

Tom Parry Evans

Extract from the Autobiography of Tom Parry Evans

I was at the College from 1943-1945 – aged from 17 to 19 years

... teachers could have said of me, "You are an honest boy, Tom Evans, for you have taken nothing away from here."

When the time came for me to leave for Trinity, my old elementary school headmaster at Llanddarog, Mr Glynne Lewis, invited me to have a chat with him about what I should study. He emphasised that great changes were likely to happen after the war and that qualified teachers of practical subjects would be in short supply. He meant well, but his recommendation that I should take up Woodwork, Rural Studies and Music almost ruined my college career. As Dewi was a gifted carpenter and joiner, and in any case I was descended from a family of wood turners, I assumed that I had inherited a similar capacity and, since I had regularly dug the garden over the years, and recognised a variety of birds and animals, that I was adequately experienced in countryside matters and, of course, I had always enjoyed singing, so I accepted the advice gladly.

Very soon I found out that I could not plane a piece of wood properly let alone craft some joints that fitted. The tutor in charge, to save his precious supply of timber, suggested that I should end my association with him and his discipline, so that at the end of the year I gave up shaping blocks of wood into shavings. This meant, then, that I had to pass my examination in Rural Studies, a subject that I found uninteresting to say the least, and in which the greatest excitement lay in viewing slides under a microscope to examine extinct life. Also I had to be successful in Music, a subject that tended to be studied by proficient instrumentalists, whereas all I could offer was the ability to sing well-known melodies in tune. I'm fairly sure that I should have been a happier and a more competent student if I had ignored the advice given me and had followed a more 'academic' course studying Mathematics, History and Geography, for example. It was a blessing that the core subjects of Educational Practice and Psychology, Health and Physical Education, and English Language and Bilingual Education did not deter me, whilst the study of Welsh Literature delighted me and gave me good cause to persevere and survive.

Without doubt, the main reason that I did not thrive in the new environment was because of my comparative immaturity. I was hardly more than a schoolboy and, indeed, I regarded attendance at the college simply as a continuation of my schooldays (with prefects and a Head Boy) but now, amongst strangers, many of whom were brash youngsters from the industrial towns, or affluent members of an upwardly mobile, Anglicised middle-class. To exaggerate the differences between us, both groups at first tended to treat us Cymraeg-speaking country lads with a condescension almost amounting to contempt. On reflection, perhaps what helped me to get through was the regimented, monastic style of life that, in a way, protected me from my insecurities in this 'foreign' community. Equally important was the secure friendship of Howell Gravelle and Huws Bach who had moved with me to Trinity, and of Harry Owen already a senior with a year's experience behind him.

Trinity College was a 100-year old Anglican establishment for men only, and its traditions and expectations had hardly changed since its early days of Victorian sombre respectability. Each day started with reveille at 7 o'clock, not by bugle call but by a bawling of prefects. After carrying out our ablutions, we attended chapel for daily prayers before proceeding to the refectory for breakfast at 8 o'clock. Lectures commenced at 9am and lasted until midday or beyond. If the afternoon were free of lectures we could leave the 'campus' if granted an 'exeat'. In town, there were two cinemas, the Lyric and the Capitol, which we would visit if there were a matinee showing, but more often than not, all we did was to go to a little café in King Street to have some tea and cakes or, at best, a Welsh rarebit. We were expected to be back at college in time for tea, after which there would be a period of supervised compulsory private-study until 9 o'clock. 'Lights-out' and 'One man one bed' were ordered at 10pm. On Saturdays, we were free until 10pm at which time we were expected to attend vespers in the chapel before retiring for the night. Usually, I returned home to see my parents, so that I did not take part in sporting activities much as I should have liked. I did play one game of rugby for the College in a mid-week friendly against Carmarthen Quins, a club with a greater reputation now than then, for then the young rugby enthusiasts were otherwise engaged. As for cricket, I did not possess the necessary flannels and equipment, and I did not feel that my parents could manage the additional expense of kitting me out. The one game that I did play fairly regularly at College was Eton Fives – played on a properly designed concrete courtyard and using a tennis ball and, more to the point, as we only played the game casually there were no financial expenditure involved.

I enrolled in the college choir and was made welcome until the choirmaster found out that I could not read music but could only provide an unrehearsed spontaneous bass harmony, a skill that I had acquired during my chapel hymn-singing days. I was demoted to pump the organ, out of sight of the congregation, behind the piped construction. Again, I did not last long, for I was overheard at Sunday matins booming out 'Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring' when the organist (a student by the name of Rhapps) was delicately negotiating a quiet passage.

