

MORRIS, JAN (1926 - 2020), writer

Name: Jan Morris
Date of birth: 1926
Date of death: 2020
Spouse: Elizabeth Morris (née Tuckniss)
Child: Mark Morris
Child: Henry Morris
Child: Virginia Morris
Child: Tom Morris
Child: Susan Morris
Parent: Enid Morris (née Payne)
Parent: Walter Henry Morris
Gender: Female
Occupation: writer
Area of activity: History and Culture; Literature and Writing
Author: Mike Parker

Jan Morris was born on 2 October 1926 in Clevedon, Somerset, as James Humphry Morris, the youngest of three boys. Her father Walter Henry Morris (1896-1938) had been gassed in World War I, and made ends meet by driving taxis and hearses. Her mother Enid (née Payne; 1886-1981) was an organist and music teacher. Her two older brothers were Gareth Charles Walter (1920-2007), an internationally renowned flautist, and Christopher John (1922-2014), organist and composer.

Placed by *The Times* at fifteenth on the list of Britain's greatest post-war writers, Morris enjoyed a globally-successful publishing career that lasted 73 years, in which she produced over forty books and innumerable essays. A profound sense of place was always her métier, though she detested being called a travel writer. Her style was exuberant and sensual, fusing history, place, biography, opinion and travelogue in ways that were quite unique, and instantly knowable. As she put it herself towards the end of her life, 'Fact or fiction? As an old pro of the writing game, I don't recognise the distinction.'

Her book biographies often describe her as 'Anglo-Welsh by birth, Welsh by loyalty'. From an early age, she was transfixed by the sight of ships in the Bristol Channel, and the darker, sharper hills of Wales beyond. Further lustre was added to distant Monmouthshire by its place as the home county of her father, who died when she was twelve.

Intimacy with the Welsh borderland came too when Morris went to Lancing College in January 1941, after it had been evacuated away from the Sussex coast and into a series of draughty old houses in Shropshire. From there, she worked as a journalist at the Western Daily Press in Bristol, before being called up for the remainder of the war, as an intelligence officer in Italy, Egypt and Palestine. On being demobbed, she went to Christ Church College, Oxford; something of a return, having been a chorister at the cathedral school there before going to Lancing. Morris met and married in 1949 Elizabeth Tuckniss (1924-2024). They had five children: Mark (1952), Henry (1953), Virginia (1960), Tom (1961, later known as Twm Morys) and Susan (1964). She graduated with a BA in 1951, and joined the staff of *The Times*.

Fate presented Morris with her first great break: at the age of 26, accompanying the 1953 Everest expedition led by Colonel John Hunt. The *Times* had bought exclusive rights to the trip, and when the mountain was finally scaled for the very first time, Morris, waiting at the camp at 22,000 feet, devised an elaborate system of codes and runners to telegraph the news back to London, without anyone else seeing it. The story broke on the eve of Queen Elizabeth II's Coronation. It was, Morris wrote later, 'the last innocent adventure'.

A new celebrity status brought a direct approach from publishers Faber & Faber, who published Morris's first book, *Coast to Coast* (1956), an account of travelling across the USA. Other books on Oman, Iraq, South Africa and Jordan followed in swift succession, while Morris worked as a correspondent for *The Times* and then the *Manchester Guardian*. The family were living in Kent at the time, then Oxfordshire and Berkshire.

In 1960, her seventh book, *Venice*, was published to widespread acclaim, though it coincided with family tragedy. After the arrival of their first two sons, the Morrises had a daughter who died in infancy. Reeling from the shock, they relocated to Wales for the first time, to the Watch House in Portmeirion, courtesy of their friend Clough Williams-Ellis. By the time Morris gave up her journalism two years later, and prepared to write books full-time, they had decided to base themselves more permanently in Gwynedd. Jan (still going as James) was 36 years old, and had already visited more than seventy countries.

