

The Bard of the Black Chair:
Ellis Evans and Memorializing the Great War in Wales

McKinley Terry

Abilene Christian University
Texas Psi Chapter

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Author contact information is available from the Editor at editor@alphachihonor.org.

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Abstract

This paper examines the way in which the Welsh people have used the life and death of Ellis Evans, better known by his bardic name Hedd Wyn, to symbolize the destruction of World War I throughout their nation. After exploring the way in which the Welsh people responded to the outbreak of the First World War, the paper examines the life of Ellis Evans, focusing primarily on the months leading up to his enlistment in the Royal Welch Fusiliers, his death at the Third Battle of Ypres on July 31, 1917, and his posthumous win of the Bardic Chair at the 1917 Welsh National Eisteddfod. Due to the fact that Evans only ever wrote in Welsh, the paper examines how he has remained a uniquely Welsh figure and symbol for Welsh experience during the early 20th century, as well as his place in the ranks of poets who served during the Great War. Relying on the author's personal travels and interactions with memorials dedicated to Evans, the paper finally explores the way the symbol of Hedd Wyn the slain poet has endured more forcefully than the memory of Ellis Evans the man. Two-thousand-seventeen marked the centenary anniversary of his death and posthumous victory at the National Eisteddfod, and throughout Wales and nearby regions, memorials have commemorated his sacrifice, and this paper examines the diverse ways in which the Welsh people have chosen to remember Ellis Evans and craft a national narrative for their experience in the First World War.

Key words: Wales, poets, 20th Century, World War I, memorials, bards

Looking at the Black Chair today, it is easy to imagine how impressive it would have been upon the stage at the Birkenhead Eisteddfod in 1917. The solid, sturdy oak rises high with a traditional Celtic cross interlaced with an endless knot. The angle at the top draws the viewer's eyes towards the crest of the druidic society and then even higher towards heaven. On the seat itself, a swirling pattern depicts the world so that the winning poet might feel the full importance of his poetic victory. Small but fierce dragons face outward from the arms of the chair, the symbol of the proud but small nation of Wales. Immaculately crafted, it is the synthesis of Welsh's Celtic past and its Christian present made into a single, looming piece. A true masterpiece fit for a master of poetry, it is all the more tragic that the victorious poet never even gazed upon it. Ellis Evans, known

in the bardic circles as Hedd Wyn (Welsh for "blessed peace"), won the chair for his poem "Yr Arwr" at the Birkenhead Eisteddfod of 1917, but he had been slain in the Third Battle of Ypres only weeks before on July 31. When his victory and death were announced at Birkenhead, the Gorsedd of Bards¹ draped the chair in a black sheet, a shroud for a fallen warrior. In the century that has followed Evans's death, the "Black Chair" has become a symbol for the loss experienced by the Welsh in the First World War, and memorials commemorating Evans's sacrifice have helped construct a narrative of tragedy and turn a Welsh shepherd into an icon for an entire nation.

¹ The governing body of Bardic and Druidic Orders in Wales



Figure 1. The Black Chair in Yr Ysgwrn, Evans' family home. Personal photo

To understand why Ellis Evans captured public fascination in Wales, one must first examine how the First World War affected the small nation. Throughout the 19th century, the Welsh predominantly adopted pacifism as a leading philosophy due to the prominence of the Nonconformist movement. According to Alan Llwyd

the Welsh chapels were, understandably, much opposed to war. There was also a strong peace movement in Wales, and politicians such as the pacifist Henry Richard, the 'Apostle of Peace,' were held in high esteem by the Welsh people. (Llwyd, *Out of the Fire of Hell* xv).

Of course, not all Welsh people were pacifistic, but there existed in Wales a fierce tendency towards peace in the late 19th century. Though he disputes the actuality of widespread Welsh pacifism, John Ellis accepts that "the actual ambiguous embrace of the pacifist movement by the Welsh people is less important than the powerful and enduring image of pacifist commitment that such leaders constructed" (21). Whether pacifism pervaded the Welsh people, prominent Welsh people included it in

the narrative defining Welshness. Nonconformist ministers advocated for peace and moderation; subsequently, Wales was viewed as a nation without any pervasive militarism. By the time the First World War began, this was the general view of the relationship between Wales and war.

