

The Chairman : J. Towyn Jones



South West Wales briefly reclaimed its ancient name of Dyfed, the land of myth and magic, as a modern county from 1974 to 1996. For some reason, many institutions and companies persist in using the name to this day. A fact to which the Chairman is easily reconciled for he is a Demetian, i.e. he relates to the present three counties of Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire which formed Dyfed.

J. Towyn Jones is descended from the Bards of Cwm-du in Cardiganshire whose pedigree may be traced to the 15th Century. They made a name for themselves both in the Principality (e.g. closely connected with establishing the early Baptist cause at Rhydwylym) and in 18th Century America. Abel Morgan (1673-1722) compiled the first Welsh concordance **Cydgordiad Eglwyddorawl o'r Scrythurau**, in Philadelphia in 1730. This was the second Welsh book to be published in America and Towyn has a copy of it in his extensive library which many of the Society have visited. When he was elevated to the Druid Order (White robe) in the Gorsedd of Bards in 2000, he took as his bardic name: 'Towyn o'r Cwm-du'.

Most importantly and of significant interest to members of the Society, two of the family distinguished themselves in David Lloyd George's government and political circle. Both of them first cousins of Towyn Jones's grandmother: Sir John T Davies, K.C.B., C.V.O (1887-1938), Lloyd George's Private Secretary, and J. Towyn Jones (1858-1925), M.P. for East Carmarthenshire, Junior Lord of the Treasury. Although not a George himself by name or pedigree, the Chairman's credentials as far as association with the greatest of the Georges is concerned are therefore, impeccable! He and his cousin, Brigadier Glynne R. Jones, OBE, FRCS, TD, FSA Scot, have conducted extensive research into their own family tree.

The Chairman's connection with Pembrokeshire is that he was born there at his mother's family home, Blaenpistyll, Boncath (or Llanfyrnach according to his passport!) at a quarter to midnight (not without significance some might say - see below!) on the 29th May 1942, the only child of Thomas Emrys and Annie Mary Jones. A few weeks later he became a citizen of Carmarthenshire where he has remained ever since, albeit in three different parts of the county. First of all, he was brought up on the hill farm where his father's family had lived for several generations. The Welsh name 'Lan' for his old home, like "Wuthering", could similarly claim to be *"a significant provincial adjective, descriptive of the atmospheric tumult to which its situation is exposed in stormy weather."* When winter came relentlessly hard, as it always did, the tall trees surrounding the farm howled their scorn to the east wind like a coven of bony hags on the heath gripped in icy isolation. Yearly the teeth of winter formed their image in long crystal fangs on the cowshed eaves. As a snowy blanked thickly feathered itself around the farm, so spindly branches, bushes and hedges more darkly, silently, intensified their threat. Not until the

early 1960s and the advent of electricity, were the frontiers of night driven back and people became less intimidated by its black agents.

This probably explains more than one of the Chairman's passions, one of which is his almost obsessive fondness of snow. Even though he was only five years old, he well remembers the great blizzard unleashed in 1947. It fell upon the old homestead in the night with unprecedented ferocity. Death comes, on occasion, dressed in white. Fear of its deadly shroud, his parents' earnest hospitality and the blazing hearth of his old home, kept it at bay on the night of that terrible snowstorm and transformed it into one of the most formative occasions of Towyn Jones' life. Two local characters, Dan Waunlwyd and John Plasnewydd, who would have assuredly perished had they ventured homeward over the moors, were forcibly detained overnight and captivated Towyn with their tales.

Over the years he has himself become well-known as a raconteur and very much in demand all over Wales telling ghost stories by candlelight and more seriously lecturing



on the supernatural in folklore. The quest for truth in such tales had its genesis that wild night. This is why he was eventually invited to address the George Family Name Society at Nantyffin near Clunderwen. His subject was the legend connected with a historic Pembrokeshire house called Trewern near Nevern. He has sought to convey some of the mystery associated with it in his oil painting of

Trewern which hangs above the fireplace in his study, as may be seen in the photograph. For several centuries Trewern was the family home of the Warren family and was eventually inherited by Edward Warren Jones of Llanina near New Quay, the son of one of three Warren daughters, of the same family as the Lloyds of Coedmore near Cardigan. Towards the third decade of the Victorian century, the tenancy was taken by David George of Cardigan, who was later to be ordained minister of the local Baptist Congregation although, as often happened in those days he continued farming. Nevertheless, he became a rich landowner and the secret of his new found wealth was believed to be this Tudor house, built according to the late Major Francis Jones, CVO; c.1578. So how did someone who, it was said, had to pawn his watch to pay his tithe dues, acquire such wealth? The Reverend David George (1808-1892), struck gold. Literally so, legend has it. He discovered "delw aur Trewern (the golden effigy of Trewern). Concealed in a secret chamber above the porch, in what may well have been a recusants hideaway, was a solid gold figure, of the Virgin Mary some have surmised, hidden since the dissolution of the Monasteries.

Not surprisingly, in this magical territory (alluded to already) rife with strange tales, the supernatural plays its part. The more mundane version of the story maintains that a servant sent up a ladder to examine storm damage to the roof of the porch, glimpses the interior of the chamber and its contents for the first time in centuries (and is well

rewarded for his silence!). The other version derives from the fact that during his last few years David George was afflicted with a tic - a convulsive motion of certain muscles which caused the involuntary response of throwing the head over the shoulder - giving rise to the claim that he had been approached by a ghost offering to disclose hidden treasure but with the dire caution that he was not to witness the spirit's departure. A condition evidently not complied with and he was left branded but otherwise greatly profited.

