

Ellis Humphrey Evans - A Lesser-Known Poet of the Great War by Simon Wilson

Most of us, if we are honest, would be hard pressed even to remember the names of a dozen war poets. There are 16 names on the memorial in Westminster Cathedral, chosen by a group of eminent historians and authors to represent all the poets who wrote of the war. It is a strange memorial, as some of them weren't, to be honest, that good, one only seems to have written one poem, one never went overseas and one wasn't actually dead when the memorial was installed. I struggle to name them all, even though I last read the list a day ago.



One who didn't make the cut was Ellis Evans (*left*). He started life as a farm worker and served in the ranks, which made it difficult to get on the list (12 of the 16 were officers) and he wrote in Welsh. Welsh poetry is difficult to write (a) because it's in Welsh and (b) because it has a complex structure. It wasn't, and still isn't, widely read across the UK because most of us don't speak Welsh and, in translation, it loses much of its effect.

Evans went to the village school, where he started writing poetry. His father bought him a book containing the rules of Welsh verse and by the age of 11 he was writing poems in the Welsh style. After leaving school, he went to work on the family farm, where he was known for being an indifferent shepherd, who spent much of his time looking at nature and composing poetry in his head. He took part in various local competitions and eisteddfods, winning his first bardic chair in 1907 at the age of 20. He was given the bardic name Hedd Wyn (meaning Blessed Peace) and

would go on to win four more chairs and come second in the National Eisteddfod in 1916, narrowly missing the highest honour that can be won by a poet writing in Welsh.

He was a pacifist, as were many chapel-goers, and did not enlist until 1917 when his family was told that one of their sons must enlist. By March 1917 he was back on the farm, being one of many farm workers sent back to help on the land. Whilst he was at home, he wrote a poem titled *The Hero* but, having over-stayed, was arrested for desertion and taken back to camp under escort. He left the poem at home and had to write it again. He mailed it from France at the end of June and, on 31 July, was killed as his battalion, the 15th Royal Welsh Fusiliers (RWF)) advanced against a German strongpoint at the Battle of Pilckem Ridge. One of the men who was with him was Simon Jones, who gave an interview about his death in 1975.

"We started over Canal Bank at Ypres and he was killed half way across Pilckem. I've heard many say that they were with Hedd Wyn and this and that, well I was with him... I saw him fall and I can say that it was a nosecap shell in his stomach that killed him. You could tell that... He was going in front of me, and I saw him fall on his knees and grab two fistfuls of dirt... He was dying, of course... There were stretcher bearers coming up behind us, you see. There was nothing – well, you'd be breaking the rules if you went to help someone who was injured when you were in an attack."



He is buried in Artillery Wood Cemetery near Boezinge (*left*), and his gravestone bears the additional inscription “Y Prifardd Hedd Wynn”, which translates as "The Chief Bard, Hedd Wyn". It is said several times online that the extra inscription was added after a petition to the Imperial War Graves Commission, but the existing paperwork available on the CWGC website shows it to have been added by the parents as part of the normal practice.

In early September, the National Eisteddfod was held in Birkenhead, one of the few to ever be held outside Wales. The pseudonym of the winning writer was announced to the crowd, which included David Lloyd George, but, unlike previous years, nobody stood to claim the honour. Three times they called the name and three times there was no answer, before the presiding Archdruid rose to announce that Ellis Evans, winner of the greatest prize in Welsh poetry, had died of his wounds six weeks earlier.

The empty bardic chair (*right*), was draped in black cloth and has become known as The Black Chair. It was taken to his home, where it still stands as part of the museum which has been developed there. It was made by Eugene Vanfleteren, a Belgian carpenter who had settled in Birkenhead after leaving Belgium as a refugee in 1914.

In the attack where Evans was killed, he was accompanied by, and may even have known, David Jones, who, having been wounded on the Somme in 1916, was back in the battalion at Pilckem Ridge, and would, in time, be an acclaimed war poet who featured on the Westminster Abbey memorial.

Another poet who wasn't featured on the Westminster Abbey memorial was Irish poet Francis Ledwidge. He was a year younger than Evans and was working in a coal mine when his poetry was first published. Enlisting in the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, he served at Gallipoli and then Salonika before being invalided home with rheumatism and a back injury. On the day that Evans was killed, Ledwidge was back in France, in a fatigue party laying wooden roadways in support of the main attack. They paused for a cup of tea and a German shell exploded close by, killing Ledwidge instantly. He too is buried in Artillery Wood Cemetery.





There is a statue in Trawsfynydd (*left*), showing Evans as a shepherd. It was unveiled in 1923 by his mother and is by L S Merrifield (1880-1943), who made many memorials, including the one at Merthyr Tydfil.

The Flintshire County Herald for Friday 24 June 1921 announced a large donation from Major David Davies MP, Chairman of the Memorial Committee. The fund was, at that time £950. The cost of the statue was £500 and the remainder would be used as a scholarship fund for children of the area. Davies had commanded the 14th battalion RWF during the war before being recalled to a cabinet post. He was a well-known philanthropist.



In 1928 two quotes from a poem about Hedd Wyn, described as “the hero poet of Wales” were used on the Welsh National War memorial in Cardiff.

Evans's most quoted poem is “Rhyfel” - which translates as “War”

Woe is me to live in such a dreary age,
While God ebbs on a distant shore;

Behind him a man, tyrant and king,
Raises his hellish authority.

When he felt God go away
He raised a sword to kill his brother;
We hear the sounds of death and
Its shadow falls on the homes of the poor.

Like the old songs they were asked to sing,
They hung their harps in the willows,
And the boys cried aloud
As their blood mixed in the rain.

A final note, in case you were wondering – the correct spelling of the regiment in the Great War is Royal Welsh Fusiliers. It was changed to Welch in Army Order No. 56 of 1920.