The Great War, however, changed this perception, and this change occurred primarily due to the efforts and successes of one man – David Lloyd George. Though Welsh and overall British opinion about the former prime minister has since soured (Huw Edwards of the BBC acknowledged that his respect for Lloyd George would likely anger other historians in the audience of a recent memorial for Ellis Evans), at the time he inspired the Welsh people with his political successes and rise to power. Alan Llwyd notes that the enthusiastic response towards the war in Wales arose from the urgings of Lloyd George, "generally acknowledged in Wales at the time as 'the Greatest Welshman of his day,' if not ever" (Llwyd, *Out of the Fire of Hell* xvi). With the outbreak of war, Lloyd George reached out to his countrymen, even convincing the traditionally pacifistic Nonconformist ministers that war against Germany was the moral duty of all Britons. His people responded passionately enough that Lloyd George celebrated the fact that "the martial spirit has been slumbering for centuries, but only slumbering... The great warlike spirit that maintained independence of these mountains for centuries woke up once more" (Ellis 26). Given the loss of life brought about in Wales due to the First World War, it is easy to see why the perception of Lloyd George would sour after the war's conclusion; nevertheless, at the time, he effectively rallied the Welsh people to war.

Ben Rees notes that "among those who knew and idolised Lloyd George was the eldest son of Evan and Mary Evans of Ysgwrn, Traswffynydd... this lad was to become the Welsh icon of the First World War and his life and death has attracted so much effort, by poets, scholars and literary figures" (Rees 1). Ellis Evans, known more prominently by his bardic name of Hedd Wyn, spent almost all of his life on his family's farm in North Wales raising sheep and writing poetry. He was, by all accounts, an abysmal shepherd, loving to be out in the fields with the sheep "only because the solitude and silence gave him ample opportunity to meditate and to write poetry" (Llwyd, *The Story of Hedd Wyn* 23). The Reverend John Dyer Richards, a friend and mentor of Evans's, wrote that he was "a pure socialist in his creed.

But he was not a street temperance man, He mixed with his contemporaries over a pint of beer. A friendly, kind hearted, humble lad, extremely popular with everyone in the village of Trawsfynydd” (Rees 1-2). Evans was no one of particular importance; what did set him apart from his contemporaries in Trawsfynydd was his propensity for poetry. With little formal education, Evans took it upon himself to learn the traditional meters of Welsh poetry, and he “won his first poetry competition for composing an *englyn* (a 4-line traditional Welsh verse in strict metre) to the peat stack (*‘Y Das Fawn’*) at the age of 12, at the Ebenezer Chapel literary meeting” (Antur 13). Thus began a poetic career that would last for nearly two decades until Evans’s death at thirty and would include victories at four local eisteddfods and a posthumous win at the National Eisteddfod of Wales in 1917.

These eisteddfods played a crucial role in preserving Welsh literature, poetry, and a national identity throughout the history of Wales, but they had grown even more popular and widespread by the time Evans could compete. Though the earliest eisteddfods appear in the 12th century, antiquarians in the late 18th century such as William Owen and Edward Williams (better known by his bardic name Iolo Morganwg) raised them to national importance by tying them to the ancient bardic traditions of the Welsh people. At a time when Welsh nationalism began to strengthen, Williams intended the eisteddfods and resurgent bardic orders “to be a revival of the bardic order, to be a national cultural institution for Wales, a kind of supporters’ club for the language, literature and history of the Welsh” (Hobsawm and Ranger 61). Even to this day, the National Eisteddfod hosts the very best of Welsh literary, scientific, and creative ventures during its weeklong proceedings managed by the Gorsedd of Bards. Anyone interested in Welsh culture should visit and witness the colorful array of men and women dressed in white, blue, and green robes marking their roles in the bardic tradition of their nation. The pinnacle of these proceedings is the Chaining of the Bard Ceremony in which the victorious awdl² is read. The pseudonym under which the poet submitted the awdl is announced, and from within the crowd itself the victorious poet arises and is awarded the Chair, essentially a handcrafted throne fashioned to honor the best of Welsh poetry that year. That the winning poet arises from the

