

R.I.P. Ifor Owen, 91, Welsh teacher, illustrator, comic–book writer ("Hwyl")

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Ifor Owen
Teacher and illustrator

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Meic Stephens

Ifor Owen, teacher and illustrator: born Cefnddwysarn, Merioneth 3 July 1915; married Winefred Jones (deceased; two sons, one daughter); died Dolgellau, Gwynedd 22 May 2007.

Ifor Owen was devoted to his own small communities in rural north–west Wales, serving them in many capacities but mainly as a primary school headmaster for 40 years. He was a gifted teacher who understood the needs of children from Welsh–speaking homes, providing attractive reading material for them and encouraging his staff to help pupils develop their literacy skills in their own language. Besides books, he wrote, illustrated and published the first comic in Welsh, Hwyl ("Fun"), the first number of which appeared in 1949 and the last in 1989. It soon became a children's favourite, selling 8,000 copies an issue, and many adults admitted to enjoying it too.

In his concern for the education of Welsh–speaking children, Owen was inspired by Owen M. Edwards, educationist, publisher and for many years Chief Inspector of Schools in Wales, whose practical approach to bilingual education had laid the foundations for the growth of national consciousness in the first decades of the 20th century. Another influence on him was the renowned bibliophile and genealogist Bob Owen of Croesor, who awakened in him a love of the printed word and image.

An early member of Urdd Gobaith Cymru (The Welsh League of Youth), the movement founded by O.M. Edwards's son, Ifan ab Owen Edwards, in 1922, Ifor Owen played a prominent part in the League's activities and became almost the official designer and illustrator of its publications. In the days before the more professional approach of the

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Welsh Books Council, he was one of the few who strove to make Welsh children's books more colourful and visually exciting. He also turned his hand to making county maps which featured cameo portraits of the famous men and women who had lived within their borders.

Ifor Owen was born in the village of Cefnddwysarn in Merioneth in 1915. Educated at the Boys' Grammar School in Bala and Bangor Normal College, where he trained to be a teacher specialising in art and science, he entertained an ambition to teach art but his father thought it "only for girls". At the age of 21 he was appointed headmaster of the primary school at Croesor, an upland, virtually monoglot community, where he remained until 1948. From then until 1954 he was head of the village school at Gwyddelwern near Corwen and from 1954 to 1976 the first headmaster of Ysgol O.M. Edwards in Llanuwchllyn, near Bala. It gave him particular pleasure to be in charge of a school named after his hero and to live in part of Neuadd Wen (White Hall), the large house Edwards had built for himself in the village.

Owen had begun illustrating books in Croesor while the school was shut by an outbreak of measles. As an illustrator he was always in great demand. The first book he illustrated was *Yr Hen Wraig Bach a'i Mochyn* ("The little old lady and her pig", 1946), after which many commissions from Welsh publishers followed. Among other books were a Welsh version of Collodi's Pinocchio story, *Yr Hogyn Pren* ("The Wooden Boy") by E. T. Griffiths and *Hunangofiant Tomi* by E. Tegla Davies, a classic among Welsh children's tales. In the early Sixties he turned his hand to designing the sleeves of records produced by the burgeoning pop industry in Wales. An example of his talent as a designer can be seen in the wrought–iron gates of the cemetery at Llanuwchllyn.

In 1961 Owen was invested in the White Robe Order of Gorsedd y Beirdd – sometimes said to be the equivalent of the CBE in Wales – and the University of Wales awarded him an honorary MA in 1997. But perhaps the honours which gave him most satisfaction were the prestigious Sir Thomas Parry–Williams Medal, which he received in 1977, and the first–ever Mary Vaughan Jones Award in 1985, named after one of the foremost of Welsh children's authors and thereafter presented triennially by the Welsh Books Council.

Ifor Owen was a man for whom the local was the real. He was in his element at meetings of committees charged with organising or financing local initiatives of a cultural nature. Since the National Eisteddfod depends on support from the district where it is held every year, he served on its council and was the long–time chairman of its Art and Craft Committee. He was also a member of the governing body of the National Museum of Wales. But he also derived great pleasure from sessions of the famous literary club *Clwb Llenyddol Pethe Penllyn*,

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where his puckish wit and keen
interest in local history were much appreciated.