‘Always a Merthyr Boy’

The Distinguished Anglo-Welsh Dramatist J.O. Francis

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> He is the leading Welsh dramatist and the only Welsh playwright who has created any impression outside Wales … he likes to be regarded as a product of the current Welsh system of education. Francis is a very interesting and charming man with many opinions and no prejudices.

Words written by a Welsh journalist in 1922 about the then famous 4 -year old playwright in an article, entitled ‘J.O. Francis. Author of *Change*.’ John Oswald Francis, – John, no doubt to his family – was known as J.O. to most of his associates in his adult life. Ten years earlier he had been a London teacher, passionate about the theatre, when he won fame with his popular one-act comedy, *The Poacher* (1912). His serious four-act play, *Change*, was published to wider acclaim a year later. It was the first notable, authentic Anglo-Welsh play and it was about stress in family life in a strike-torn valley community. The thought-provoking author was hailed as the creator of a new genre of modern Welsh drama and both plays launched the first week of the Welsh National Drama Movement in May 1914 at the New Theatre in Cardiff. One of the wealthiest men in Britain, Lord Howard de Walden, who had Welsh family connections, had formed and was financing the new company. Lloyd George, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, went to support it. There were four plays by other writers on the week’s programme. The following week’s venue was the Theatre Royal and Opera House, Merthyr Tydfil. Three months later, war broke out and the drama company folded. Francis, who had been on the brink of becoming a professional dramatist, joined the army. After the war, he became a dedicated civil servant working on National Savings. However, his interest in drama and writing never waned, and he became a much-respected London-Welsh personality.

Of the seventeen J.O. Francis plays, published over four decades, *The Poacher*, the most popular, and a few others of its kind, set in Welsh rural surroundings not far from industry, played a vital part in the growth of an am-dram movement that

flourished in Glamorgan and beyond during the Great War, took a strong hold on Welshmen in the 1920s and stayed strong during the Depression and WW2 until the television age began. Widespread staging of J.O.'s plays (and those of other writers too, of varying quality) created a lively interest in drama among local actors, producers, writers and helpers. Theatricals, hitherto considered ungodly by respectable chapel people, earned a popularity in communities, deprived of gaiety and light entertainment.

I would like to explore with you the importance of this gifted writer in the creation of early modern Welsh drama and the role Merthyr Tydfil played in shaping his personality and his subject matter. Merthyr was his inspiration. I shall refer to a couple of his plays and to unpublished talks he gave on the BBC. I have drawn information from the writings of Professor M. Wynn Thomas and Dr Alyce von Rothkirch of Swansea University and the small J.O. Francis archive at the Hugh Owen Library at UCW Aberystwyth; this includes valuable unpublished manuscripts of his BBC work. These and his delightful 1920s essays for the *Western Mail* reveal glimpses of the schoolboy, the good Welsh Baptist boy, the rugby fanatic, the studious reader and the young theatre-goer who spent an idyllic early life in late Victorian Merthyr. I had not heard of him until recent years, and I've lived in his birthplace for over fifty of them. He just went out of fashion – off the radar, it seems. It has been a joy to discover him and his nineteenth century hometown. I have relied much on the text of his 1955 radio talk, *Beginners Please!*, in which he spoke about his passion for drama. It began in the 1880s, when travelling English theatre companies brought drama to the town. His 45-minute talk, written in his characteristic gentle style, laced with a touch of comedy, started like this:

> Many people have been active in the modern movement for native Welsh drama. I happen to be one of them … But having been born in Glamorgan (a good beginning for a man) I hadn't to wait for any movement to kindle in me a devotion to the theatre. I fell in love with it as a small boy in Merthyr Tydfil – head over heels in love … We had plenty of chance to see acted drama but the plays we saw were melodramas of the Victorian period … they were strong meat. We hissed the villain and roared applause for the virtuous hero and the even more virtuous heroine. I hissed and cheered with the other folk, but I could only do it in a small boy's throaty treble. Plays would come to Merthyr from time to time. They were performed in our Temperance Hall just across the road from the railway station. Then civilisation unfurled her latest banner over our town … In the evenings people looked greenish and ghastly under the new electric light. And – wonder of wonders – a theatre was built for us in Pontmorlais, a real proper theatre! Then the tide of melodrama came flowing over us in

> full spate. For my part I delighted to soak myself in the purple flood. I wallowed in it. We heard the villain grind his teeth. We saw *The Grip of Iron*, *The Stranglers in Paris* and *The Face in the Window*. … Hundreds of small boys in South Wales saw that face at the window and shivered in bed at the thought of it. For us youngsters in the valleys drama was that sort of thing. And we – knowing no better loved it and some of us got drama in our blood.