The choirmaster, by the way, was the Principal of King Alfred's College, Winchester, about 30 of whose students had been evacuated to Trinity for the duration of the war. Dr R C White had an overwhelmingly imposing personality that he enjoyed exercising on all and sundry, in particular on the Reverend Halliwell, the Trinity Principal, who seemed to be a quiet, modest, inoffensive almost effeminate man. Dr White would not have been amused to learn how he came to be known as 'Tishoo' – and I'm not too sure that I should put the explanation down on paper – however, I'll use a more acceptable phraseology than was used when it was put to me during my first few weeks at Trinity. 'Tishoo' had nothing to do with sneezing but with 'tissue' as in 'lavatory paper' and its significance was to do with the uttered name 'Ar Se White'. No, I'll go no further.

Canon Parry (later, the Dean of St Davids Cathedral) also oozed power. He had been the College Principal from 1909 until 1940 and gave the impression that he did not quite trust Reverend Halliwell's capacity to cope with his recent acquired position of authority, for he was a frequent visitor to the college, and his lean cadaverous figure often dominated the chapel as he stood in the pulpit to harangue us students. One sermon of his that dwelt on the actuality of angels flying about in the air above us during our worship, only caused us to question his

grasp of the real world in which we lived. Another figure who seemed to be unaffected by happenings elsewhere was Charles Wilford, the Head of the Model School in town, who acted as the Music tutor at college. By 1943 some ex-servicemen who had been invalided out of the Forces, came to Trinity to be trained as teachers, some of them hoping to become teachers of music. Quite a few of them were mature, married men with families to care for, who had experienced the bitterness of losing friends killed in battles lost. When one or two of them, unaccustomed to academic study, failed to gain good grades in Music, Charles Wilford threatened to write to their mums and dads about their failures! Such insensitive comments did not endear him to us.

We were protected from the harshness of war, but there were certain duties to be undertaken that qualified as a kind of war service, though the real thing remained a distant event, for students were expected to postpone their call-up until after the completion of their studies. Fire-watching was a regular task, but as there was no bombing and no expectation of enemy action above the market town of Carmarthen, the most frightening aspect of the duty was the requirement to approach Dr White in his bed to wake him promptly at 7am – frightening because rumours abounded that he was over-fond of young men, though nothing ever occurred, it seems, to have warranted this unpleasant accusation.

As a Home Guardsman I attended the usual drill parades, sometimes took part in mock operations, armed with unloaded rifles, against the 'enemy', that is, other Trinity Home Guardsmen, and once or twice did a night-time telephone duty in an office downtown, one of which was on the eve of D-Day, the 6th June 1944, though I cannot claim to have contributed anything to the success of that operation.

These activities hardly impinged on our daily routines. Really, we were much more concerned with moaning about our, so we considered, dismal lives. On entering college, our food ration books had to be handed over to the Matron / Cook, understandably, as we did expect to be fed during our stay, but to describe the cuisine as below standard would be a gross overstatement and rather flattering to the cook. I recall clearly one stomach-churning midday meal when the main course was rabbit-stew. As I lifted the spoon to my mouth, there staring at me was the rabbit's mournful eye full of unspoken resentment. I was not long after this that the student population marched down to the British Restaurant in town as a form of protest. British Restaurants were giant cafes that provided good basic meals at a comparatively low cost to the working population. After a day or two of such action, the college authority promised that improvements would be made, though I cannot remember ever enjoying college food after the rabbit incident.

As one would expect where students are gathered together, occasional events were organised to lighten the monastic routines, though I must admit that they were so trivial in nature that I do not have distinct memories of them. Sometime during the first month an initiation ceremony, arranged by the senior students with the sole purpose of belittling and embarrassing the newcomers, was held. It was very reminiscent of public school customs, of seniors and fags, and so on. As I was a comparative nonentity amongst the noisy, excitable town lads, I managed to escape attention and avoided being put on trial, and so did not have to perform any kind of forfeit or punishment. I do recall that some of the more mature

entrants refused to undergo the intended humiliations of absenting themselves from the ceremony. At the time, we youngsters thought that they were spoilsports but, of course, with their experiences in the war, they despised the childishnesses of studentry.

A small annexe to the main entrance hall was treated as the sole province of off-duty students. I seem to remember that it was known as the Smoke Hall and, presumably, smoking was permitted there, though I have no detailed memory of it. I do remember some raucous behaviour when vigorous pranks were played – including some robust multiple leapfrogging, and the singing of many hugely obscene English rugby songs.

