

## MANNAY, JAMES (JIM) SAPOE JOHN (Ahmed Hassan Ismail) (1927 - 2012), historian and poet

**Name:** James (Jim) Sapoe John (Ahmed Hassan Ismail) Mannay

**Date of birth:** 1927

**Date of death:** 2012

**Spouse:** Julia M. Mannay (née Desmond)

**Child:** Farida Mannay

**Child:** Jamila Mannay

**Child:** Leila Mannay

**Parent:** May Davies (née Griffiths)

**Parent:** James Sapoe Mannay

**Gender:** Male

**Occupation:** historian and poet

**Area of activity:** History and Culture; Poetry

**Author:** Rebecca Eversley-Dawes

James Mannay was born on 2 December 1927 in Butetown, Cardiff, the eldest of three children of James Sapoe Mannay (b. 1893), a Kru seaman from Setta Kru or Nana Kru in Liberia, and his wife May (formerly Davies, née Griffiths, 1896-1971) from Wolverhampton. His siblings were Foeh Thomas Mannay (1930-2021) and Elizabeth Mannay (1932-1998).

James, known as Jim, was brought up at 11 Frances Street where his mother ran a lodging house. According to a surviving licence which was granted in 1927, the house had occupancy for 9 seamen. Many of these men were from West Africa and while not solely an African lodging house, men of the Kru community were frequent lodgers there. Jim's father and his cousin Benjamin Johnson (Weah) lived next door to each other and together with their 'kinsmen', they regaled Jim with tribal stories and taught him some of the Kru language and songs, which were extremely important in Kru culture. One of the lodgers was an African griot (story teller) named Doe Grey, whose role within the tribe was to keep the history and to pass it on. Jim's recollection of his time as a child included paying him a penny to tell him a story. The tribal tradition was also passed on to Jim and his brother in their naming. Sapoe and Foeh are Kru names and Sapoe can be traced to Jim's great grandfather who was a chief in Liberia.

From a young age, Jim also had a fascination with the local Zawiya mosque and his father (who didn't attend) took him to prayers. Jim eventually converted to Islam and was given the name Ahmed Hassan Ismail.

As a young man, Jim travelled the world as part of his National Service with the Second Battalion of the Welsh Regiment and was stationed in Singapore. He received a court martial for insubordination, however as a result of the support of the Crown Prince of Afghanistan (who visited the regiment and whom Jim had met upon a visit to the Zawiya in Butetown) and several letters by his mother May to James Callaghan in the House of Commons, he was served no further penalty.

Upon his return, he married Julia M. Desmond in 1949 and raised three daughters, Farida (b. 1949), Jamila (b. 1950) and Leila (b. 1950). He spent his early years as a market trader selling perfume, and later worked as a railway shedman. In later life he was very active within the voluntary sector supporting refugees and asylum seekers with a bicycle repair scheme.

Together with his cousin Emily, Benjamin Johnson's daughter, Jim spent years recording the history of the Kru people. They both kept many documents relating to individuals and Jim wrote extensively about the community in Tiger Bay, detailing many Kru and English names and nicknames. He was also a poet whose life story was reflected in his work. Thanks to the accuracy of his storytelling, Jim's work has resulted in the identification of over 600 individuals from West Africa throughout the UK, and became the basis of research to identify seamen from the Kru community who served in the two World Wars.

Jim Mannay died on 30 May 2012 in Cardiff.

### Author

Rebecca Eversley-Dawes

### Sources

Jim Mannay's personal diaries (privately held)

Heritage & Cultural Exchange Archive: Jim Mannay's service diary, letters between May Mannay and James Callaghan, and oral history recording

### Further reading

'James (Jim) Sapoe John Mannay (1928-2012)', *Y Bywgraffiadur Cymreig / Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, People's Collection Wales

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