

JOHN, MARY HANNAH ('May') (1874 - 1962), singer and revivalist

Name: Mary Hannah John
Date of birth: 1874
Date of death: 1962
Parent: Morgan John
Parent: Mary John (née James)
Gender: Female
Occupation: singer and revivalist
Area of activity: Religion; Music
Author: David Pike

May John was born at 4 Canning Street, Ton Pentre in the Rhondda on 26 January 1874, the sixth of the seven children of Morgan John (1841-1909), manager of a shoeshop, and his wife Mary (née James, 1840-1930). The Johns were a devout Calvinistic Methodist family, Morgan John being a deacon at Jerusalem Chapel in Ton Pentre. The family was a very musical one, and May began to sing when still very young with the Band of Hope at Jerusalem.

May John began singing competitively at the age of twelve, and made an immediate impact in local eisteddfodau in the Rhondda. She was taught initially by choir leader Taliesin Hopkins (1859-1906) from Cymer, and then by [Clara Novello Davies](#) in Cardiff. At the Pontypridd National Eisteddfod of 1893, she won the soprano duet competition with a rendition of 'Quis est homo?' from Rossini's 'Stabat Mater', her partner Elsie Drinkwater also being a pupil of Clara Novello. This success led to an invitation to participate in the World Trade Fair in Chicago in that same year, where May John won the prize for the best soprano. She then toured the United States with Clara Novello's prize-winning choir, and subsequently received invitations to take on prestigious singing posts in both New York and San Francisco, but declined both in order to stay in Wales.

In February 1894 May John was one of four singers from the Royal Welsh Choir to sing before Queen Victoria at Osborne House. She went on to study at the Royal Academy of Music in London in 1894 and was a double medallist when she completed her course in 1896. The years that followed saw her singing at the Welsh National Concert at the Queen's Hall in London in 1896, as well as in numerous oratorios and eisteddfodau.

When the Revival broke out in 1904, she took time out from her professional career in order to sing extensively in revival meetings in England as well as in Wales, singing in Ton Pentre, where she first worked with [Evan Roberts](#), and then in Pontypridd. By December, she was working in Cardiff with Annie M. Rees from Gorseinon, the youngest of the revival singers and one of [Evan Roberts'](#) original group of singers, and they were leading revival meetings themselves. She was noted in this period for her 'cultured soprano voice', and in addition to singing was an impassioned and forceful preacher who encouraged women to 'come forward for there was much work before them that men could not do.'

In January 1905 May John was working in North Wales with the young Calvinistic Methodist minister W. Llewelyn Lloyd. She then worked in Bristol with [John Cynddylan Jones](#), where they shared responsibility for leading meetings in the Broadmead Wesleyan Chapel. She also worked there with Thomas 'Awstin' Davies, the well-known Revival reporter.

By May 1905, May John was part of a large group of revivalists travelling from Wales to London. There was yet another visit to North Wales in June 1905, when she was involved in one of the biggest open air meetings of the Revival when 6,000 gathered to hear Evan Roberts preach from a wooden platform set up in a field near Rhosneigr. May John was still involved in the Revival as late as November 1905.

After the Revival had died down, May John resumed her singing career for a while, in the years before the Great War, working fairly close to home. Following the death of their father in 1909, she and her sister Celia moved to 2 Vaynor Street in Porth where they looked after their mother. May John died there on 18 October 1962, aged 88. The fact that there was no obituary for her in the *Rhondda Leader* reflects the degree to which this great singer was by then, sadly, forgotten. She was buried in Llethreddu Cemetery, Trealaw in the John family grave.

Author

David Pike

Sources

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Chicago Eisteddfod: Success of a Rhondda Valley Vocalist, *The Pontypridd chronicle and workman's news*, 29 September 1893, p.8

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Revival Leaders: Miss May John, R.A.M., *Evening Express*, 23 January 1905, p.3

'Extraordinary Revival Singers' (2) May John

Images

NLW: Miss May John, R.A.M. (Soprano) genedigol o Ton, Rhondda

Miss May John, *The Pontypridd chronicle and workman's news*, 15 December 1893, p.1

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