

Background Notes for the Study of the Film ‘Hedd Wyn’

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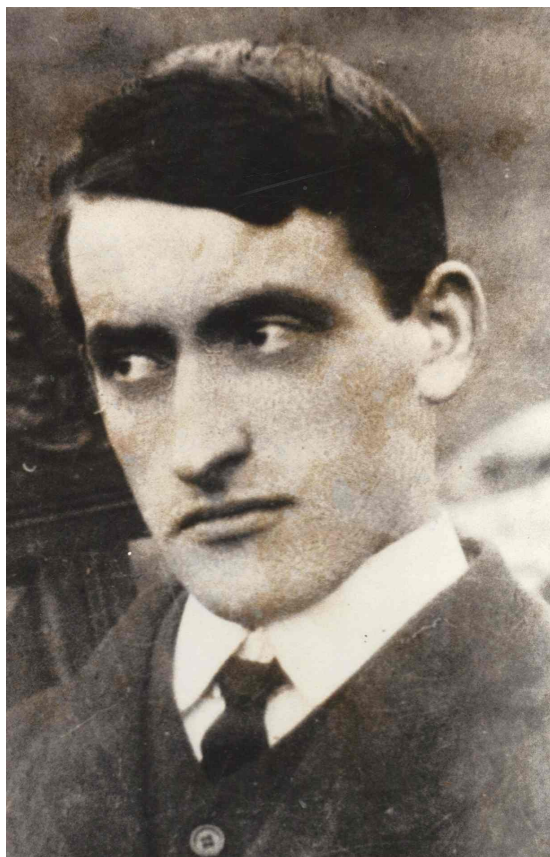


Image of Hedd Wyn

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The Film

The story of the poet Hedd Wyn (Ellis Humphrey Evans) who was killed in action during the First World War was the subject of a Welsh language film 'Hedd Wyn' in 1992, starring Huw Garmon as the poet. The script was by the poet Alan Llwyd, and the director was Paul Turner.

This film has been a set work for study at the Welsh Second Language exam at AS level for some years. The film explores Ellis' dislike of violence, and gives a very accurate portrayal of life on a Welsh farm at the start of the 20th century. It describes the cultural conflict caused by the influx of English soldiers into a Welsh area; and also the inhumane treatment of the Welsh recruits when they joined the army. It does also show the heroism of some of the officers who faced death with their men.

Ellis' surviving relative (Gerald Williams) is critical of some historical inaccuracies in the film, although it did bring the story of Hedd Wyn to a wider audience.

An interesting device which the film uses is a veiled female figure, based on the Celtic moon-goddess, *Arianrhod*, who represents *yr Awen* (the Muse), seeking to show Ellis' poetic inspiration. The film also uses voice-over reading of many of Ellis' poems.

This film was nominated for an Oscar in 1994 in the category of best film in a language other than English. It won the Royal Television Society Award for Best Single Drama (1993) and it won six BAFTA Cymru Awards.

Although not widely available on DVD, you may still order second-hand VHS copies on Amazon.co.uk. Also the WJEC examining board sell the film on DVD and VHS.ⁱ

Ellis Humphrey Evans (Hedd Wyn) 1887-1917

Ellis Humphrey Evans was born at 'Penlan', Trawsfynydd, Meirionnydd (Merionethshire) in Wales on 13th January 1887, the eldest son of eleven children born to Evan and Mary Evans. Soon after his birth the family moved to his father's old house 'Yr Ysgwrn' a small hill-farm about a mile to the east of the village of Trawsfynydd. Apart from a very brief spell working in south Wales as a coal miner, Ellis lived at 'Yr Ysgwrn' all his life until he was called up by the army.

