

JARMAN, ELDRA MARY (1917 - 2000), harpist and author

Name: Eldra Mary Jarman
Date of birth: 1917
Date of death: 2000
Gender: Female
Occupation: harpist and author
Area of activity: Music; Literature and Writing
Author: Ffion Mair Jones

Eldra Jarman was born on 4 September 1917 in Aberystwyth, daughter of Ernest France Roberts and his wife Edith (née Howard). Both her parents were of Roma descent, her father the grandson of **John Roberts** (Alaw Elwy) and her mother the daughter of Eldorai Wood, who had dual Irish and Roma heritage. Following an increasing tendency towards integration among the Roma, Eldra's family had settled in an ordinary house during the preceding generation: when her mother was around ten years old, their itinerant life came to an end, and Eldra's first home was her grandparents' house in Aberystwyth. When she was around two years old, her father began to work as a river keeper for Edward Douglas-Pennant, third baron Penrhyn, and the family moved to a house on the Penrhyn estate at Nant Ffrancon. Later in her life, Eldra portrayed her childhood as quite different from that of non-Roma children: her home was in a remote location and she did not socialize with other children. However, there was 'plenty of freedom to play' in the company of her brother (ten years her senior) and her father's dogs. She was entertained by her mother, who would recount tales of fairies and giants; her brother taught her how to fire a pistol; her father showed her the Roma method of fishing, and she saw him use ferrets and nets to catch rabbits in his work on the estate.

When she was four years old, the family moved to nearby Bethesda and, aged six, Eldra began to attend Glanogwen Church School; she also became a member of the Methodist Sunday school in the town. Her mother took fright when a neighbour's studious daughter died during her first year at university and a decision was consequently taken against allowing Eldra (who was not physically strong) to try for a place at the county school, a step which would probably have led to a similar progression into higher education for her, too. As a result, she left school when she was around thirteen years old. In addition to her love of wandering around the country with none but her father's dogs for company, playing the harp became important to her during this period. Her father was a harpist, the only one among fourteen siblings to take up this instrument which had, in turn, been an important part of the life of their father, Reuben Roberts (d. 1949). Ernest France Roberts was employed for a period as regimental band harpist to the South Wales Borderers. The fact that the conductor of the band encouraged him to improve by his own invention the accompaniments to the tunes played is an indication of his ability. He assisted **Nansi Richards Jones** ('Telynores Maldwyn') to learn the harp, but his main pupil was his daughter. Eldra learnt by listening to him play, a few bars at a time, and repeating what she heard, without resorting at all to written notation. Later, she travelled to the university at Bangor for further tuition from Alwena Roberts ('Telynores Iâl'; 1899-1981).

Through her father's contact with Nansi Richards, when she was around fifteen years old, Eldra was invited to the farm of Hafod y Porth, Beddgelert, home to Nansi and her husband Cecil Maurice Jones. She described herself and Nansi as soul mates: they shared the same impulsive nature and the same love of freedom and of the countryside, and looking back at this period, Eldra felt that it was one of the happiest of her life. There was space here for her to develop as a harpist: in 1930, Nansi and her friend Edith Evans ('Telynores Eryri') had established Côr Telyn Eryri (The Snowdonia Harp Choir) and Eldra was given the opportunity to join this multifaceted group as a harpist, performing tunes such as the 'Wrexham Hornpipe', already familiar to her through her own family tradition, in lengthy soirées before appreciative audiences.