After renting them a house in Llanfrothen for a while, Clough Williams-Ellis helped the Morrises find Plas Trefan in Llanystumdwy. It had been on the market for two years, and was 'half-derelict, wildly impractical, cripplingly expensive and really rather beautiful', as Morris put it in a letter to a friend. It became the much-loved base for the growing family: their third son Twm was born in 1961, and daughter Susan, known as Suki, in 1964.

Being comparatively settled allowed the perpetually restless Morris to reach for new heights, both professionally and personally. Many of her earlier books and journalism had a theme of empire somewhere at their heart; hardly surprising in an era which saw many former colonies gain their independence from the UK and other European imperial powers. She nursed the idea of a trilogy portrait of the British empire, beginning with its climax, which she identified as the 1897 Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria. In the prologue to this first volume of *Pax Britannica*, published in 1968, she wrote: 'I resolved to write a big, ornate, frank but affectionate work about Victoria's empire, start to finish.' The second book in the trilogy, *Heaven's Command* (1973), went into the rise of the empire, and the third, *Farewell the Trumpets* (1978), its retreat.

1674 pages in total, the *Pax Britannica* trilogy remains her magnum opus. In a tribute essay for her eightieth birthday in 2006, Ned Thomas wrote, 'Re-reading *Pax Britannica* now, I am struck by how just and balanced most of its judgements are, on both the colonizers and colonized.' Others are less enthusiastic. In a 2019 *LRB* essay, James Wood calls *Pax Britannica* 'glitteringly nostalgic', writing that 'Morris doesn't exactly hide the racism and genocidal violence of the imperial enterprise, but they're somehow swept up in the sheer mad gusto of the narrative.' In his book *Empireland* (2021), Sathnam Sanghera quotes this, and though acknowledging Morris's 'characteristically elegant account, in peerless prose', finds some of her attitudes 'queasy', especially 'some wild racial generalizations which are surely based on the contemporaneous accounts of people who have since been proven to be genocidal maniacs'.

While writing the trilogy, Jan Morris was also undertaking the greatest of inner journeys, to gender reassignment. In the opening words of *Conundrum* (1974), her pioneering book on this most thorny of topics: 'I was three or perhaps four years old when I realised that I had been born into the wrong body, and should really be a girl.' She had confided in Elizabeth her big secret before they were married, but as the realisation grew stronger through the 1950s and 60s, she wrestled with suicidal impulses, and began hormone treatment. She completed reassignment surgery in Casablanca in 1972, and lived henceforth as a woman, as Jan.

'Fortunately for me,' she wrote in *Conundrum*, 'the first society into which I ventured frankly and publicly sex-changed was the profoundly civilised society of Caernarfonshire.' While this is not strictly true (she kept a small house in the Jericho district of Oxford, where she first experimented in presenting publicly as a woman), it contains a more general truth, and illustrates the strange tangency of her gender and national identities. 'To decide as I have done, in my middle years, that Wales will henceforth be the true epicentre of my life, is in some sense a renunciation', she wrote. She was renouncing a great deal else too.

Through the 1980s and 90s, her passion for Wales was paramount. She wrote extensively on the country, its landscape, language, literature and culture for numerous publications, and in various books including the magisterial *The Matter of Wales: Epic Views of a Small Country* (1984). In the book's final words she writes that Wales 'is not just a country on the map, or even in the mind: it is a country of the heart, and all of us have some small country there.'

The book contains an interlude, set 'sometime in the twenty-first century', in which she imagines 'clustered among green water meadows below the mountains', the small market town of Machynlleth transformed into the capital of an independent Cymru. She worked this idea up into another book, *A Machynlleth Triad* (1993), which included a translation into Welsh by her son Twm Morys.