So, let's take a look at this well-spring of inspiration. J.O. was born in Merthyr Tydfil in 1882, in the heyday of the most industrialised town in Wales, at 15 Mary Street, one of many hillside terraces of workmen's houses. His father, David, was a blacksmith. David had married Dorothy Evans, a girl from a Rhondda smallholding who had come to Merthyr Tydfil to work in millinery and dressmaking – a'tidy' little woman, capable, determined and independent. John was the eldest of five children – two sons and three daughters – and before he was nine years old the family moved to 41 High Street, where his father opened a farrier business and his mother made hats and frocks for private customers. The Francises were Welsh Baptists and of the Liberal persuasion. Their son, John, spent the rest of his Merthyr life until he was eighteen on the busiest main street in the valleys in what was often regarded as the worst place in the world. To this boy (and the exiled writer he became,) it was 'a shop-keeping town' with 'thrilling' streets.

Dorothy kept a nice home above the shop which, from the back, overlooked the Brunel-designed railway station with its five ticket offices. Next door to No. 41 was an elegant high-class confectioner/bakers. Until recently it had been a small sweetshop. Business in the town was booming. Opposite was the Baptist Chapel where JOF learnt the scriptures in Welsh, showed respect for the controlling deacons who ensured that strict chapel rules were observed, and where the revered minister, a born actor, delivered long dramatic sermons full of Welsh 'hwyl'. This was unforgettable stagecraft. Next to the chapel was a bookshop. The Temperance Hall was nearby – despite Baptist prejudices it was his favourite haunt. Other enthusiasms were sport, especially rugby; studying; reading tales of the American Wild West and trainspotting in the station yard. At 14, he became a pupil in the new County Intermediate School. Glamorgan's long-awaited school system allowed him four extra years of tuition and the chance to study for university – and perhaps an escape from becoming his father's apprentice. He regarded these extra years as 'a blessing' and the school 'a learned paradise'. Although Francis left Wales, Merthyr became his muse and he never stopped writing about it. In his 1943 radio story, *Clipetty Clop!*, he tells of a riot in Merthyr's High Street during a colliers' strike, the reading of the riot act, and the failure of the police to calm the crowd – which scattered swiftly only when the clip-clop of the cavalry was heard. The militia stayed close to the hotbed of Merthyr Tydfil! Francis

ponders wistfully and comically on the contrasting, genteel decorum of his quiet London suburb where nothing thrilling ever happened. As a boy, he had witnessed many signs of public unrest and a changing political outlook. Strikes, lock-outs and noisy political gatherings were commonplace. In 1900, he heard Keir Hardie speak at the Temperance Hall. More memorable stagecraft! Liberal Merthyr was turning to Socialism. Francis was well acquainted with another valley town – Tonypandy, where his mother's close relatives lived. To the intelligent schoolboy and his friends, the miners' leader, William Abraham (the great Mabon) appeared saint-like when he addressed his union-seeking followers. Change was in the air. Young people were showing more interest in politics than in the restrictive religion of their parents.

John Francis spent hours of study in his room where he could view the street life below: the horse-drawn traffic, the townsfolk, especially the Saturday night crowds, searching for bargains in the late-open shops. Francis hinted in one of his radio stories that goods were often priced higher on those nights when collier families from the smaller villages came to spend their money in the late-open shops. He was not part of such a family but many of his school peers were. When some left school unexpectedly it was known that the small wage they could earn down the pit was more important than schooling. His story, written many years later, about a boy who had loved his new French and Latin lessons before leaving abruptly to become a collier with his father, reveals Francis's perception of the unfairness of lost opportunity. He sympathised with the low-paid working man facing not only the callousness of the millionaire coal-owners but also the artful guile of shopkeepers.