crowd embodies the belief that poetry dwells within the hearts and soul of the Welsh people themselves and not the exclusive property of privileged individuals. To be awarded the Chair at the National Eisteddfod has for centuries marked the greatest achievement to which a Welsh poet can aspire, and it was for this accomplishment that Evans spent his life toiling and improving his poetic ability.

Evans’s position in the pantheon of Welsh poets must be especially examined, as it is certainly undeniable that few people outside of Wales know of him. During the First World War, many poets and writers of Welsh descent or with connections to Wales rose to prominence. Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves, Edward Thomas, and Siegfried Sassoon, among others, were all tied in some way or another to literature arising from Wales, and they are well known for their depictions of the horrors of the Great War. Why then does Ellis Evans not find himself included among their ranks? The answer is simple: while those men wrote in English, Ellis Evans only wrote and published poetry in Welsh. The English versions of his poems that scholars access now were posthumously translated, and only some of his poems were actually translated into English. “Yr Arwr,” the ode with which Evans won the Chair at the National Eisteddfod of 1917, is particularly difficult to find in English (and took this author months and many emails to Welsh professors to locate). Additionally, Evans never wrote poetry about his experience in the war because he died in his first battle. Unlike well-known poets such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, Evans never received the opportunity to write about his experience in battle.

However, two poems written before Evans enlisted in the army, “War” and “The Black Spot,” are more well-known (though only by comparison to his more obscure pieces). Part of the reason that Evans came to embody the horrors of the First World War in Wales can be attributed to the nature of these two poems. “War” opens with a despairing cry: “Woe that I live at this fell time,” a time in which “in the rain boys’ blood is made/To flow; their screaming fills the air” (Antur 27). Likewise, “The Black Spot” laments that all men can claim is “the dear old earth, all gone to rack/Amidst the glory Divine,” a condemnation of the destruction wrought by man’s violence and blind hatred (34). These two poems, more widely distributed than any others that Evans wrote, seem to indicate that he only ardently opposed the war and the idea of violence in general. This has certainly

² A long poem, typically an ode, written in one of twenty-four strict metres

become the mythological narrative surrounding his life and death, the narrative that casts him as purely a pacifist whose views represent the very nature of his people.

The truth is more complicated than this. Scholars disagree on whether or not Evans was truly pacifistic, with Alan Llwyd maintaining that he ardently opposed the war while Ben Rees insists that he “had no pacifist convictions,” pointing to the existence of a poem titled “Gwladgarwch” or “Patriotism” as evidence that Evans, like many of his countrymen, initially supported the fight against Germany (Rees 2). It is true that he wrote a poem about patriotism, but the words themselves dispute the notion that he ever eagerly endorsed the war. Canto VI of the poem reads as follows:

Once more, love of country calls to the fight,
As it did in days gone by;
Calls in the name of Britain and its might,
In the name of the Lord of Hosts, from bright
Heaven up above on high.

And then, when the fighting is all over,
Then will day dawn cloudlessly;
For now; O Lord, grant that we may prosper,
And keep the flame of patriotic fervour
Unfading until we're free. (Antur 49)

Yes, Evans calls for Britons to answer the call to fight, but there is a clear wish for lasting peace. War is not glorified. If necessary, it must be fought courageously, but it is not something to celebrate. This desire for peace, along with the clear condemnation of violence in “War” and “The Black Spot,” seems to indicate that Evans, like many of his countrymen, held pacifistic tendencies but also believed that the war against Germany was justified and therefore necessary.