When war broke out in 1939, Eldra offered her services to the Women's Land Army. She was given a month's training at Llysfasi Agricultural College, where she was taught how to feed hens, handle sheep and clean out pigsties. She went on to spend nine months working at Baron Hill, Anglesey, a mansion requisitioned by the government at the beginning of the war. It was around this time that she came to know her husband, **Alfred Owen Hughes Jarman** (1911-1998), then tutor in the Extramural Department of the University College of North Wales, Bangor. They were introduced by a friend on Jarman's request; he had been captivated when he heard that she wandered the mountains barefoot. Their relationship led to a period of learning the Welsh language. English was Eldra's mother tongue and family language, and her knowledge of Welsh was very sparse before Jarman began teaching her the language, together with aspects of Welsh history and poetry. She didn't consider herself Welsh (or English), either: the Roma were a separate people for her and her birth family. By the time she married Jarman in 1943, however, Eldra had joined Plaid Cymru, the Welsh nationalist party. She was motivated not by politics, she later said, but by a sense of the importance of 'freedom' as a principle, whether for herself as an individual or for countries throughout the world, both large and small. She was particularly moved by a trial in November 1971 which led to the imprisonment of members of Cymdeithas yr Iaith (the Welsh language society), and she wrote a poem, 'Yr Wyddgrug' ('Mold'; a reference to the case held at the Assizes in that town), expressing her concern for those who were incarcerated across the border in England. It is worth noting that Jarman, too, spent a short time in prison, following his refusal to enlist during the Second World War because of his nationalist stance on Wales's neutrality.

Teleri, the Jarman's' elder daughter, was born in 1944, whilst they were living at Llandegfan, Anglesey. By the time their second daughter, Nia Eirwen, was born in 1949, the family had moved to Cardiff, following Jarman's appointment as a lecturer in the Welsh Department of the University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire in 1946. Moving to the capital was a 'shock' to Eldra; she felt as if there were a 'mask' over her face and she had difficulty finding 'the things that were important to me' amidst the bustle of the place. She used her time, however, to begin to research into the history of the Roma in Wales, drawing on the work of John Sampson (1862-1931) and Dora Esther Yates (1879-1974), two pioneers in the field of Roma scholarship. She added to their findings information which had come down to her through the memories of her parents about the two key branches of the Roma in Wales, the related families of **Abraham Wood** (1699?-1799) and his great-grandson John Roberts. The resulting two volumes were both intensely personal and of wide-ranging significance to the study of the lives and influence of the Roma in Wales. *Y Sipsiwn Cymreig* appeared in 1979, and a revised English version with extensive additions, *The Welsh Gypsies: Children of Abram Wood*, was published in 1991. In both cases, authorship was credited jointly to Eldra and her husband; Eldra - who regularly claimed that she was no good at replicating facts -acknowledged playfully that it was Jarman who put it in order.

In addition to her scholarly work, Eldra continued to play the harp> in a style which reflected her family's history of six generations of harpists. Specific names to the tunes which she played were rare, and as an accompanist she made use of improvisatory methods. Her work with Bryn-mawr Dancers, a group founded by Jessie and Hector Williams in 1952, for instance, saw her play a string of tunes until she fell on one which suited the dancers' needs, since neither she nor they could refer to a tune by its name. She played a Grecian Erard harp which her father had bought in Liverpool but, in a nod to the classical tradition and unlike her father and others among her predecessors, she placed the instrument on her right shoulder rather than the left as was the custom among players of the triple harp.

She expressed some regret that neither her daughters nor her grandchildren had taken up the harp, but she was glad that she had transmitted the Welsh language to her children. She spoke candidly, however, of the difficulties which she had faced, having only learnt the language as an adult, confessing that in speaking Welsh to her daughters she seemed at times to be 'putting up a wall' between them. One way in which she fostered a relationship with children more generally was through her two volumes of stories from the Roma tradition, *Y gof a'r diafol* (1989) and *Storiâu'r sipsiwn I blant* (1991), both illustrated by Suzanne Carpenter. Her memories of her own childhood formed the basis of the film *Eldra*, broadcast on S4C in 2001, shortly after her death the previous year. Among its highlights was the musical score, created by the triple harp player Robin Huw Bowen. Describing Eldra as 'the last of Wales' true Gypsy harpists', Bowen released a CD in 2006 reflecting his experience of learning the traditional harp tunes of the Roma directly from Eldra or from recordings of her playing, and including tunes in the style of the jig, hornpipe, waltz and polka.

Eldra Jarman died on 24 September 2000 at Pontypridd Cottage Hospital. She had been suffering from bone marrow cancer and heart disease.

Author

Ffion Mair Jones

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Further reading

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Wikipedia Article: [Eldra Jarman](#)

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Additional Links

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