He went to the village school, and then worked as a shepherd on the farm. He showed a talent for poetry from an early age, and with the help of William Morris, a local minister, he had some success in local eisteddfodau winning his first competition at the age of twelve. Ellis won his first Bardic Chair in nearby Bala in 1907 with a poem called Dyffryn (Valley). In 1913 he again won the Chair at Pwllheli. Following this he won Chairs at Llanuwchllyn (1913 and 1915), Pwllheli (1913) and Pontardawe, in South Wales (1915). Apart from writing for competitions he also composed poetry about events and people around Trawsfynydd. It is a custom that Welsh poets take an *Enw Barddol* (a Bardic Name), and Ellis chose Hedd Wyn which means 'Blessed Peace'

(literal translation: 'white peace'). Some say that this name was inspired by the shafts of sunlight which he saw in the fields and hills around Trawsfynydd.

His ambition was to win in the National Eisteddfod of Walesⁱⁱ, which he first entered in 1915 when it was held in Bangor. Ellis came second in the National Eisteddfod in 1916, held that year in Aberystwyth. Such compositions take great flair and precision, as the poem must be written within the strict rules of the Welsh metre called *cynghanedd*. Ellis set his sights on the chair at the National Eisteddfod of 1917 (to be held in Birkenhead). 'Yr Arwr' (The Hero) was set as a subject for the Chair and Hedd Wyn decided to compete.

Meanwhile, as the War continued, pressure was brought to bear on local farmers to send their sons to the army. Although Ellis had no intention of volunteering for the war, the introduction of conscription in 1916 forced him into the army. Despite farming being work of national importance after 1916 only two sons were allowed to remain to help farm the land. As the oldest of the sons still at home, Ellis joined the Royal Welsh Fusiliers in January 1917, despite his own conscientious objections - his opposition to war and killing.

After a brief training period in February 1917 at Litherland near Liverpool, in March the Government called for farm workers to help with ploughing and Ellis was temporarily released along with many soldiers. He spent some of these seven weeks' leave working on 'Yr Arwr'. He returned to training in May and in June 1917 Ellis joined the 15th Battalion Royal Welsh Fusiliers at Fléchin in France. His arrival depressed him. "Heavy weather, heavy soul, heavy heart. That is an uncomfortable trinity, isn't it?" Nevertheless at Fléchin he finished his National Eisteddfod entry drawing upon his experiences to describe the realities of war for both the soldiers and their families back home. 'Yr Arwr' was an *awdl*, a poem in the strict Welsh metres using the poetical system called *cynghanedd*. It is a tradition that poets compete in eisteddfodau using a *Ffugenw* (nom-de-plume or pen-name), and for the Birkenhead Eisteddfod, Hedd Wyn signed 'Yr Awdl' as 'Fleur-de-Lis'. It left with the post on the 15th July 1917.

The same day his Battalion moved towards the Front Line in readiness for the major assault which would be known as the Third Battle of Ypres or simply as Passchendaele.

The Battle of Pilkem Ridge 31st July 1917

By the end of July Ellis' regiment was stationed near Pilkem Ridge (Pilckem Ridge). That summer was extremely wet and heavy rain turned the battlefield into a swamp. More than 30,000 soldiers died in the Battle of Pilkem Ridge. The target for the wider operation, the devastated village of Passchendaele, was not captured until the 6th November, 98 days after the start of the battle. This slow advance over little more than five miles of ground was achieved with the loss of 310,000 Allied and 260,000 German lives.

At the start of that battle Ellis' unit was ordered to attack on the 31st July 1917 at 03.50hrs (3.50am). The 15th Battalion took Pilkem and then advanced toward Iron Cross (Hagebos). They came under heavy fire from the Germans in Battery Copse. Ellis was shot in the back. There are a number of versions of what followed. One version is that he was taken by four comrades to a first-aid post at a dug-out, called Corner House. There a Doctor worked out that Ellis had little chance of surviving, but he did not lose consciousness. "Do you think I will live?" he asked the Doctor. Despite his critical state, Ellis smiled. "You seem very happy", a soldier remarked. "Yes, I am very happy" he replied. Those were his last words. Ellis Evans died at about 11.00hrs (11am). He was buried on the battlefield, although his body was moved after the end of the war to Artillery Wood cemetery.

