


## EVANS, EMYR ESTYN (1905-1989), geographer

**Name:** Emyr Estyn Evans  
**Date of birth:** 1905  
**Date of death:** 1989  
**Spouse:** Gwyneth Lyon Evans (née Jones)  
**Child:** Alun Evans  
**Child:** Edwin Evans  
**Child:** Colin Evans  
**Child:** David Evans  
**Parent:** Elizabeth Evans (née Jones)  
**Parent:** George Owen Evans  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** geographer  
**Area of activity:** Education; History and Culture; Science and Mathematics  
**Author:** Colin Thomas

E. Estyn Evans was born 29 May, 1905, opposite Darwin's birthplace in Mount Street, Frankwell, Shrewsbury. As a teenager, his father, George Owen Evans (1865-1921), had worked in claypits and coalmines around Acrefair near Ruabon, Denbighshire, before entering Bala CM ministerial training college. His mother, Elizabeth (1864–1944), formerly an apprentice milliner in Wrexham, was the eldest of five daughters of an artistic building contractor, Peleg Jones, who had married a farmer's daughter from Brymbo.

G. O. Evans was ordained in the Presbyterian Church of Wales and after having ministered to Welsh congregations in Llanymynech and Shrewsbury, he moved in 1906 to Y Tabernacl, Coedway, between the Breidden Hills and the River Severn. There, Estyn, three older brothers (Vyrnwy, Owen Tanat, and Hafryn) and younger sister Deva spent a happy, if poor and constrained, rural childhood, walking a mile across the border to primary school in Alberbury, Shropshire, before transferring to Welshpool Intermediate (County) School. While their parents spoke Welsh to each other, the children were encouraged to use English as their first language.

In 1922 Estyn won an open scholarship to University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, intending to read Latin, but he was immediately drawn to Geography and Anthropology under the life-long influence of [H. J. Fleure](#). He graduated with first-class honours in 1925, but the onset of tuberculosis prevented him from accepting an invitation from his external examiner, Sir J. L. Myres, to undertake research at New College, Oxford. Recuperation in Wiltshire brought him into contact with the archaeologist O. G. S. Crawford, future editor of *Antiquity*, and he returned to Aberystwyth to assist [Fleure](#) with contributions for the 14th edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, briefly also becoming his deputy editor of the Powys-land Club's [Montgomeryshire Collections](#)  (Mont. Colls.).

On his 23rd birthday, and benefiting from some insights given by [Dr. Thomas Jones CH](#), Evans was appointed lecturer in Geography at The Queen's University, Belfast, with responsibility for establishing a new department; he was promoted to Reader in 1944 and Professor from 1945 until his retirement in 1968. In the same year as taking up his new post, he had met, and in 1931 married, Gwyneth, daughter of Abel E. Jones, Professor of Agriculture at Aberystwyth and his wife Bessie, their four sons David, Colin, Edwin, and Alun sharing their parents' enjoyment of weekend and holiday retreats to a white-washed cottage in the Mountains of Mourne.

Like many of [Fleure](#)'s students, Evans's academic interests focussed initially on relationships between prehistoric and proto-historic communities and their natural environment, and in 1931 he was awarded an MA (Wales) for a thesis entitled 'A Study of the Origins and Distributions of some Late Bronze Age Industries in Western Europe', gaining a DSc for published work in 1939, a year after being elected Member of the Royal Irish Academy.

Prior to his arrival in Belfast, in the long wake of Partition (1922) and the looming economic depression, studies of Northern Ireland's past had been mired either in sectarian politics or academic indifference. Bringing a fresh outlook, Evans ignored hidebound attitudes within the university and, with Classics colleague Oliver Davies and a host of volunteers who attended his extramural lectures and participated in field excursions, embarked upon an archaeological survey of the six counties that discovered scores of previously unrecorded megalithic monuments, later published with D. A. Chart and H. C. Lawlor as *A Preliminary Survey of the Ancient Monuments of Northern Ireland* (1940). He chaired the Ulster Ancient Monuments Advisory Council, with Davies revived the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, and in 1937-8 excavated the Province's largest

Neolithic site, Lyle's Hill, Co. Antrim. With characteristic generosity, in 1939 he gave all his research material on European Bronze Age sickles to [Cyril Fox](#), yet when the latter published it under his own name, with due acknowledgment, in the Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society, there was nothing but warm praise from Evans.

From an increasingly profound understanding of Ireland's prehistory, it seemed to him a short inevitable step to attempt recovery of its rapidly disappearing peasant culture and folklore, taking a formal lead from 1953 as Chairman of the Committee on Ulster Folklife and Traditions, and from 1965 as President of the Ulster Folklife Society. Following his BA dissertation on the Pyrenees (published in the 1930 *Festschrift* for [Fleure](#), edited by [I. C. Peate](#)), Evans's first book was *France: A Geographical Introduction* (1937), a conventional regional study. However, his scholarly reputation rests mainly on *Irish Heritage: The Landscape, the People and their Work* (1942), *Mourne Country: Landscape and Life in South Down* (1951), *Irish Folk Ways* (1957), *Prehistoric and Early Christian Ireland: A Guide* (1966), and *The Personality of Ireland: Habitat, Heritage and History* (1973), together with a posthumous collection, *Ireland and the Atlantic Heritage: Selected Writings* (1996), in which Gwyneth Evans wrote 'A Biographical Memoir' of her late husband. Sharing his 'sympathetic reverence for landscape and ordinary people', Gwyneth noted: 'I have always felt that inside the austere disciplined academic there was a poet struggling to break free'. Certainly, his receptive eye for colour and acute ear for language frequently found expression in his lyrical descriptions of contrast and change in the Irish countryside and the ways of life of those who inhabited it.

