

EVANS (née FRANCIS), MARY JANE ('Llaethferch'; 1888 - 1922), elocutionist

Name: Mary Jane Evans
Pseudonym: Llaethferch
Date of birth: 1888
Date of death: 1922
Spouse: William David Evans
Parent: Mary Ann Francis (née Hutchings)
Parent: Charles Francis
Gender: Female
Occupation: elocutionist
Area of activity: Eisteddfod; Performing Arts
Author: Evan David Jones

Born 3 February 1888, in a house at Reed Row, Godre'r Graig, Swansea Valley, the daughter of Charles Francis, conductor of Ystalyfera Band, and his wife, Mary Ann Hutchings. Both Charles Francis and his father, George Francis, who came to Ystalyfera from the Caerleon district, Monmouth, were able musicians. The parents of Thomas Hutchings, Mary Ann's father and also a musician, came from Bristol to run a school in Swansea; after the father's death, the mother took charge of the 'College' School near Ystradgynlais. After travelling in many countries, Thomas Hutchings moved to Ystalyfera where he worked in the tinplate works. Through her mother, his wife was also from a musical family, the Anthony s of Cwmaman. Hutchings and his wife both worked, as children, in the tinplate works. When Mary Jane was five years old, her family moved to live with her mother's parents at Cwmtawe Villa where they kept a few cows and sold milk. The little girl carried two pitchers of milk to customers on her way to Panteg School because, at this time, her father worked at the Ynysmeudwy tinplate works. For this reason, she later took the name, 'Llaethferch' (Milkmaid). Despite a musical education given by local teachers, she showed little inclination for playing a musical instrument. William Asaph Williams gave her singing lessons but this again did not interest her because of her great love was reading and literature. She took part in recitation competitions and also participated in the quarterly meetings of the Sunday schools in the Panteg area. During the Revival of 1904-05, she was received as a member of Panteg Congregational church; she was among those members released in 1905 to establish a church in Godre'r Graig. On the initiative of her minister, [Ben Davies](#) (1864 - 1937), she took lessons in recitation with David Thomas Jones. Mary Jane now began to recite at literary meetings and at eisteddfodau; she became famous as 'Llaethferch' and won many chairs and cups. In April 1909, she entered the Old College School, Carmarthen run by [Joseph Harry](#); in order to meet the fees, her family sold the cows. She was placed in a class of talented students and a special course on literature was arranged for her. Mary Jane preached for the first time at Godre'r Graig on 8 July 1909; she usually included a recitation with the sermon. In 1912, she took an examination in elocution and obtained the grade of A.E.V.C.M. at the Victoria College of Music. For a time, she taught at Tro'rgliên School, Cwmtwrch, and attended the Royal Academy of Music in London for two terms in order to perfect her English, but lack of money cut this course short in January 1916. She discovered an interest in drama and formed a drama company at Ynysmeudwy. She performed with Gunstone Jones and Gwernydd Morgan and also performed with her own company in Gruffydd o'r Glyn by Alarch Ogwy. Her delight in recitation competitions hindered her from rehearsing with the company. She turned to presenting dramatic recitations on her own or with a soloist so that she could obtain a respite and the audience given some variety. These recitations were very popular both in Wales and in parts of England between 1918 and 1922. The programmes contained rich and varied material both in English and Welsh. Her most popular piece in Welsh was 'Cadair Tregaron' by [J.J. Williams](#). In 1921, her writing paper described Mary Jane Evans as the winner of a crown, 11 cups, 68 chairs and 396 other prizes at eisteddfodau. She achieved little success as a reciter at the National Eisteddfod; she was given an award at Swansea in 1907 and acted as an adjudicator at Barry in 1920 and Corwen in 1921. She considered extending her tours to London, America and Japan but four years of performing throughout Wales proved too much for a constitution which was not strong. Mary Jane Evans died on 25 February 1922 at her home in School Street, Maerdy, Rhondda. Her body was carried to her parents' home at Wigfa near Ynysmeudwy on the following Thursday and she was buried in the graveyard at Godre'r Graig on Saturday, 4 March. For a period of less than four years, she appeared like a shooting star over the halls and chapels of Wales where she delighted many audiences and became, for that short period, the most famous woman in Wales.

Without telling her parents, she married William David Evans on 5 March 1919; he was a teacher in the Maerdy elementary school and had been discharged from the Army, suffering from the effects of poison gas at Ypres. A penillion singer to the accompaniment of the harp, he won prizes at the National Eisteddfod. He was the conductor of the Maerdy United Choir.


Author

Evan David Jones, (1903 - 1987)

Sources

Ben Davies (ed.), *Llaethferch. Er Cof (Ystalyfera 1923)*, 1923.

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