Eye witness account of Ellis Evans' wounds

An account of the events of that morning in 1917 were recorded by the National Museums of Wales St. Fagans when they interviewed Simon Jones of Aberangell in 1975. Jones served in the same regiment as Ellis, and witnessed him falling on the field of battle.ⁱⁱⁱ.

"It was the last day of July, you see. The first day of probably the biggest battle that ever took place. The battle of Passchendaele. And we were going over the top at half past four. We started over Canal Bank at Ypres, and he was killed half way across Pilckem (Ridge). I've heard many say that they were with Hedd Wyn and this and that, well I was with him as a boy from Llanuwchllyn and him from Trawsfynydd. I saw him fall and I can say that it was a nose cap shell in his stomach that killed him. You could tell that. You couldn't stay with him - you had to keep going, you see.

When did you see him last, to speak to him?

Oh, it's difficult to say. Perhaps I spoke to him that morning, because if I saw him get killed, I must have been near to him. I remember well that we had an officer leading us called Newman, Lieutenant Newman. He was going in front of me, and I saw him fall on his knees and grab two fistfuls of dirt. Well there was nothing but dirt there, you see - the place was all churned up. He was dying, of course.

What did you do? Could you do something when you saw Hedd Wyn... ?

Nothing at all. No. 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. Your business was to keep going.

How did you feel when you saw your friend fall?

Well I'll tell you straight. To be honest, you had no time to sympathise because you didn't know whether you'd be in the same situation as him in a couple of yards."

"Dydd ola o Orffenna', 'dech chi'n gweld, diwrnod cynta'r frwydyr fwya fuo yn y byd 'ma 'rioed ma'n debyg. Brwydyr Passchendaele. A oen ni'n mynd drosodd hanner awr wedi pedwar. Odden ni'n cychwyn dros Canal Bank yn Ypres ag - y mi lladdwyd o ar hanner Pilckem. Ac ma 'ne lawer iawn wedi clywed - 'dw i wedi clywed llawer yn sôn bod nhw hefo Hedd Wyn, a fel hyn ag fel arall. Wel, ôn i hefo fo fel bachgen o Llanuwchllyn a fynta o Drawsfynydd ag mi gweles o'n syrthio. A mi allaf ddeud mae *nosecap shell* yn 'i fol lladdodd o, wyddoch chi. Ôch chi'n medru gwobod hynny. O, allech chi ddim sefyll hefo fo mae'n wir. Odd rhaid ichi ddal i fynd, 'de.

Pryd welsoch chi o ola', hynny ydy, i siarad hefo fo?

O, mae'n anodd i mi ddeud. Falle 'mod i'n siarad efo fo'r bore hynny, yndê. Achos... trwy 'mod i'n weld o yn cael 'i ladd odd rhaid 'mod i'n agos iddo. A dwi'n cofio'r peth mor dda bod gennon ni *officer* yn lidio ni i fyny. Newman oedd 'i enw fo, Lieutenant Newman, ag odd hwnnw'n mynd o 'mlaen i. A mi weles o'n disgyn ar 'i linie ac yn cydio mewn dwy ddyrned o faw, yndê. Wel, doedd 'na ddim ond pridd yno, wyddoch chi. Oedd y lle wedi 'i falu ymhob man, yndê. Marw 'roedd o wrth reswm, yndê. Ia...

Beth wnaethoch chi? Och chi'n gallu gneud rywbeth wedi ichi weld Hedd Wyn yn... ?

O, dim o gwbwl. Nagoedd. Odd bear - *stretcher bearers* ma'n debyg yn dod fyny tu nôl i ni, 'dech chi'n gweld, 'te. Oedd 'ne ddim - wel, fysech yn torri'r rheole mewn ffor' tasech chi'n mynd i helpu un wedi 'i glwyfo pan ôch chi mewn *attack*. Busnes chi oedd dal i fynd, 'de.

Sut oddech chi'n teimlo pen welsoch chi'ch cyfaill yn disgyn?