This should not be surprising given that the Welsh people in general responded similarly to the war. Lloyd George and other leaders framed the war as a battle to defend the rights of smaller nations. When Germany invaded Belgium, it declared that small nations possessed no rights to sovereignty and dignity; Wales, as a land conquered by the English, could relate easily to this narrative. David Lloyd George, in a speech given to Welshmen at Queen’s Hall in 1914 defended the value of nations not considered great by the empires of Europe, declaring with eloquence that resonates with even the most weathered cynic:

The greatest art in the world was the work of little nations; the most enduring literature of the world

came from little nations; the greatest literature of England came when she was a nation of the size of Belgium fighting a great Empire. The heroic deeds that thrill humanity through generations were the deeds of little nations fighting for their freedom. Yes, and the salvation of mankind came through a little nation. God has chosen little nations as the vessels by which He carries His choicest wines to the lips of humanity, to rejoice their hearts, to exalt their vision, to stimulate and strengthen their faith; and if we had stood by when two little nations [Belgium and Serbia] were being crushed and broken by the brutal hands of barbarism, our shame would have rung down the everlasting ages. (Lloyd George 10-11)

Lloyd George’s call for the defense of Belgium appears to have stirred the hearts of his countrymen. According to Chris Williams, “272,924 men from Wales (including Monmouthshire) served in the British Army during the Great War, representing 21.52 per cent of the male population of the country” (126). Such enthusiasm, though similar in scope to that experienced throughout the rest of the United Kingdom, represented a marked growth from the Welsh people who had expressed a military reluctance in recent decades. Hundreds of thousands of boys and men volunteered to go do battle in defense of small nations such as Belgium.

However, Ellis Evans was not one of these boys who volunteered at the outbreak of the war. Whatever his complicated views on the conflict with Germany and war in general, Evans did not intend to fight in Europe. Fortunately for him, conscription did not take place until 1916, and even then, men on farms could often earn exemptions by demonstrating that they were contributing to the war effort through the growing of crops and raising of animals. As pathetic of a shepherd as Evans was, his contribution was meaningful. By the end of 1916, however, a terrible choice lay before him. Alan Llwyd notes that “Before the end of the year 1916, on November 24, Bob, Hedd Wyn’s brother, would be eighteen years of age” (Llwyd, *The Story of Hedd Wyn* 55). Recruiting tribunals would not allow for two able-bodied men to avoid service by working on a small farm, so either Ellis or Bob would have to fight. As terrible as it was, the choice seemed obvious to the elder brother. In January of 1917 he volunteered in Blaenau Ffesteiniog near his home, and before long he was moved to Litherland Camp outside of Liverpool for training.

In the months that followed, Evans's experience was much the same as the hundreds of thousands of other Welshmen who served in the First World War. Humorously enough, it appears that Evans's ineptitude as a shepherd was only exceeded by his ineptitude as a soldier. His friend Simon Jones claimed that "His mind was often elsewhere when he was on parade, he was rather idle and untidy in appearance, and was often reprimanded by his superiors at Litherland," and Evans himself admitted that he had "committed quite a few minor transgressions since arriving here [Litherland], but I have been pardoned every time, and that is quite an achievement in the army" (Llwyd, *The Story of Hedd Wyn* 67). Throughout his training, Evans struggled to write and edit his poem "Yr Arwr" that he intended to submit to the National Eisteddfod in Birkenhead that year. An opportunity presented itself when the government offered leave to those men who had experience as farmers to return home in the spring for several weeks to plough the fields. There is some dispute as to how long Evans spent at home during his furlough, but most scholars believe it to have been about seven weeks. Interestingly, there is also a story that Evans was arrested for overstaying his furlough before being sent to France, but Alan Llwyd disputes this as fantastical and unlikely (Llwyd, *The Story of Hedd Wyn* 77). Whatever the truth of the matter, it is certain that Evans returned to Litherland in early June before being dispatched to France and then to Belgium to join the war. The lack of records and inconsistency of accounts have surely contributed to the mythic nature of Evans's story as the people of Wales have chosen to remember him, reinforcing the conception that he was a tragic hero slain by the horrors of war long before his time.