A Rag Week was organised annually when the townspeople were invited to contribute generously to one charity or another. I do have a vague memory of dressing up as Dai Loshin (a cartoon character of the rugby world in Wales) and carrying a collection tin around the streets one Saturday, hoping that the crowds would show a proper appreciation of the students' efforts at public hilarity.

All these activities were rather hysterical in form, presumably a reaction to the staid, restricted existence at Trinity, where students were regarded as inmates almost (similar to the poor people who occupied the United Counties Asylum just across the road). Even when away from the campus, discretion was the password, for students were forbidden from entering the local taverns and, if caught, could be gated for a fortnight or so. As for being seen in the company of girls, there was a standard fine of one shilling – a small fortune for most of us. It never crossed my mind to break the rules for I should most certainly have broken my parents' hearts if apprehended entering a pub to partake of the evil drink. Neither was I likely to be caught chatting up the girls, for I spent most of Saturday, the day of freedom, firmly ensconced at home in the bosom of my family at Porthyrhyd and, in any case, I was romantically loyal to my supposed childhood sweetheart!

In the second year, as seniors, we were allocated separate rooms in Dewi Block, a minimal, functional, concrete construction dating from 1925. Each room was just large enough to house a bed, table, chair, small cupboard and a wash-basin, and it was here that we were now permitted to do our unsupervised Private Study in the evening. However, during the day the building was out of bounds to all students. I suspect that in the first year, as juniors, we must have occupied the cubicles in the Dormitory, but I must admit that I have no memory of such an arrangement.

There was one other, more recent modern building on campus – the Broadcasting Hall. Its foundation stone had been laid in October 1938 by the Duke of Kent, accompanied by Princess Marina, both of whom had been welcomed with such enthusiasm by us children standing in obedient rows on the Carmarthen streets. Broadcasting Hall was regarded as a 'plus' for the college, for it placed the establishment at the forefront of modern communications. Whenever distinguished people visited the college they were invariably invited to address us students, seated in serried ranks, in the Hall. One such guest was Mr Chuter Ede, the then President of the Board of Education, whose responsibility was similar to that of today's Minister for Education. I have no memory of his oration, but I expect that it was as full of waffle as are today's political speeches and just as unworthy of anyone's

serious attention. Yet I do remember listening to him with quiet respect. I suppose that the circumstances then were so different anyway.

By the second year, I had acquired greater confidence and had widened my circle of friends to include Ifan Davies from Garnant near Ammanford, and Peter Cherry, a more mature student who had worked as a teacher in Guernsey before the Channel Islands had been invaded and occupied by German military forces. Nearly 60 years later, I still keep in touch with Ifan at Christmas. Peter Cherry was a highly gifted student who so impressed his tutors that, as soon as he had finished his course, he was invited to join the college staff as a lecturer in English studies. In later years he became Head of Drama, but by that time I had lost touch with him and, in fact, I did not become aware of his early death until some years after the event. Apart from meeting Ifan at Bielefeld in Germany when we did our military service after the war, I hardly had any contact with any of my fellow students once I had left college. I did come across Malcolm Weekes who taught at Clevedon School for some time, and I saw Dicky Moule (a King Alfred's lad) when he played rugby locally in the fifties. Both Malcolm and Dickie have long since died.

The most stimulating weeks of the two-year course were spent on teaching practice at local Elementary Schools. My first uncomfortable experience of standing in front of a class was at my old school at Llanddarog, where most of the children to whom I pontificated were nearly all acquaintances of mine from the parish. Quite a few of them accompanied me (disrespectfully!) on my way home at the end of the day. Thankfully, they were kind to me within the school walls. I wish I could have said the same of the tutor who came to check that I was competent enough to continue my studies as a student-teacher. He slated me for claiming that the coastal village of Pendine was in Pembrokeshire whereas it was in my own county of Carmarthen. I was only a couple of miles out, but the lesson was learnt that, in future, I should take greater care when preparing my work for the day.

The final practice (and the final assessment) was at a much larger school – Pentrepoeth – in Carmarthen town itself. Though the children were rougher and much more awkward, I found the experience more satisfying for, somehow, I had to overcome their hostility as well as their innate sense that all teachers were fair game and that a teacher's sole purpose in standing in front of the class was to have his mettle tested. Added to this, of course, was the fact that I was their senior by only five years, so that in no way was there any respect shown for age and experience. In the first week, one lad muttered threateningly that his uncle was Tommy Farr, who just before the war had fought Joe Louis for the heavyweight championship of the world. He became my ally in the classroom when, instead of cowering, I complimented him on his good fortune and asked him to talk to the class about his famous relation. He declined the invitation either because he could not express himself fluently or, very likely, because Tommy Farr was as much of a stranger to him as he was to me. The incident was quite trivial but, to me it was another valuable lesson learnt – that a teacher will always be fair game to most boys, and that to be forewarned is to be forearmed!