Wel, wel, ddeuda'i 'chi'n union. Deud y gwir wrthoch chi, odd o ddim yn amser ichi gydymdeimlo dim ryw ffor' am y rheswm wyddech chi ddim na mewn dwylath fysech chithe 'run fath â fo, yndê."

Y Gadair Ddu / The Black Chair

On September 6th the Eisteddfod pavilion in Birkenhead was packed to hear the adjudication of the judges. In their opinion the poet with the nom-de-plume of 'Fleur-de-lis' fully deserved to win. The Archdruid then rose to tell the audience that the winner was a Private E.H. Evans - Hedd Wyn - but explained that he would be unable to take part in the ceremony as he had been killed in battle a month earlier in the War at Passchendaele. (Ellis never knew of his success). The Chair was draped with a black cloth and the assembled audience was grief-stricken, the empty chair seemed to symbolise all the men who would never return from the War.

Interestingly, the Eisteddfod Chair that year had been carved by a Flemish carpenter Eugene Vanfleteren. He fled Flanders in Belgium at the outbreak of the War and settled in Birkenhead. The Western Mail newspaper reported: "Instead of the usual chairing ceremony the chair was draped in a black pall amidst death-like silence, and the bards came forward in long procession to place their muse-tribute of *englyn* or couplet on the draped chair in memory of the dead bard hero". The Birkenhead Eisteddfod is still referred to as *Eisteddfod y Gadair Ddu* - the 'Black Chair Eisteddfod'. On September 13, 1917 the chair arrived in Trawsfynydd by train and was carried by horse and cart to 'Yr Ysgwrn' and placed amongst his other chairs.

Published Poetry and Criticism

In 1918 J.J. Williams published 'Cerddi'r Bugail', a posthumous anthology of Hedd Wyn's work. A reprint of this volume is sometimes available second-hand from online booksellers.^{iv}

Hedd Wyn's poems had been turbulent and emotional before 1914. Later he expressed his own feelings against the War in his poem 'Rhyfel' (War). In his 1987 book 'Llên Cyni a Rhyfel' (The Literature of Adversity and War), D. Tecwyn Lloyd describes 'Rhyfel' as "one of the great verses of our century and the greatest of all war poems of our era."^v

You can view a manuscript draft of Hedd Wyn's poem 'Yr Arwr' (from the University of Bangor archives) on the Gathering the Jewels website.^{vi}
<http://www.gtj.org.uk/index.php?id=4793&L=0>

The acclaimed poet, Alan Llwyd maintains that 'Yr Arwr' "is possibly the most ambitious of any Eisteddfod winner in the 20th Century." In two lines it sums up the terror of battle in the trenches during The Great War: "*A gwaedd y bechgyn lond y gwynt / A'u gwaed yn gymysg efo'r glaw.*" "With the cries of the boys filling the air/and their blood mixed with the rain"

Published, authoritative English translations of Hedd Wyn's poems seem to be difficult to find. This leaves the way open for academics and enthusiasts to use tools such as the Internet to put forward their translation and for other to constructively criticise,

an example of this is the Poets' Graves Workshop (describing itself as a "Contemporary Poetry Forum, Creative Writing Workshop and Arts Discussion").^{vii}

Places to visit

Trawsfynydd

Trawsfynydd is made up of a small township and rural community of scattered farms much as it was when Ellis left there. The main living in 1917 would have been from the land or the slate quarries in nearby Blaenau Ffestiniog. Farming now dominates the economy, most of the slate mines have gone and recently a nuclear power station, the main employer in the region, was decommissioned. Welsh is still the first language of the inhabitants.

