

## GRIFFITHS, JOHN GWYNEDD (J. Gwyn) (1911-2004), scholar, poet and Welsh nationalist

**Name:** John Gwynedd Griffiths

**Date of birth:** 1911

**Date of death:** 2004

**Gender:** Male

**Occupation:** scholar, poet and Welsh nationalist

**Area of activity:** Poetry; Scholarship and Languages

**Author:** Ceri Davies

Born 7 December 1911 in Porth, Rhondda Valley, third of five children of the Reverend Robert Griffiths, minister of Moreia (B), Pentre, and Mrs Jemima Griffiths (née Davies). A younger brother was the Reverend D. R. Griffiths (1915-1990), biblical scholar and hymnist. He was educated at Porth County School for Boys, then at the University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire, Cardiff (1st class honours in Latin 1932, 1st class honours in Greek 1933), the University of Liverpool (M.A. in Egyptology 1936) and the Queen's College, Oxford (D. Phil. 1949). As a postgraduate student in Oxford (1936-9) he met Käthe Bosse, from Wittenberg (Lutherstadt), Germany, an Egyptologist who, being of partly Jewish parentage, had escaped Nazi persecution and was employed by the Ashmolean Museum. The two were married on 13 September 1939, at the beginning of the Second World War, a union which led to a lifetime of sharing the same aspirations and of academic and literary collaboration. Their sons are the authors Robat Gruffudd (born 1943), founder of Gwasg y Lolfa, and Heini Gruffudd (born 1946), an authority on teaching Welsh to adults and a tireless campaigner on behalf of the language.

In 1939 J. Gwyn Griffiths was appointed Latin master at his old school in Porth. In this period his and Käthe's home, in Pentre, became the focus for 'Cylch Cadwgan' ('The Cadwgan Circle'), a group of like-minded young writers, including Pennar Davies and Rhydwen Williams. They were radical in their Christian, pacifist and nationalist convictions; they also longed to see Welsh literature, freed from old shackles, becoming increasingly open to European influences and engaging with the crises of the age. J. Gwyn Griffiths's Welsh literary work, the volumes of poetry - *Yr Efengyl Dywyll a Cherddi Eraill* ('The Opaque Gospel and Other Poems', 1944), his part in the group collection *Cerddi Cadwgan* ('Cadwgan Poems', 1953), *Ffroenau'r Ddraig* ('The Dragon's Nostrils', 1961), *Cerddi Cairo* ('Cairo Poems', 1969) and *Cerddi'r Holl Eneidiau* ('All Souls Poems', 1981) - and the volume of literary criticism, *I Ganol y Frwydr* ('Into the Thick of Battle', 1970) are characterized by a note of national and international commitment, by their author's polymathic culture and also by much bold jocularity. (In 2007 all his poetic works were published in a one-volume collection, *Hog Dy Fwyell*, 'Whet Your Axe', edited by his son Heini Gruffudd.) In 1943 he moved from the Rhondda Valley to become Latin master at Bala Grammar School: in this period he assisted Euros Bowen in establishing *Y Fflam* ('The Flame'), a journal which (until 1952) provided a platform for a new generation of Welsh-language writers.

In 1946 J. Gwyn Griffiths was appointed assistant lecturer, then in 1947 lecturer, in Classics at University College, Swansea. This gave him the opportunity to return seriously to the research work which had been in abeyance for the war years, a study of the religious cult associated with the Egyptian deities Isis and Osiris. In his doctoral thesis he discussed an aspect of the mythology connected with these deities, the conflict between Horus and Seth, work which provided the foundation for his first volume in the field, *The Conflict of Horus and Seth, from Egyptian and Classical Sources: A Study in Ancient Mythology* (1960). There followed *The Origins of Osiris* (1966), then masterly commentaries on *Plutarch's Greek treatise De Iside et Osiride* (1970) and on the last book of the Apuleius' Latin 'Golden Ass', *Apuleius of Madauros: The Isis-Book (Metamorphoses, Book XI)* (1975), and subsequently *The Origins of Osiris and his Cult* (1980). These works earned wide recognition for their author. In University College, Swansea, he was promoted senior lecturer (1959), reader (1965) and professor (1973). He was also Lady Wallis Budge Research Lecturer at University College, Oxford (1957-8), Guest Professor at Cairo University (1965-6), and Visiting Fellow at All Souls College, Oxford (1976-7), as well as having periods as a visiting researcher at the universities of Bonn and Tübingen. He was editor of *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* from 1970 to 1978. For his published works he was awarded the degrees of D.Litt. (Oxon.), 1972, and D.D. (Wales), 1979.