For my final 'sample' lesson which would be observed and assessed by an independent examiner, I introduced the children to the 'Mabinogion' stories from medieval literature and combined them with a little modern geography, that of the valley of the Cych where many of

my family lived, so that I was able to be enthusiastic about the topic without even trying, for nothing was more important to me than the family and the language of the Cymry. I suspect that this one lesson saved me from ignominy, and guaranteed that I should be regarded as a potentially competent teacher. Without doubt, failure would have blighted my parents' lives, and it was with this thought in mind that I persevered with my studies, though I must admit that continuing with Rural Studies and Music was tough going. To put it mildly, therefore, I did not shine socially or academically at Trinity and, possibly, that is why I have no distinct memories of achievement during my time at College.

Even tougher, from the end of 1944, was the knowledge that Mam was suffering from a cancer of the stomach, that it was inoperable and that it would prove fatal before very long. Data wrote to the War Ministry seeking compassionate leave for George serving with a Royal Artillery coastal battery in Cornwall, for Esmond with the Royal Welsh Fusiliers and Winston with the Royal Artillery both stationed in Germany, and for Dewi with the Royal Air Force in Burma.

The response was generous, for by this time the military situation was not as critical as it had been, and all four were granted leave. Sometime in February 1945, I was allowed to spend the occasional week-end at home, returning to College in time for Monday's lectures at 9am. I would travel with Data to town reaching college without a minute to spare. On one of these journeys, as we were nearing Llangunnor, the car veered suddenly to the right, crossed the white line and headed directly towards an approaching large van. Data, with a heart-rending groan of pain, had collapsed on to the steering wheel and was quite unaware of the danger.

Fortunately, the van driver took evasive action and steered his vehicle over to the wrong side of the road but, just then, Data recovered consciousness and, realising that he was in the right hand lane, he swung the steering wheel to return the car to its proper course. I had just enough wit to grab hold of the wheel to avoid disaster. Data brought the car to a standstill, but I drove the rest of the way and saw him safely to his office in Spilman Street. During that term, I regularly visited Data at his office to check his health and to pressure him into consulting the doctor.

What he did decide was that the farm was no longer a viable concern, and he made arrangements for the stock to be auctioned off, for with Mam confined to her sick bed, he crippled by his stomach pains, Peggy slaving away as a nurse and bottle-washer, and me preparing for my final examinations, there was no way that Glangwendraeth could remain a working farm. I think that the sale was held in February or March, and was attended in force by our kind neighbours and sympathetic relations who, I'm sure, paid much more for the stock than it was worth.

When it was all ended, I reported in person to Data who, by this time was in his own sick bed. At long last, he allowed a doctor to examine him and the diagnosis was again cancer of the stomach. He deteriorated rapidly and spent much of his waking hours coughing up blood but, as before, he would not bring attention to himself so long as Mam was suffering. Eventually, towards the middle of April, his condition was such that the doctor had

to be called. Data was immediately taken to the hospital in Carmarthen, but before he was taken he insisted that he be allowed to speak to Mam. As I was already in Mam's room comforting her, I saw their heart-breaking farewell.

Data clung to Mam for long minutes and whispered his love to her. I turned away with tears of grief in my eyes but also with thankfulness in my heart that I had seen such deep devotion. By morning, Data was dead, and I had to break the news to Mam. I lay on the bed by her side afraid to utter the cruel words, but Mam knew why I was there and said "Data is dead, isn't he", but she said it as a statement and not as a question, as if she knew that it was time for her to depart as well. She slept that night and never woke again, and the very next day Mam followed Data to the hereafter. They were buried together at Peniel, Foelgastell. On their gravestone are carved the words of David (in Cymraeg, of course) – "In life, in death, they were not parted".

In the Carmarthen Journal, the funeral was reported thus:

"The passing of Mr and Mrs William Evans, Glangwendraeth, Llanddarog, within two days of each other, caused general regret throughout the district. Mr William Evans had complained for only a short time, and was taken to Carmarthen Infirmary, where he passed away in the early hours of Wednesday morning, 18th inst. His wife, Mrs Emily Evans, had been brought home from hospital a few weeks ago, and passed away on Thursday afternoon, 19th inst, about thirty-six hours after her husband.