Estyn's unassuming charm dispelled potential barriers of occupation, social status and political allegiance with an all-embracing humane egalitarianism. He developed friendly collaboration with the Irish Folklore Commission and archaeologists in Dublin with the same skill as he applied to cajole suspicious Stormont bureaucrats, or tease archaic customs from an old farmer's memory over a field gate. Based on his experience of surviving peasant communities across Europe from Romania to Galicia and Donegal, and the success of models in Scandinavia and Wales, in 1958 his campaign to create an Ulster Folk (and later Transport) Museum began to materialise at Cultra, on the outskirts of Belfast, his former students becoming its first two directors. Reconstructed vernacular buildings, fully furnished and documented, together with exhibition areas, library and archive collections, now exemplify Ulster's diverse cultural traditions, and are regarded as being of international importance. A parallel initiative was the establishment at Queens University Belfast in 1965 of the multi-disciplinary Institute of Irish Studies, of which Evans was Director (1968-70) and Senior Fellow (1970-72), when he simultaneously held a Leverhulme Emeritus Fellowship.

Estyn's academic activities reached far beyond Ireland and were equally widely acknowledged. He was Visiting Professor of Geography at Bowdoin College, Maine, (1948-9) and the University of Indiana (1963), and he was awarded honorary doctorates by six universities. Among other distinctions, he was an honorary member of the Royal Town Planning Institute (1950), President of the British Association Section E (Geography) (1958) and Section H (Anthropology) (1960), President of the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society (1967-77), and of the Institute of British Geographers (1970). He was awarded the Royal Geographical Society's Victoria Medal (1973), and received the Association of American Geographers' Merit Award (1979).

His research covered all scales from individual artefacts to sites, regional cultures and entire civilisations, and at The Queen's University he was surrounded by a devoted group of colleagues and students, to whom he was simply 'Prof.'. His personal qualities, energy and breadth of vision were recognised in 1970 by his appointment as CBE for services to the community.

Estyn Evans published extensively in inter al., *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, *Mont. Colls.*, *Antiquity*, *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, *Irish Naturalists' Journal*, and he wrote numerous contributions for *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (14th ed.) and *Festschriften* presented to colleagues in various disciplines. Among his radio and TV broadcasts, his BBC Wales Annual Radio Lecture *The Personality of Wales* was published in 1973. Surprisingly, none of his early publications relating to Wales appeared in [R. T. Jenkins](#) & W. Rees' *Bibliography of the History of Wales* (1962 ed.), and only two out of eight in P. H. Jones' 1989 edition.

Despite relinquishing his parents' narrow religious faith in his teens, he retained throughout his life all the fundamental principles instilled during his childhood, 'inheriting the Protestant ethic of hard work' and believing himself to be 'a Puritan at heart'. A talented artist, his publications were enlivened with his own sketches, photographs, and immense fund of oral and written evidence, his elegant prose always orchestrated with personal anecdotes, literary (often Biblical) allusions and twinkles of gentle humour. When asked by [E. G. Bowen](#) whether he intended returning to Wales on his retirement, Estyn sketched a post-card cartoon of himself with roots growing from his shoes deep into the Ulster countryside. He died in Belfast on 12 August, 1989.

## Author

Colin Thomas

## Sources

E. Estyn Evans, *Ireland and the Atlantic Heritage: Selected Writings (Dublin 1996)*, with photograph, full bibliography 1926-88, pp. 261-8, and drawing of Gwyneth Evans by Raymond Piper;

E. Estyn Evans, 'Recollections of a Border childhood', unpublished typescript;

Gwyneth Evans, 'Emyr Estyn Evans', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, 58, 1999, 134-42;

National Library of Wales George Owen Evans autobiographical MS, 1906;

Robin E. Glasscock, Obituary: 'E. Estyn Evans, 1905-1989', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 17, 1991, 87-91;

Bob Graham, [Evans, \(Emyr\) Estyn](#), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*

## Further Reading

The Dictionary of Ulster Biography: [Emyr Estyn Evans \(1905-1989\)](#)

Who's Who: [Evans, Prof. \(Emyr\) Estyn](#)

Wikipedia Article: [Emyr Estyn Evans](#)

## Images

Raymond Piper, [Professor Estyn Evans](#)

## Additional Links

VIAF: [110273353](#)

Wikidata: [Q5374905](#)

Published date: 2012-08-22

Article Copyright: <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/>