- Llys Ednowain - In Trawsfynydd there is a small museum with exhibits about Ellis and other famous inhabitants. The museum is called Llys Ednowain - it is also a hostel. The address is Llys Ednowain, Trawsfynydd, Gwynedd, LL414UB (telephone 01766 770324, email llysednowain@btconnect.com).
- Town centre - In 1923 a bronze statue of Hedd Wyn as a shepherd was unveiled in the village by his mother. The inscription is verse which Hedd Wyn wrote in memory of a friend who lost his life in the Trenches: Ei aberth ni â heibio - ei wyneb / Annwyl nid â'n ango / Er i'r Almaen ystaenio / Ei dwrn dur yn ei waed o (Roughly translates as 'Neither his sacrifice nor his dear countenance are forgotten, though the Hun has stained his fist of steel in his blood').
- Yr Ysgwrn - Ellis' nephew - the son of his youngest sister Mary - still owns the farm 'Yr Ysgwrn' where Ellis lived, and it is possible to make arrangements for a visit there. He has a lot of memorabilia, and tells visitors the story of his uncle. One teacher reports "I called there recently with a small group of people and found being in Mr Williams' company hearing all about the history and times of the family was an experience in itself." There is a visitors' book which lists many famous people. Ellis' Bardic Chairs (including the Birkenhead National Eisteddfod Black Chair of 1917) are on display in the parlour at 'Yr Ysgwrn'. To visit Hedd Wyn's birthplace contact Gerald Williams, Yr Ysgwrn, Trawsfynydd, Gwynedd, LL41 4UW.

University of Bangor

The University of Bangor in North Wales^{viii} holds a number of manuscripts relating to Ellis, he is also commemorated on the North Wales Heroes Memorial arch.

- **Archives** - The collection includes a fascinating letter from the front written "From somewhere in France". It is written in close handwriting covering every part of the paper. The letter provides a poet's view of the life "behind the line" and yet typically does not reveal the actual horrors of the trenches. It focuses on the few small moments of beauty that Ellis finds to contemplate and share with the reader. He focuses on trees and flowers, saying the most beautiful thing he's seen is some flowers put to grow out of an empty shell. In a piece which almost predicts the symbolism of the Remembrance Day poppy, he says France's flowers will be doleful in the future and a sad wind will blow

over her acres because the colour of blood will be in one and the sound of sorrow in the other: “*blodau prudd fydd blodau Ffrainc yn y dyfodol a gwynt trist fydd yn chwythu dros ei herwau achos fydd lliw gwaed yn un a sŵn gofid yn y llall*”. Professor Gerwyn Williams, Head of the School of Welsh, University of Bangor, who specialises in the literature of the First World War, says; “reading the letter- in Hedd Wyn’s handwriting- imagining the conditions in which it was written offers a direct and unique connection with the poet. It’s an excellent example of the treasures to be found at Bangor University’s Archive, a rare manuscript which brings to life the experience of studying the work of an important man of letters.”^{ix} A draft of the Eisteddfod Chair winning awdl ‘Yr Arwr’, in the poet’s own hand (Archives reference number MSS. 23333) is also available. You can also view this manuscript online on the website of the Gathering the Jewels Project. Contact Archives and Welsh Library, The Main Library, Bangor University, College Road, Bangor, Gwynedd LL57 2DG. LL57 2DG (telephone : 01248 382966 email: archives@bangor.ac.uk URL: <http://www.bangor.ac.uk/archives/index.php>)

- **Bangor University’s Memorial Arch** - Elis Humphrey Evans is one of over 8,500 soldiers, sailors, and airmen from North Wales, who fell in the First World War. Within the Memorial Arch building are oak panels inscribed with the names of the fallen, arranged by parish and county. Their website includes a photograph of each panel which can be navigated online if your Internet browser has Flash, see <http://www.bangorcivicsociety.org.uk/pages/arch/index.htm> and for Trawsfynydd see <http://www.bangorcivicsociety.org.uk/pages/arch/DSCF4314.htm> The arch can be visited: North Wales Heroes Memorial, Deiniol Road, Bangor, Gwynedd.