During the brief time he spent in France and Belgium, Evans completed his ode "Yr Arwr" and sought to acclimate himself to life on the Western Front of the war. Though he is recorded as having often grown despondent as his battalion moved eastward, his poetic sensibilities never appear to have wavered. In a letter he wrote home on the 25th of June, Evans paints a picture of life in France, a picture crafted by a poet who embraced the long-enduring Romantic tendencies of Welsh literature:

I saw some rosebushes, and the lips of every rose so bright and crimson that it seemed as though a myriad kisses slept in them; and because the weather here is so fine, the sunset is a beautiful

spectacle, with the sun on the far side of the battalions of trees setting as beautiful as an angel of fire... the most beautiful thing I have seen since coming here is an old shell-case that had been adapted to grow flowers: a small green plant hid the upper half of the old shell, and nine or ten small flowers could be seen between the leaves. And doesn't that prove that beauty is stronger than war, and that loveliness will survive the madness? (Llwyd, *Out of the Fire of Hell* 49)

Just over a month later, Ellis Evans was killed in battle. On the morning of July 31, 1917, the Battle of Passchendaele began, and the 15th Battalion of the Welsh Royal Fusiliers fought at Pilckem Ridge. Around midday, Evans was struck with a nose-cap shell and died soon afterward, one of nearly four thousand British men to die that day. Alan Llwyd describes the scene of what would have been Evans's final hours as a campaign "doomed from the outset to be a messy, bloody and almost impossible campaign. The terrain was a pock-marked quagmire, full of deep, waterlogged shell-holes" (Llwyd, *The Story of Hedd Wyn* 99). It was amidst this chaos in a war that he always hoped to avoid, so many miles away from his home in Trawsfynydd, that Ellis Evans died at the age of thirty.

About six weeks later, the National Eisteddfod of Wales took place in Birkenhead Park, Liverpool. An abbreviated occasion due to the war, it lasted three days instead of the traditional seven. David Lloyd George, by then Prime Minister, attended the eisteddfod as he had for many years. On the final day, it came time to perform the Chaining of the Bard ceremony in which the poet who had submitted the most creative and skilled awdl (ode) would be robed, praised, and awarded the chair itself. The Archdruid, the Reverend Evan Rees, announced the victor's creativity and originality. Twice he called for the poet who had submitted under the pseudonym "Fleur-de-Lys," and twice no one answered. When on the third time no one answered the call of victory, the Archdruid announced that the winner was Hedd Wyn and that Hedd Wyn had died in Europe only weeks before. Evans's mentor, Silyn Roberts, attended the eisteddfod and later depicted the scene that followed, stating that "The wave of emotion that swept over the vast throng is undescribable and can never be forgotten. The bards enfolded the chair in a great black shroud" (Rees 4). By all accounts, Lloyd George himself, whose push for conscription had led to Evans's participation in

the war and his subsequent death, sat there in the assembly also overcome with emotion. Because of the sheet that the druids draped over the bardic chair, the event became known as the Eisteddfod of the Black Chair.

The construction of the Black Chair also contributed to the mythology surrounding Evans. David Evans of Birkenhead offered to supply the funding for the bardic chair, and to this end he commissioned Eugeen Vanfleteren. Vanfleteren “was a Belgian from Malines (Mechelen) who arrived in Birkenhead in September 1914 with the first group of refugees fleeing the German invasion of their country” (Lee, “Birkenhead Park” 34). While Vanfleteren carved the prize for the charring ceremony, Ellis Evans travelled to Belgium to help liberate the craftsman’s homeland. Evans made it possible for Vanfleteren to return home after the war, and Vanfleteren’s work on the Black Chair helped bring about the immortality that Evans achieved in the Welsh memory. When a centenary memorial was held in Birkenhead this year to honor Ellis Evans, the family of Vanfleteren sent a letter describing how proud their ancestor would have been to know that his work is still remembered, as well as how grateful he was to men like Evans who made it possible for him to eventually return home. The tragic symbolism of Evans dying to liberate the homeland of the man who crafted the chair he won posthumously has helped create the mythology surrounding the man known as Hedd Wyn.

