

## JONES (MROWIEC), ELIZABETH MAY WATKIN (1907 - 1965), teacher and campaigner

**Name:** Elizabeth May Watkin Jones  
**Date of birth:** 1907  
**Date of death:** 1965  
**Spouse:** Josef Mrowiec  
**Parent:** Watkin Jones  
**Parent:** Annie Jones (née Thomas)  
**Gender:** Female  
**Occupation:** teacher and campaigner  
**Area of activity:** Education; Music; Activism; Literature and Writing  
**Author:** Ffion Mair Jones

Elizabeth May Watkin Jones was born on 10 May 1907 at Capel Celyn, Merioneth, the first child of [Watkin Jones](#) ('Wadcyn o Feirion'; 1882-1967), postmaster, and his wife Annie (née Thomas; 1881-1924). She was raised in a home which set great store on Welsh culture and on education. Her father was a prize-winning poet in local eisteddfodau and successful in the art of singing to the harp (cerdd dant), proficient at both instructing others and setting words to musical tunes. Her mother, who had been brought up at Rhydlydan, Pentrefoelas, Denbighshire, taught in her local area and later at Barnsley, Yorkshire, and Llandudno. The parents were married in April 1906 and set up home initially at Gwern Tegid, Capel Celyn, later moving to the Post house in the village. Annie was a warm and endearing presence among her neighbours; she supported her husband's activities in his paid employment and as a choir conductor and adjudicator, and those of her children who would 'often recite and sing, etc., very skilfully at meetings in the area'. Her premature death in February 1924 was a particularly harsh blow for Elizabeth as the elder daughter. She was a sixteen-year-old pupil at the County School for Girls in Bala at the time, had been awarded a Senior Certificate in English Language and Literature, Welsh, and Botany (1922), and was studying to gain further qualifications with the aim of becoming a certificated teacher. She was forced to give up her education in order to look after her siblings, the youngest of whom was only two and a half years old. By November 1925, however, she had applied for a post at her old primary school, Celyn School. An appointment was made in April the following year, together with recognition of the status of 'Uncertified Assistant' by the Welsh Department of the Board of Education at Whitehall.

Elizabeth remained at Celyn School for ten years until a drop in the number of pupils led to a transfer to the nearby school of Maesywaun in September 1936. Two years later, she moved to Bala Central School, where she was put in charge of Standard One (children aged seven to eight years). Throughout her career as a teacher, she displayed an interest in developing her qualifications and her professional competencies. She attended Welsh Teachers' Union summer schools, including one at Barry, Glamorgan, and she was praised in letters of recommendation for her 'keen interest in educational problems'; for devoting much time to the study of elements of pedagogy, especially in the field of teaching Welsh; and for her abilities as a musician. For one pupil at Bala School, she was 'Miss Watkin Jones, the harpist', and in a photograph taken during her time there, she is seen sitting by the school harp, accompanying a group of over twenty enthusiastic cerdd dant singers. Elizabeth's contribution as a teacher was not fairly acknowledged, as shown by a letter drafted on her behalf (c.1940) to draw attention to anomalies in her pay: the lack of recognition of her years of service and the way in which she had been misplaced as a Supplementary Teacher rather than a Uncertified Teacher in determining her salary was drawn to the attention of the Merioneth Education Authority. When a non-committal answer was returned, Elizabeth wrote in pencil on the bottom of the paper, 'Hopes dashed. He'll probably put me back on Supplementary Scale'. She continued to fight for recognition, however, showing perseverance and ambition by applying for posts as elevated as headships, for example at the County School, Cwmtirymnach, in 1947; and in February 1956, Gordon Price, former head of Bala School, wrote a laudatory testimonial recommending her as a suitable head for a rural school.

Elizabeth and her father eventually left their home at Capel Celyn Post house and moved to Frongoch, lower down the Tryweryn valley; by 1949 they had moved to a house in Bala, appropriately named 'Celyn'. Their home was in the town, therefore, when a thunderbolt struck their native village: shortly before Christmas 1955, Liverpool Corporation announced its intention to submit a private measure to Parliament seeking permission to build a dam on the River Tryweryn, creating a lake which would drown the valley, including the village of Capel Celyn. 'They are shy, reserved people', said Elizabeth of her former neighbours in an interview with the *Daily Herald* in November 1956, and 'they did nothing when they first heard about this scheme last December. But I've prodded them. Now they are angry.' She was one campaigner among many who came together as Capel Celyn Defence Committee on 23 March 1956. [Dafydd Roberts](#), Caefadog, who eventually became chair, has received some recognition for the part which he played in the campaign. The role played by the unassuming Elizabeth as secretary, however, was more essential. She conducted a widespread and dogged correspondence campaign, reporting in December 1956 how the initial entreaties for support had by then evolved into real encouragement from all