Though for her the mythical and metaphorical qualities of Wales were what perhaps appealed most, she was practical too with her support. She gave her time, talents and money to many Welsh causes, wrote frequently to help out tiny publications, studied Cymraeg at Nant Gwrtheyrn, the Wlpan course in Lampeter and elsewhere, was a vocal supporter of Plaid Cymru and campaigned in the 1997 devolution referendum campaign. She became a member of the Gorsedd at the 1993 National Eisteddfod at Builth Wells, taking the bardic name Jan Trefan. Despite her professed Welsh republicanism, Morris accepted a CBE in 1999, much to the horror of many. She linked her

acceptance of the honour to the arrival of the then National Assembly for Wales, explaining 'Now that Wales is on the path to independence from England, I think it's time to be magnanimous. As a chronicler of Empire, it is rather attractive to be a Commander of it' (*The Daily Telegraph*, June 1999).

Though she rarely strayed into writing pure fiction, her whimsical account of an imaginary city-state, *Last Letters From Hav*, surprised everyone - Morris herself included - by being shortlisted for the 1985 Booker Prize. Her archive at Aberystwyth University contains many letters from readers asking where exactly Hav was. A Welsh fictional fable, *Our First Leader*, is less successful.

Morris was a stalwart advocate of younger writers, many of whom beat their way to her door for tea, whisky and advice, all of which were given freely. Also dropping in, often unannounced, were many trans people, and their loved ones, some in considerable distress. Throughout the last quarter of the twentieth century, Morris was one of the very few trans people in public life, and though she became more sanguine about her gender identity as she aged ('I'm both now' she told *The Times* in 2018), it was a responsibility that she shouldered without complaint.

Her last 'proper' book (her description) was 2001's *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere*. It was, she said, her favourite, and remains so too for very many of her readers. An elegiac meditation on transience, set in a city that she first visited as an officer at the end of the war, a city that has been under so many different regimes in its history, it is a fitting literary finale to an extraordinary life.

Jan Morris died on 20 November 2020, aged 94, in Ysbyty Bryn Beryl, Pwllheli. Elizabeth, whom she'd 're-married' in 2008 after the law had changed to allow same-sex registrations, outlived her, and died in a nursing home in Aberystwyth two months shy of her hundredth birthday. Their ashes are scattered on a tiny island in the Afon Dwyfor, under a headstone that Jan used to love to show off to visitors. It reads:

DYMA MAE DWY FFRIND, AR DERFYN UN BYWYD - HERE ARE TWO FRIENDS, AT THE END OF ONE LIFE.

Author

Mike Parker

Sources

personal acquaintance / knowledge (of Jan, Elizabeth and Twm)

Paul Clements, *Jan Morris* (Cardiff 1998)

Paul Clements (ed.), *Jan Morris* (Bridgend 2006)

Paul Clements, *Jan Morris : life from both sides* (Cardiff 1998)

Planet (February 2021)

Cambria (2008)

The Times (August 2018)

The Observer (March 2020)

Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Jan Morris](#)

Works

Jan Morris, *Coast to Coast* (1956)

Jan Morris, *Coronation Everest* (1958)

Jan Morris, *Venice* (1960)

Jan Morris, *Pax Britannica* (1968)

Jan Morris, *Conundrum* (1974)

Jan Morris, *Wales: The First Place* (1982)

Jan Morris, *The Matter of Wales: Epic Views of a Small Country* (1984)

Jan Morris, *Last Letters from Hav* (1985)

Jan Morris, *Pleasures of a Tangled Life* (1989)

Jan Morris, *A Machynlleth Triad* (gyda Twm Morys, 1993)

Jan Morris, *Our First Leader: A Welsh Fable* (2000)

Jan Morris, *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere* (2001)

Jan Morris, *A Writer's House in Wales* (2002)

Jan Morris, *Contact!: A Book of Glimpses* (2009)

Jan Morris, *In My Mind's Eye: A Thought Diary* (2018)

Jan Morris, *Allegorizings* (2021)

Archives

NLW Archives: [Jan Morris Papers](#), GB 0210 JANMOR

Additional Links

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