That Vanfleteren carved the chair for a man whose death helped liberate his country added to the tragic nature of Evans’s death, and this has helped fashion Ellis Evans into a national icon for the Welsh people, a symbol for both their struggles and their heroism during the Great War. The connection between the chair and refugees has only become more prominent in recent years as well. At a September memorial for Evans in Liverpool to commemorate the centenary of his death and eisteddfod win, Professor Robert Lee spoke about Vanfleteren and the plight of Belgian refugees. He also drew connections between Belgians during the First World War and Syrian refugees today, arguing that a nation like Britain that prides itself in its historical response to the needs of refugees must uphold those values and welcome modern refugees (Lee, “The Belgian Connection”). Though the Black Chair was not itself political in its inception, it has been used as a political force as the mythology surrounding Ellis Evans has grown.

The mythology surrounding Ellis Evans only expanded as more people throughout Wales read his awdl,

“Yr Arwr.” Translated as “The Hero,” the poem depicts a tale of a young man sent by the gods to “call life from its tribulations and its pains/To the deathless world of young mornings,/On a blessed age the colour of roses – he will return/A flow immortal his vigour and his words” (Evans). An ode embracing the fullest expression of Welsh Romanticism, its protagonist suffers in his travels of the world to the point that his beloved does not even recognize him. Very likely a representation of the poet himself, the “Hero” decries that “You listened at last/My passion, my poetry, my song;/And my payment was terrible violence/Shameful disgrace and oppression” (Evans). While the poem ends hopefully, the hope is found when the “Hero” rescues his beloved and brings her to an otherworldly land of summer and joy. Peace seems not to dwell in this world; rather, it exists only in imagination and hopefully in the afterlife. Evans, as well as all the young men slain in the First World War, came to be associated with the “Hero” and his tragic life redeemed only in death.

This mythology, however, did not arise without careful cultivation on the part of his friends and admirers. Alan Llwyd notes now quickly after Evans’s death, “a committee was formed immediately to begin the process of commemoration... The first responsibility of the Remembrance Committee was to publish a volume of Hedd Wyn’s poetry” (Llwyd, *The Story of Hedd Wyn* 147). Evans died in 1917, and within the next year *Cerddi’r Bugail* (The Shepherd’s Poems) had been published. The committee applied the money earned from the sale of the book to help fund a planned memorial for Evans in Trawsfynydd, and in August 1923 they unveiled the statue. Perhaps most intriguing about the way that Ellis Evans has been memorialized is the fact that he is rarely remembered by his actual name. Instead, he is widely known by his bardic name of Hedd Wyn. The statue that the committee unveiled included a plaque which named him as Hedd Wyn, not Ellis Evans. Alan Llwyd, author of the most thorough biographies of the poet, titled his book *The Story of Hedd Wyn: The Poet of the Black Chair*. The school in Trawsfynydd named after the poet even references him as Hedd Wyn. While this is not entirely uncommon as a way to remember bards of Welsh history, it does emphasize the fact that the memory of Ellis Evans has been intentionally cultivated by those who see him as a symbol of the Welsh experience of World War I. More than his life, “his death has become an integral part of his story and his legacy. This very death has come to embody the impact of the First World

War on Wales; all of rural Wales's losses have been condensed into one loss" (Antur 4). In many ways, he has become more symbol than man, and as Hedd Wyn grows more known, Ellis Evans becomes more forgotten. Statues and plaques commemorating his death take precedence over the life that inspired such moving poetry. This mythologizing of Evans emphasizes the political nature of public commemoration. In life, Evans made very little impact on the development of Welsh culture or national identity. In death, however, the cultivation of his memory as a national symbol has allowed the Welsh people to fashion a narrative around his sacrifice based in his memory as a poetic pacifist tragically slain while defending the rights of small nations and oppressed peoples.