Francis mentions, too, the top-hat wearers of the town, the cream of wealthy entrepreneurial businessmen of the 1890s. Their refinement impressed him when they grandly placed their silk top hats under their big seats in chapel on Sundays. The not-so-grand he saw as bowler-hat wearers, and there were thousands of flat-cap wearers. Those hats represented the different social classes that existed in a community created by huge industrial wealth. When a felt trilby was spotted in the crowd it meant that the actors were in town. At eighteen, after success in his exams, Francis, much encouraged by his recently widowed mother, achieved his ambition to go to Aberystwyth to study English Literature. The new County school excited the interests of many of the *mam*s and *mamgu*s of Merthyr who couldn't wait to see their boys off to 'Aber' or Cardiff to study for their 'cap and gown'. Well-off families had always been able to buy an expensive education for their offspring in numerous local private schools, or in public schools away from home. Now Merthyr could offer its more ordinary children a chance. John Francis grasped his chance and got to Aberystwyth. It was a second paradise, filled with lectures, college politics, sport and drama. He and some new Glamorgan friends joined the Dram Soc. Reared on blood-curdling melodramas, the Merthyr boy was amazed

when the actors performed an excerpt from Ibsen's *Doll's House*. The realism of the problems of an ordinary family, in the translated Norwegian play, revealed a new vista to the budding playwrights. They also saw the new folksy Irish plays acted by Irish actors about Irish tinkers and the like. The friends began to write for fun and to act in their small plays about Welsh home life back in Glamorgan. (A bit like the Ryan and Ronnie sketches of the future, I imagine, with Mam presiding over the family tea and 'brembutter' meal and requesting some respect for their father.) Francis became their delighted writer-actor-manager.

J.O. graduated in 1904 with first class honours in English. At some time during those four years he studied at the Sorbonne in Paris. (Did he win a bursary? One wonders – the writer gives little information about his personal life.) In *Beginners Please!* he spoke of having seen plays at the Comédie Française theatre – a wonderful experience for a future playwright. Stylish performances of the works of the great 17th century comedy writer/actor/manager, Molière, were (and still are) performed there. His biting satire, which often poked fun at priests to amuse King Louis XIV, revealed another vista: satire became an important element in J.O.'s plays – he turned to poking fun, albeit more gently, at deacons, to amuse less lofty audiences.

In 1907 these 'Glamorgan men', then teachers in London, joined the Aberystwyth Old Students Association. They began to write short plays about South Walian families for the entertainment at annual Easter reunions in Aber. Some were written in Welsh; J.O., who had known but lost the Merthyr Welsh patois, wrote in English that was full of Welshness. Being a handsome, dapper man with a wry sense of humour, he was idolised by generations of re-uniting ex-students, who found his writing style hilarious and his dapper presence inspiring.

The Poacher was written for an early reunion. Its most interesting character, Dici Bach Dwl, is a simple soul, who lives under the stars and appreciates the beauties of nature and the freedom of being a tinker with good poaching skills. He loves his dog, Fan (Myfanwy!), his ferret and his friend, Twmas Sion. He does not like Dafydd Hughes the Shop. He's a deacon who scorns him because he does not go to chapel. Dici has good lines and plenty of laughs, but Francis is not poking fun at him – his theme is tolerance; the deacon should learn to appreciate, like the good-natured Twmas Sion and his wife Marged, that the social misfit, Dici, is a good soul. Life is hard. Money is scarce. Whether Twmas, a recent convert to chapel should catch/steal a rabbit for a tasty meal is the focal point of the little play, and the deacon turns out to be less saintly than expected. Francis used to say he couldn't really leave the deacon out of plays about the valley community. Hundreds of actors delighted in those characters and Poacher stayed in print for sixty years.

Enthusiastic young teachers and preachers returning from those reunions to schools, churches and chapels, and most of them were in Glamorgan, were soon

staging Francis's little plays in drama societies of their own. Huge numbers of these sprouted in mining institutes, and later in youth clubs and works leisure groups too. *The Poacher*, *The Bakehouse* (a gossipy tale with an all-female cast) and *Birds of a Feather* were great favourites. Competitions took place and Drama Leagues were established and the activity stayed popular up to the 1950s. It induced some to write their own plays – of varying quality. 'Producing' was a word that was not widely used. It was often a minister or a teacher who took charge of the proceedings. This drama movement changed and enriched community life. It was happening in England too. In 1934, in his book, *An English Journey*, J.B. Priestley depicted the widespread and enthusiastic am-dram groups as 'little campfires twinkling in a great darkness in communities, where actors, stage hands and audiences were suffering from industrial depression'. A Welsh journey would have strengthened his conviction. In 1912, Francis, while teaching at the Holborn Estate Grammar School in London, wrote the serious 4-act play, *Change*, for that year's reunion. It was pioneering; he remembered Merthyr and wrote about a Welsh family during a coal strike, the resulting conflict between a father and his sons and the break-up of the family unit. In 1913 he entered it for Lord Howard de Walden's competition to find the best play written by a Welsh author about Wales and Welsh people. The play won him the £100 first prize, fame and de Walden's support.