The late Mr William Evans, a native of Maesybont, commenced work under local government as assistant overseer to the Llanarthney Parish Council many years ago. He was in charge of the register of electors, and had served as rate collector for a long period. Probably he was as well versed in local government as anybody in the county, and was looked upon as a most efficient and conscientious clerk in the offices of the Carmarthen Rural District Council. Possessing strong religious views, he was a staunch Welsh Presbyterian, and a deacon of long standing at Peniel, Voelgastell, where his wife was also a zealous member. He had been clerk to the governors of the Gwendraeth Valley Secondary School, and was chairman of the Llanddarog Parish Council.

Mrs Evans was a native of Abercych, and was known for her benevolence and charming personality. Both she and her husband generously assisted every good cause. Their tragic removal will be a distinct loss to the community."

There followed a long list of ministers of the religion, relations, friends, neighbours and various dignitaries who were present at the funeral. However, I think that Data and Mam would have been unhappy that the account was written in English and not in Cymraeg. Many years later, Peggy addressed this issue by arranging for the appropriate Biblical text to be engraved on the gravestone – "Ac yn eu marwolaeth ni wahanwyd hwynt".

It took Dewi some time to hitch lifts from Burma and he did not reach Blighty until the end of April 1945. On the last lap of his long journey, on the bus from Carmarthen to Porthyrhyd, an old acquaintance recognised him and expressed sympathy for his bereavement. That was how Dewi learned that his mother and father had been buried together a week or so before. When I recall the circumstances of his homecoming, the tears tend to gather and I weep yet again for my dear parents and Dewi.

Dewi and I spent most of the first day in each other's company, staying up until the early hours of the morning, during which time he unburdened himself of some of his memories, both pleasant and otherwise. He recalled his voyage to Singapore, especially when the ship had berthed at Cape Town and the South Africans had welcomed them with such kindness and generosity. He spoke of the delightful countryside and vowed that he would return there one day. He did not dwell at length on his stay at Singapore nor on his escape from the island just as the Japanese were occupying it, but he did speak scathingly of the British senior officers there. He commented enthusiastically about the charming people of Ceylon and showed me quite a few photographs of the time he spent amongst the villagers on the island. He spoke of the excessively long train journey that took him across the length of India up to the Burmese border, and he chilled my blood with his account of an event that he witnessed on one foray into the jungle. It seemed that one particular Burmese village tribe had a strict moral code concerning family rights and duties. A married man had been found guilty of committing adultery with one of the village girls, causing the dismissal of the girl from the village community to fend for herself in the wilderness. The man was buried alive up to his neck. His face and head were then smeared thickly with honey to attract the soldier ants that would, slowly but surely, work their way into his skull to devour him alive.

He did not remember his posting to Burma with much pleasure at all for it was there, in the humid jungle, that he developed malaria, a disease that would affect him for the rest of his life. The proximity of the advancing Japanese armies made life even more uncomfortably precarious, especially when reports came in of gangs of enemy marauders stealthily advancing in the night to slit the throats of British soldiers asleep in their isolated barrack rooms. Yet, according to Dewi, despite all the shocking events that he had experienced in the Far East and on his return home, what disturbed him more than anything was not recognising me at first for, of course, when he had left I was but a fourteen year old schoolboy but on his return I was in my last term at college about to qualify as a teacher. As a token of his regret for not knowing who I was, perhaps, he gave me his Burmese corn-cob pipe which, for quite a few months, I struggled to smoke – out of gratitude and affection really – but without much success!

Immediately after the funeral, which was attended by several of my college friends, I had to return to my unwelcome studies, studies that no longer seemed relevant, for I had only stuck at my work so as not to cause dismay to my parents. Within a week or so of settling back, the war in Europe came to an end with the German unconditional surrender. The whole population rejoiced ecstatically, understandably, but I did not feel able to join in the celebration for even that great news seemed comparatively unimportant. I could not keep from my mind the picture that I had of my parents when they had heard of the fall of Singapore and realised that they might not see Dewi again, and of how their worst fears had

been realised but not in the way they had foreseen. Whilst the students took advantage of the occasion to desert the college to celebrate wildly in town, I moped in my room, possibly feeling too sorry for myself. I attended the few remaining lectures in a similar mood. My inattentiveness infuriated my newly appointed Rural Studies tutor and he openly spoke scathingly of my likely failure in the soon-to-be-taken examination, at which my friends ganged up on him and made it quite clear to him that his lack of sensitivity was quite unforgivable. Indeed, I owed much to my fellow students for their thoughtful support and, I'm fairly sure, to most of my tutors as well, for despite my lack of worthwhile achievement, eventually I was passed fit to practise as a Certificated teacher or, as I was teased by my family and friends, I was now Certifiable!