A phantom disclosing hidden treasure is of course, common form in Folklore. This, however, is a classic tale of its kind with enduring elements of fascination. There can hardly be a more tantalising George story than this. After all, there *was* a hidden chamber above the porch. A photograph of Trewern taken about the time of World War II clearly shows that the top window above the porch is a fairly recent feature, for it does not appear in the photograph!

The Chairman's interest and expertise in this field is well known through lecturing, storytelling and broadcasts but also in the publication of two books on the subject: **Borley Cymru**, Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, 2001, and **Rhag ofn Ysbrydion**, Cymdeithas Lyfrau Ceredigion, 2009. On his retirement at the end of November, he very much hopes to be actively completing many years of studious research for the publication of **The Ghosts of Aberglasney: the Origins of a Tradition** and **Shady Leaves of Destiny** (concerning Lady Elizabeth Hills Johnes of Dolaucothi).

This aspect of his pursuits had its culmination at the AGM of "The Ghost Club" in London, on 19th October 2013, when it was unanimously resolved the Reverend J. Towyn Jones be elevated to be Honorary Life Member of the Ghost Club. The Chairman, Barrister Alan Murdie, spoke of Reverend Jones' diligent and life-long research into the supernatural in Wales, both in historic and folklore terms and of his contribution to the Club in London. The Ghost Club was founded in 1862 by eminent Victorians such as Charles Dickens. It should be noted that Towyn's interest in the subject is purely academic! He is not a Spiritualist and has never attended a séance in his life, nor has any inclination to do so.

Fine Art also developed into an abiding interest during his formative years and has remained a life-long passion. A former student of the Carmarthen School of Art, he was elected a Life Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts on 10 April 1972. His portrait 'Jack Rhydgaled and Tim' was exhibited at the Royal National Eisteddfod of Wales in 1974 and his portrait of the Reverend Professor D. P. Roberts MA., BD., painted in 1964, is in the collection of the National Library of Wales. His decision therefore to become a theological student caused some consternation. Principal Stanley Lewis, A.R.C.A., 1905-2009, vented his dismay in no uncertain terms. Well over half a century later, on the verge of his retirement, Towyn himself finds it no less astonishing that he persevered as a nonconformist minister at two country chapels 1964-1974 and in the Carmarthen area 1974-2015. This is particularly since it was more by accident of birth than conviction that he aligned with the dissenting persuasion, certain antecedents of which are anathema to him. The exuberance of a Baroque Church of the Counter Reformation would seem to be more pleasing to the eye of the Artist.

During this early period of his career circumstances conspired to put before him what might easily have been life-changing. The BBC beckoned and the opportunity arose

to become a broadcaster. He made frequent appearances on the television magazine programme "Heddiw" and other programmes, presented several radio series over the years and has remained a familiar voice on the media.

A respected local historian, one of his books is **Ar Lwybr Llofrudd**, published by Gomer in 1970 - an investigation into an unsolved Carmarthenshire Victorian murder case and the difficulties of an early police force before the advent of forensic evidence. The prime accolade awarded him in this field was to be elected President of the Carmarthenshire Antiquarian Society (founded in 1905), highly regarded by a great many as the premier Welsh local history society. It is to be hoped that his retirement will facilitate the publication of the long awaited **History of the Bridge at Llandeilo Fawr** and other studies.

Other early influences (as already indicated) have become deep convictions over the years. He is a staunch Royalist. The beacon lit on Moelfre, near his old home, to celebrate the Coronation in June 1953, drew a great crowd with no barriers of language, race or party creed. Nothing but the Monarchy could enable such fraternity. He is a Life Member of the Constitutional Monarch Association and the Society of King Charles the Martyr.

Christmas (banned by Cromwell!) is a subject to which Towyn Jones' has devoted attention throughout his life. During his years as a minister, he was able to write and produce Christmas extravaganzas that drew large appreciative audiences from far and wide. Latterly, these included cameos filmed on location. He led a party of choristers from his church to sing "Silent Night" in Welsh in Oberndorf; likewise "Good King Wenceslas" in Prague and "Daeth Iesu o'i Gariad" at Schubert's grave in Vienna. Many will always remember the enchanting and mystic atmosphere of the candlelit Plygain service at 6.00a.m. on Christmas morning, which he conducted without a break for fifty years (1964-2014). With the Incarnation at its heart, no wonder Christmas is a wonderful, colourful and joyous occasion that has engendered rich traditions. Towyn Jones' life-long fascination with the subject led him to become firm friends with Count Andrew von Stauffer and the late Countess Maria (who was regarded as the world experts on the festival) and a member of the Society of Nativitists.

Eisteddfodau have played their part in the formation of the Chairman's character. He hated having to compete in those highly popular competitive meetings held in the village halls and chapels during his boyhood days, but was enthralled by all the arias and solos, sung by very fine singers, that he was privileged to hear. That was his introduction to opera of which he is a dedicated aficionado. His taste in music extends from classical to traditional jazz but stops far short of modern pop and country and western!

His partner Margaret ('Mags') Edwards, Welsh speaking and a native of Meirionethshire, held a highly responsible position in Credit Suisse for many years. She has a house in London, where she has lived for a quarter of a century, which means that Towyn, a Friend of the Royal Academy and member of the National Trust, Historic Houses Association and the English Heritage is ideally placed to visit all the major exhibitions to his heart's content but still maintaining well-loved Brynsiriol, Carmarthen.