In 1979 J. Gwyn Griffiths retired from his university post in Swansea, but he continued researching and writing with the same ardour. He was now internationally known as an authority on ancient Egyptian religion and the interpretation of it by Greek and Latin writers. In retirement he widened his scholarly interests to include the religions of other parts of the ancient world. In 1991 *The Divine Verdict: A Study of Divine Judgement in the Ancient Religions* was published, to be followed, in 1996, by *Triads and Trinity*, a volume which traces the origins of the notion of tri-unity in the ancient world and contextualizes the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Also there appeared an extensive collection of his most important articles, *Atlantis and Egypt with other Selected Essays* (1991), another volume which displays the breadth of his scholarship. In 1992 he was presented with a Festschrift by his fellow-Egyptologists, *Studies in Pharaonic Religion and Society in honour of J. Gwyn Griffiths* (ed. Alan B. Lloyd), which contains a bibliography of his writings to 1991. A matter of particular joy to him was the opening, in Swansea University in 1998, of the Egypt Centre, a permanent and purpose-built home for the Wellcome Collection of Egyptian Antiquities: he and Käthe Bosse-Griffiths had been instrumental in securing the collection for the university.

Throughout his life J. Gwyn Griffiths was a prominent campaigner in the interests of Wales and of the Welsh language. He was the prime mover in establishing the (Welsh-medium) Classical Section of the Guild of Graduates of the University of Wales: he became the Section's first secretary (1951-72), then its chairman (1972-92). Under its aegis he edited the two collections *Cerddi o'r Lladin* ('Poems from Latin', 1962) and *Cerddi Groeg Clasurol* ('Classical Greek Poems', 1989), and also published a Welsh translation of *Aristotle's Poetics* (1978; new printing, 2001). He was a friend of Waldo Williams and D. J. Williams: a collection which he made of Waldo's poems provided a basis for the publication of *Dail Pren* ('Tree Leaves', 1956); he was editor of a volume in D. J.'s honour (1965), of a collection of his early short stories *Y Gaseg Ddu* ('The Black Mare', 1970), and of the volume devoted to him in the series *Bro a Bywyd* (1982). Earlier in his life J. Gwyn Griffiths wrote a number of political pamphlets, including *Anarchistiaeth* ('Anarchism', 1944) and *Y Patrwm Cydwladol* ('The International Pattern', 1949); from 1948 to 1952 he was editor of the Plaid Cymru periodical, *Y Ddraig Goch* ('The Red Dragon'). He also stood as a candidate for Plaid Cymru in local and parliamentary elections in Swansea and district. He supported every Welsh-language activity in Swansea, and, although hampered by deafness in his last years, rarely was he absent from any event which promoted the language in the area. For years he was a deacon in Capel Gomer, Swansea's Welsh-language Baptist church, and a local preacher who gave readily of his service to churches of all denominations.

J. Gwyn Griffiths was a man of deep convictions, a tireless worker and a warm companion. He died in Swansea, aged 92, on 15 June 2004, over six years after his wife. On 23 June 2004, after a service at Trinity Chapel, Swansea, his remains were buried with Käthe's in Morryston Cemetery.

## Author

Ceri Davies

## Sources

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Heini Gruffudd, in *Hog Dy Fwyell* (2007), 9-15

Heini Gruffudd, *Yr Erlid. Hanes Kate Bosse-Griffiths a'i theulu yn yr Almaen a Chymru adeg yr Ail Ryfel Byd* (2012)

Meic Stephens, *Necrologies. A Book of Welsh Obituaries* (2008), 176-80

personal acquaintance

## Further Reading

NLW Archives: [General Election, 8th October, 1959. Gower Division of Glamorgan. Dr. J. Gwyn Griffiths, Plaid Cymru Candidate](#)

[Wikipedia Article: J. Gwyn Griffiths](#)

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