Royal Welch Fusiliers Regimental Museum

Visit this museum to find out more about the regiment Ellis served in, and their other famous soldiers who included the authors Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, both officers, as well as David Jones and Frank Richards. Address: Royal Welch Fusiliers Regimental Museum, The Castle, Caernarfon, Gwynedd, North Wales, UK LL55 2AY http://www.rwfmuseum.org.uk/nb_heddwyn.html

Belgium

- **Artillery Wood Cemetery** - Ellis’ grave is at Artillery Wood Cemetery, Boezinge, near Ypres in Belgium. He is buried at section II, row F, grave 11. His headstone was to read simply E.H. Evans, but after the War a petition was submitted to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, and it was granted that his grave could also read ‘Y Prifardd Hedd Wyn’ (The Principle Bard, Hedd Wyn). The website of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission includes a certificate for Ellis’ burial <http://www.cwgc.org/search/certificate.aspx?casualty=100906> as well as details about the history of the Cemetery, a list of the burials, and a plan of the plots http://www.cwgc.org/search/cemetery_details.aspx?cemetery=9700&mode=1

Another poet is also buried at Artillery Wood, Francis Edward Ledwidge, who died the same day. You can find out some more about Ledwidge, an Irishman, <http://www.francisledwidge.com/> In 2007 the 90th Anniversary BBC Wales transmitted from the grave of Hedd Wyn. The footage is available on 'YouTube' and is a particularly good introduction to the subject see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6VUPV_fJJR8

- **Langemark** - Near to Boezinge at the Langemark crossroads a plaque has been erected to mark the location of Ellis' death. It is inscribed in Welsh, Flemish and English. Many ceremonies have been held since his death to his memory, in 1992 on the 75th Anniversary of his death, a commemorative slate plaque was unveiled at the Hagebos cross-roads in Langemark to his memory and an exhibition in the Cloth Hall in Ieper.
- **Ypres** - The towns and villages around Ypres (Ieper) hold memorials and relics of the First World War including preserved trench systems and countless cemeteries. There is a modest but sincere memorial to Hedd Wyn's memory St. George's Memorial Church, Ieper placed by *Merched y Wawr*, Trawsfynydd.

ⁱ The WJEC sell: Clasuron Drama (DVD Box Set) - a collection of four classic films in Welsh: Branwen, Gadael Lenin, Hedd Wyn and Solomon a Gaenor £34.77 (ex. VAT) (S4C) ISBN: 5023794008835 <https://www.wjec.co.uk/index.php?nav=shop&pID=3&langID=1> and Hedd Wyn (VHS), also available separately with English subtitles £8.69 (ex. VAT) <https://www.wjec.co.uk/index.php?nav=shop&pID=703&langID=1>

ⁱⁱ Interesting information about the National Eisteddfod is available from the National Museums of Wales 'Gorsedd of the Bards of the Isle of Britain' <http://www.museumwales.ac.uk/en/gorsedd/introduction/>

ⁱⁱⁱ National Museums of Wales: <http://www.museumwales.ac.uk/en/rhagor/article/1920/>

^{iv} *Cerddi'r bugail: Ynghyd ag atodiad o waith y bardd nas cynhwyswyd yn argraffiadau 1918 na 1931* (Clasuron Hughes) by Hedd Wyn. Published by Hughes a'i Fab (1994) ISBN: 0852841590

^v *Llên Cyni a Rhyfel*, D. Tecwyn Lloyd. Published by Gomer Press (1987) ISBN: 086383356X

^{vi} Manuscript draft of 'Yr Arwr' on the Gathering the Jewels website <http://www.gtj.org.uk/index.php?id=4793&L=0>

^{vii} Poets' Graves Workshop <http://www.poetsgraves.co.uk/forum/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=5051&p=33518&hilit=Hedd+Wyn#p33518>

^{viii} Archives and Welsh Library, The Main Library, Bangor University, College Road, Bangor, Gwynedd LL57 2DG (telephone : 01248 382966 email: archives@bangor.ac.uk URL: <http://www.bangor.ac.uk/archives/index.php>)

^{ix} University of Bangor, news 7/11/2007, 'Hedd Wyn's letter from the Front' <http://www.bangor.ac.uk/news/full.php?id=385>