directions. Letters were received from Welsh churches, agricultural unions, members of political parties, councils (parish, rural district, county, town and boroughs), school pupils, Welsh societies from Wales, England, and Canada, besides countless individuals. Strict tabs were kept on the extent of the protest by means such as sending slips out to supporters to be returned noting the names of MPs contacted, for the committee's minutes. Furthermore, numerous public meetings were organized locally throughout 1956 before the appeal was extended to broadcasts in the English media. On 29 November, for example, the inhabitants of Cwm Tryweryn appeared on Granada television's *Under Fire* programme, filmed in Manchester, brandishing their placards and with Elizabeth and her harp, a symbol of their cultural pride, placed amidst them. The many radio and television interviews in which Elizabeth participated included one on *The Dragon's Teeth*, where, alongside [Megan Lloyd George](#), she argued against the supporters of the plan to submerge the valley.

In spite of the successes, the struggle was at times bitter. Some responses were disappointing: Elizabeth would surely have been angered to hear that Bala Town Council refused to oppose the plan during a meeting in October 1956; or that the scholar [R. T. Jenkins](#), who had been raised in Bala and who wrote to her on 26 April 1956, did not have 'a very strong sense of conviction on the matter... the advantages of the plan to the region could outweigh any disadvantage; I don't know, that is the truth'. Furthermore, there was a battle to be fought against Liverpool Corporation. Several times during May, June, and July 1956, the Corporation refused to meet directly with a deputation from the Defence Committee. Elizabeth, in her turn, refused on behalf of the Committee to accept the Corporation's invitation to meet with one of the Council's sub-committees, Liverpool Water Corporation. The final step was to arrange a visit of protest to Liverpool on 21 November 1956, with the aim of persuading the inhabitants and their councillors of the need to save the valley. In a press release just before the visit, Elizabeth condemned 'the city council's high-handed action' in no uncertain terms. By insisting that this would be a 'purely personal' protest - that was why children had been asked to accompany their parents - she displayed her political savvy, distancing the campaign from the increasingly visible connection with the nationalist movement represented by Plaid Cymru. Nonetheless, it was [Gwynfor Evans](#), President of Plaid Cymru and a faithful friend of the cause, who led the procession through the streets of Liverpool.

On 27 November 1956, Liverpool Corporation submitted to a parliamentary committee a private measure for the submerging of Tryweryn Valley, thus beginning the process of securing official permission for their proposal. In its third reading on 31 July 1957 it was passed with a majority of 96. After the arduousness of her effort, Elizabeth, as her youngest brother, Watkin L. Jones, remarked, could have 'become embittered in dejection... but this didn't happen. On the contrary. She hardly mentioned it to me'. One possible reason for her silence was that she was on the brink of a very happy period in her personal life: on 24 May 1958, she became the wife of Josef (Iozef) Mrowiec (1914-1995), a Polish emigrant from Upper Silesia. Josef had fled from Nazi oppression and enlisted in a Polish corps within the British army during the Second World War. Eventually, he settled at Llanuwchllyn and began to work as a painter in the Bala area, before settling after the marriage at 'Celyn' with Elizabeth and her father.

Following two journeys to visit her husband's family in Poland (1960, 1962), Elizabeth submitted a travel journal to a competition at the National Eisteddfod held at Swansea in 1964. She won first prize and the praise of the judge Geraint Dyfnallt Owen (1908-1993), for 'entering directly into the society of a foreign country rather than wandering around the edges'. Even whilst she clearly delighted in 'my dear adopted country', Elizabeth did not forget the destiny of her native region on these journeys: on a visit to Goczałkowice lake, created after a dam had been placed across the River Vistula, drowning six villages, she described how 'An uneasy shiver went down my spine and I whispered "Tryweryn"'. By the time the same fate had officially befallen her own valley on 21 October 1965, Elizabeth was in her grave. She died on 21 June that year at Maelor Hospital, Wrexham, having suffered from a degenerative heart condition. She was buried at Llanycil cemetery, her gravestone showing an image of a harp and the Polish words 'Tu spoczywa w Bogu moja ukochna zona' ('Here my beloved wife rests in God') expressing her widower's grief at his loss.

## Author

Ffion Mair Jones

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## Further reading

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**Published date:** 2022-11-24

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