It was staged at The Haymarket in London in 1913, and in New York, Pittsburg, Chicago and Montreal in January 1914. The opinions of the young sons in the play (one fighting for a miners' union, one turning against studying for the ministry at university, the third dying of TB) impressed President Woodrow Wilson. Francis's social commentary made him the John Osborne of the early 20th century, although he was a much nicer person. Francis made notable socio-political observations but he never became a Socialist. He remained a member of the Liberal Club, mixing with political admirers of the charismatic Lloyd George, but his love of writing superseded politics. Knowledge of the political scene, however, and recent memories of the 1910 Tonypandy riots, the striking Llanelli railwaymen's riot in 1911 and the many insurrections in Merthyr's past, influenced the subject matter of *Change*. A coal strike and a riot feature importantly in the play, set in the Price family home in Aberpandy. Francis empathised both with the feelings of the chapel-going father and the young new Socialists. The views of Lewis Price, the unionist son, on strike, are recognised as compassionately as those of his father, John Price, an old collier and a deacon who thinks his son is a foolish loafer who should go back to work because the coal-owners always win. John Price is like David Francis, the writer's father, who also would have liked his son to be more like him. He owned a good little business that his sons could inherit. He would have been ambivalent about John's success at school which threatened the old order of the family. There are hints of similarities in their characters but Francis never mentions his father, who died before his son left home. His sup-

portive mother was his rock. She moved on to make a good home and a living in a boarding house she ran in Aberystwyth, and later came to live with her son and a daughter in London – in a house called 'Y Bwthyn' in Golders Green. Francis never married. He devoted his time to work and to staying active as a dramatist, essayist, broadcaster, short story writer, skilled debater, popular public speaker and sport-lover.

Praise came in 1919, from a young Miners' Federation rep and check-weigher in Tumble, West Wales, who was bowled over by the social commentary of *Change*. The reviewer of the play was S.O. Davies B.A., graduate in theology and philosophy turned Socialist, and future M.P. for Merthyr Tydfil for nearly 40 years (1934-1972). Lewis Price's words to his stubborn father could have been those of S.O. himself (and of Mabon and Keir Hardie before him and of the future Nye Bevan):

> The pit is your master. From the cradle to the grave it's been holding you in the hollow of his hand. The food you eat, the clothes you wear, the bed you lie in – it's master of them all. But it's not going on forever I tell you …

Francis was not just a gifted writer; he also had a practical grasp of what was needed to improve drama in Wales. He worried about the mixed quality of amateur groups' performances, which he attended on regular visits to Wales. He canvassed for more organised help for drama in 1924 when he spoke to the Society of Cymmrodorion at the Pontypool Eisteddfod. He pointed out that drama had grown spontaneously in two decades but lacked any organised assistance. It was the Cinderella of the Arts in Wales, and it was time to take it seriously – to assess its strengths and weaknesses. There were problems with lax and haphazard methods of production in village performances and there was an urgent need for courses of study to improve the making of scenery, the use of curtains, stage lighting, and make-up.

> We need less oratory and more carpentry. … The man with a 'hwyl' is now not so useful as the man with the hammer … We must learn to equip our stages and to make them worthy of good plays and we must be willing to learn from people of other nations.

He suggested Summer Schools for play production. The point about learning from other nations was made because it had helped him to find his own style.

In 1928 an American, Olive Ely Hart, wrote her Ph.D. thesis on the subject, *The Drama in Modern Wales*. In a chapter on J.O. Francis and the other Aberystwyth playwrights, she wrote:

> Welsh interest in the drama has concerned itself only incidentally with acting and producing: the chief interest and the most conspicuous achievements have been in playwriting

. Things changed, didn't they? That was before playwrights inspired Emlyn Williams, Mervyn Johns, Sian Phillips, Rachel Thomas, Huw Griffith, Richard Burton and other Welsh stars of stage and screen who became our idols. Had Miss Hart been writing in the 1940s and 50s her view of Welsh drama would have changed dramatically. She praised Francis's contribution to the growth of the culture of amateur dramatics that was growing apace. This paved the way to the professional stage for most of those actors just named.

P.H. Burton, a Port Talbot schoolteacher, liked J.O.'s *Poacher* and cast his pupil, Richard Jenkins, in the part of Dici Bach Dwl in the late 1940s. They did it again – more than once – in the 1950s on the BBC, when the renamed Richard Burton was a rising star. His co-stars were Huw Griffith and Rachel Thomas. Both the acting and the production matched the author's expertise. J.O. was delighted to be with them.