The bronze memorial still stands in Trawsfynydd facing east towards his home of Yr Ysgwrn and the sunrises that he loved so much, a depiction of the poet as a shepherd with a stoic gaze and furrowed brow. It is certainly a Romantic depiction of the poet, especially given how abysmally he actually shepherded his flocks, and it plays into the decision of the committee and other admirers to represent Evans in a universal and mythological manner. Nevertheless, the statue seems to have meant much to the people of Trawsfynydd given that "hundreds of people arrived at the village to be present at the unveiling ceremony...E. Vincent Evans, said that the memorial was a nation's tribute to one of the most gifted young men ever produced by Wales, and that Hedd Wyn's story would inspire future generations" (Llwyd, *The Story of Hedd Wyn* 155). Here again, those who memorialized Ellis Evans memorialized him as Hedd Wyn, but it does appear that those who knew him best appreciated the efforts of the committee to help the nation remember the man they loved.

However, the Black Chair (Y Gadair Ddu) still most closely symbolizes the sacrifice of Ellis Evans, and to this day people can visit it to pay their respects to its winner. Following the National Eisteddfod, the bardic officials ensured that the chair made its way to Yr Ysgwrn and Evans's family. The Black Chair transformed Yr Ysgwrn into a place of pilgrimage for those seeking to honor Evans, and "since September 1917, thousands of visitors have flocked to Yr Ysgwrn" (Antur 90). Even today, the home of the Evans family remains open to visitors, and Ellis's great-nephew Gerald Williams still lives on the farm. On a sunny day, the valley glows with the quiet, tranquil light that inspired Evans to adopt "Blessed Peace" as his bardic name. The house

exists as it did during Evans's life (even the wallpaper of the kitchen has been carefully restored to how it likely would have appeared in the year before his death), and the estate gives visitors the opportunity to see how the family lived at the turn of the 20th century (Snowdonia National Park Authority). There exists no better location where one can learn about Ellis Evans and his life in Trawsfynydd, and the estate plays a crucial role in preserving his memory.

Within the house, the Black Chair sits in the parlor as it did when Mary and Evan, Ellis's parents, sought to display it to visitors. It is certainly impressive, looming there and filling the room with an austere presence befitting the tragic story of the poet's life. There is no doubt that it is a prize worthy of a master poet who won the National Eisteddfod, and it is impossible to not feel the grief of history knowing that Evans never knew he won the contest or ever gazed upon what was the culmination of his creative success. Evans's friend and fellow poet R. Williams Parry wrote that "Pining for its companion, the Chair waits,/Alone and forsaken,/In peace and with compassion/For one who will never return," and the description certainly befits the tragedy (Llwyd, *The Story of Hedd Wyn* 131). The Black Chair and Yr Ysgwrn transcend other memorials to Evans, however, because those who manage the estate remember him as the man and not the symbol. There in the home where he was raised, visitors meet Ellis Evans, not Hedd Wyn. The family Bible in the kitchen records the names of his family members, especially all his siblings, and those who lead tours of the home emphasize the accomplishments and lives of his other family members just as much as Evans (Snowdonia National Park Authority). For example, visitors hear about how Ellis and his brothers often harassed their mother, Mary, with their antics, as well as the fact that Ellis wrote englynion (short Welsh poems) referring to her as a monkey because of how exuberantly she took care of her children. If one seeks to understand who Ellis Evans was as a human being, there is no better place to visit than Yr Ysgwrn and experience a small part of the life he lived there in the fields and ridges near Trawsfynydd.