People of a certain age who recognise his name, when I ask, always recall *The Poacher* first, and some have played the role of Dici in the school/chapel/youth club play. An 80-year old retired archdeacon of Llandaff told me that he had played Dici in his Carmarthen school, and an ex-drama lecturer, W.J. Jones of Cardiff, almost ninety when he wrote to me, had done so in a Welsh translation in his chapel in Ysbyty Ystwyth in Ceredigion. He remembered the times in the 1920s and 30s when he had enjoyed am-drams in chapel. The word 'producer' was never used, the minister took charge of the play and the use of make-up was dire. W.J.'s performance as Dici Bach Dwl , it seems, hadn't been very good. He admitted that he had been more 'dwl' than J.O. Francis had intended. Gwyn A. Williams (the future historian) took the part in the 1940s in Cyfarthfa Castle Grammar School; the play was staged in a Cumberland school in 1971 and Young Farmers groups up there still use it; the Unitarians in Aberdare and Merthyr loved J.O Francis short comedies. They were written with gentle sarcasm but always with integrity and warm affection. People remember him with warm affection too and with smiles. Recent performances in Merthyr Tydfil of *The Poacher* and *The Bakehouse* delighted the audience, 100 years on.

Things change from generation to generation and progress is made. When Merthyr's schooling system changed, it greatly affected the life of the gifted schoolboy who won his school's first English Literature Prize, that fired him with ambition. He was gratified, many years later, to see his name in gold letters on the honours board in the school. Success took him away from his birthplace, its people and their jargon, but those pillars of his early life – his home, his family, the theatres, the County School, the rugby etc, remained with him, and his lasting respect for them can be found whenever he writes about places he called the Martyr's Town, the Town of the Martyr, Aberpandy, Llanavon – and just occasionally – Merthyr Tydfil. W.J. Gruffydd wrote in 1954, 'J.O. Francis brought a breath of invigorating air' to Welsh drama. He created wonderful characters from family

life because he understood the people of the valleys and their problems and that in Wales everything is built around family life; he portrayed the life of the family of that period better than anything else written at the time. His play *Change* remains a landmark in the history of the drama in Wales. J.O. Francis, like Joseph Parry, is a'bachgen bach o Ferthyr erioed, erioed.' Always a Merthyr boy. The play is not considered a great play now, but it certainly made waves. It brought to the stage characters like John Price, the respectable collier/deacon father, and Gwen, the doting mother of three sons. Changing circumstances break up the close family. At the end, the beloved sickly son is killed in a riot and the others emigrate. 'Not one left!' cries broken-hearted Gwen, as the play ends in tragedy, and her warm character, Gwen Price – Mam – entered the annals of the history of Welsh drama. And she didn't go away. Mam was an important character in Welsh drama of the early 20th century and in the novels of the South Wales valley writers of the Depression years.

J O. would rejoice that Welsh drama has made great strides. He believed in making break-throughs. The new medium of the wireless had delighted him. And then, in 1948, he watched one of his comedies *Birds of a Feather* televised live in Alexandra Palace after The Trecynon Players from Aberdare had won first prize in the British Drama League. J.O. had never watched television before. He was overcome with emotion and he began to plan a trilogy of plays for this new medium. His sister still lived with him. He retired at 70 and took up gliding. He died in 1956 at the age of 74.

In 1958, his friend, Lord Kemsley (Merthyr-born newspaper millionaire, Gomer Berry) commissioned Ceri Richards to paint a portrait of the late writer from a photograph to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the opening of the Welsh School of Drama in Cardiff. It was a place that J.O. had loved to visit. It was probably hung in a prominent place. The portrait is now in the newer Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama and hangs in a small rehearsal room at the back of the old building. Remembrances at front of house are of a newer brigade – actors Richard Burton and Anthony Hopkins. However, when I last saw it, the portrait's location seemed an enlightened choice, because a group of young students, seated in a circle, were happily rehearsing under the calm gaze of the dapper J.O. Francis. I think the unassuming, charming, gentle satirist would have settled happily for that.

Postscript: Merthyr has lately made up for its neglect of J.O. Francis. Last year there was a full house at the 120-seat theatre in the refurbished Old Town Hall. In an evening of nostalgia, the Neath Little Theatre Players staged *The Poacher* and the Tredegar Thespians performed *The Bakehouse*. The actors had prepared meticulously for their performances; production and delivery of lines were perfect; scenery, the use of curtains, make-up, props and costume were of the highest standard. J.O., who liked the word 'thrilling', would have been thrilled beyond

measure with the tribute. The Tredegar Thespians will perform *The Bakehouse* in their Little Theatre on October 19th and 20th