Regardless of how he is remembered, though, it is impressive enough that a self-educated man from Trawsfynydd is remembered at all, and 2017, the centenary anniversary of his death, especially witnessed an effort to remember Evans and honor his sacrifice. The National Eisteddfod in Anglesey that year referenced him in many of its proceedings, including the theme for

the poetry contest, and a theatrical production of his final days in Belgium was held in the first evenings of the weeklong festivities. Both Bangor and Aberystwyth Universities hosted special exhibitions about Ellis Evans, displaying original poems written in his scrawled and barely legible handwriting. The National Park Authority, which manages Yr Ysgwrn, spent the past several years renovating the home so that it could open again this year to visitors wishing to learn more about Evans, and they released a collection of his poems translated into English for the first time since they were written. On the weekend nearest to the anniversary of his posthumous victory, the Liverpool Welsh society hosted its own memorial and local eisteddfod to honor Evans in which a renovated memorial to the poet was unveiled in Birkenhead Park. Across Wales and Liverpool, those familiar with the story of Ellis Evans have ensured that his life does not go unremembered.

The popularity of the Black Chair and Yr Ysgwrn as memorials to Ellis Evans also reflects the nature of Wales as a nation. For a national icon, they have chosen a pacifistic shepherd and poet, a conscious decision to frame themselves as a nation of creative individuals tied to the land and devoted to peace. These memorials to Ellis Evans thus act as public conceptions of the adopted national identity of Wales, a national identity crafted to represent pacifism and a simpler way of life found in farming and writing poetry. Though not inherently political themselves, they are certainly used to political ends, and in some ways can be considered forms of propaganda. Nevertheless, both the Black Chair and Yr Ysgwrn do help preserve the memory of Ellis Evans the man, a simple shepherd who wanted nothing more than to spend his life writing poetry and drinking in the pubs with his friends.

There is no escaping the fact that the arts help determine historical and national narratives. Ellis Evans has come to embody the experience of a generation in Wales, both because of forces beyond his control and the conscious decisions of those who chose to remember him as a symbol of national tragedy. How he is remembered affects all those who visit Yr Ysgwrn and stand in that parlor with the Black Chair. What people choose to remember, and how they choose to remember it, matters. It influences their character. Individuals such as Ellis Evans are largely uncontroversial, but this is not the case for every person that is memorialized. For example, the question of how David Lloyd George should

be remembered is a question that Wales faces constantly. On one hand, he led Britain through a war to victory; on the other, he brought about conscription that saw thousands of men like Evans, men who wanted nothing to do with violence, forced into battle where they died horrendous deaths. Memorials are never apolitical, nor do they exist in vacuums where history can be stripped away to simple, clean narratives. How a people choose to remember their past determines their present and their future, so these questions must always be examined seriously. In some cases, such as the case of Ellis Evans, memorialization can help promote a peaceful and creative national character to bring about positive change and a brighter future.

Ultimately, however, it must also be remembered that memorials to individuals are memorials to human beings who lived and breathed and made mistakes. People can become symbols, but they were first people. Even a century after his death, Ellis Evans, an inept shepherd from Trawsfynydd known to the world as Hedd Wyn, symbolizes the sacrifice of the Welsh people in the First World War. A reluctant soldier who nevertheless served his country even unto death, he is embodied most famously by the Black Chair that “epitomises the waste, the futility and the horror of war. It has become a national icon, and has always been a symbol. Hedd Wyn himself represents all the young men of Wales, and ultimately of Europe, who were slaughtered in vain on the killing fields of the Great War” (Llwyd, *The Story of Hedd Wyn* 167). For all the mythology surrounding the poet, it is crucial that the man himself be remembered. It was not a symbol that died on the battlefield of Ypres; it was a man of flesh and blood. The Black Chair and the memorials to Evans importantly help people recall his sacrifice, but they must never transcend Evans himself. Though they are beautiful and tragically poetic, they are not him. Hedd Wyn has been immortalized, but now is the time to remember and honor Ellis Evans himself. At the end of “Yr Arwr,” the formerly slain hero returns and declares that “A better age is about to dawn/On fire from fame of my death” (Evans). Throughout his life, Ellis Evans was a man of joy and optimism who desired peace. Perhaps the proper way to honor his sacrifice is to work towards peace today, to let his life be remembered with as much importance and focus as his death, and to share in that joy and optimism that marked his poetry and life.

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Photo Information:

[Figure 1] "The Black Chair in Yr Ysgwrn, Evans' family home." Personal photo