

Sante Dwynwen, the Welsh Patron Saint of Lovers

Sante Dwynwen was a 5th-century C.E saint who was born and died in Wales. ¹ She is often called the Welsh equivalent of Saint Valentine, as both are known as Patron saints of love or lovers. ² Unlike Saint Valentine, ³ who lived in the 3rd century C.E., Santes Dwynwen was never recognized by the Catholic Church as a saint. ³ Saint Dwynwen's Day is celebrated in all parts of Wales on the 25th of January, although this date is not included in the Church in Wales Calendar. ⁴ Very few historical records exist to provide us with evidence of her adult life, what is known of that comes from the strong Welsh tradition for oral history entwined with its own special dose of myth and legend. This essay will look at what is known about her family and early life, the church that she founded, the poetry and music she inspired and why she was known as the Celtic Venus before deciding if she was the Welsh version of Saint Valentine or something totally different.



Figure 1. A modern icon of St. Dwynwen (of unknown origin)

Dwynwen's existence and her prestigious lineage are very well documented. Her father was Brychan Brycheiniog, a 5th-century King of Breconshire in Mid-Wales. ⁵ Brychan was born in Wales, his Irish father was Prince Anlach (son of Coronac) and his Welsh mother was Marchel who was the heiress to the Welsh Kingdom of Garthmadrun, latter to be renamed as Brycheiniog. ⁶ There are many stories of Brychan having several wives and concubines and producing a multitude of children. There is a consensus that he had

¹ Farmer, David Hugh, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, 5th revised edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.114.

² Ibid p. 388.

³ The Catholic Church, *Martyrologium Romanum* (Rome: Vatican Press, 2004), p. 411.

⁴ The Church in Wales, *The Revised New Calendar*, 2022. Available at:

<https://www.churchinwales.org.uk/en/publications/liturgy/New_Calendar_Collects/> [accessed 12 April 2024].

⁵ Hywel David Emanuel, BRYCHAN, saint (fl. mid 5th century) (Date Unknown)

< [https://biography.wales/article/s-BRYC-APA-0419?&query=brychan&lang\[\]=en&author_multi_facet\[\]=hde%%en=Hywel%20David%20Emanuel%%cy=Hywel%20David%20Emanuel&sort=score&order=desc&rows=12&page=1](https://biography.wales/article/s-BRYC-APA-0419?&query=brychan&lang[]=en&author_multi_facet[]=hde%%en=Hywel%20David%20Emanuel%%cy=Hywel%20David%20Emanuel&sort=score&order=desc&rows=12&page=1)> [accessed 12 April 2024].

⁶ John T., Koch, *Celtic Culture : A Historical Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2006), p. 300.

around 24 daughters, but the number of sons fluctuates, usually being put in the region of 11 sons although a much larger number of both sons and daughters has been given.⁷ There is very little actual evidence relating to his family but what is known comes from a key source, *De situ Brecheniauc* (circa 1200 CE), in which Brychan's Royal pedigree in both Ireland and Wales is given along with a list of his offspring, which were recorded as 25 daughters (including Dwywnwen whose name was noted) and 11 sons.⁸ Dwywnwen's mother is believed to have been Rigwrast whose father was the warlord Gwrtheyrn ap Gwidol and whose mother was Sevira, which means that Dwywnwen is the granddaughter of Emperor Magnus Maximus (on her maternal line).⁹ Brychan was an early Welsh Christian who may or may not have been a Saint (there is little evidence of saintly cult of Brychan). He was the creator of one of the Three Holy Families of the Island of Britain (Triad 18).¹⁰ Almost all Brychan's children went on to become Saints including Dwywnwen and her sister Ceinwen who, in the 6th-century Welsh 'Age of Saints' were thought to be amongst the most noble.¹¹

What is known of Dwywnwen to this point has some basis in historical records, but the next part of her life is when things become a little more uncertain. There are three key stories as to what happened to Dwywnwen as an adult. The first story concerns Maelgwyn Gwynedd, King of Gwynedd who died circa 547 CE and who murdered his wife and his nephew so that he could marry his nephew's widow.¹² His exact link to Dwywnwen and when is unclear but some evidence that it existed comes from her name appearing in the litany of the Llanbeblig Hours (late 14th-century C.E) that is associated with the diocese of Bangor and in the litany of a further Llanbeblig manuscript (Stonyhurst MS 61).¹³

De sancta Donwenna

Oratio

Deus qui beatissimam virginem tuam Donwennam pre timore regis Maelgoini de Hibernia in Walliam transfretare fecisti, et illam ibidem diuersis miraculorum generibus decorasti, tribue nobis quesumus: [vt] eius meritis precibus et intercessionibus de hac lacrimarum valle ad portum salutis qui Christus est remissi peccatorum nostrorum sordibus peruenire valeamus. Per dominum nostrum.

Secreta

Offerimus tibi domine preces et munera in honore sancte Donwenne virginis tue gaudentes presta quesumus, vt et conuenimus hec agere, et remedium sempiternum acquirere. Per dominum nostrum.⁴⁶

Postcommunio

Deus qui beatam Donwennam supra mare pedibus ambulare, et Maelgoinum tyrannum superare miraculose fecisti, tribue nobis quesumus: vt eius meritis et precibus a viciis ad virtutes et a mundi miseria transferamur ad regna celestia. Per dominum nostrum.

⁷ T. Thornley Jones, 'The Daughters of Brychan', *Brycheiniog* (Brecon: The Brecknock Society, 1955), 17-58 (p. 17-19).

⁸ British Library, London, *De situ Brecheniauc*, 1200. Cotton Vespasian A. xiv, 10v-11v

⁹ Brian Daniel Starr, *The Life of Saint Brychan: King of Brycheiniog and Family* (Google eBook) (Brian Daniel Starr, 2008) page 59.

¹⁰ Iolo Morganwg, *The Myvyrian Archaiology of Wales Collected Out of Ancient Manuscripts* (Denbeigh, T. Gee, 1870), p. 402.

¹¹ Catrin Stevens, *Santes Dwywnwen = Saint Dwywnwen* (Llandysul: Gomer, 2005), p.3.

¹² W. H. Davies, MAELGWN GWYNEDD, *Dictionary of Welsh Biography* (1959) <<https://biography.wales/article/s-MAEL-GWY-0547>> [accessed 12 April 2024].

¹³ Huws, Daniel, 'The earliest Bangor missal', *Daniel Huws, Medieval Welsh manuscripts* (Cardiff and Aberystwyth: University of Wales Press, 2000), 269-286, p. 121 - 123.

Figure 2. Prayers in Latin for Sante Dwynwen.¹⁴

The person referred to as Maelgoini in Fig 2. above, is Maelgwyn Gwynedd, King of Gwynedd. In the prayers, it mentions Dwynwen walking on water from Ireland to Wales to escape the tyranny of Maelgwyn. This matches a tale of Dwynwen walking across the sea, and by her holiness she proved she was more powerful than Maelgwyn. It is unclear as to why she would be walking from Ireland to Wales if she was trying to escape from Maelgwyn, the other way around would be more understandable, nor what interest he would have had in Dwynwen, although stories tell of her being the fairest of all Brychan's daughters. In the second story about Dwynwen doesn't appear until she is written about by Edward Williams (1747-1826), commonly known by his bardic name of Iolo Morganwg. In this version of she falls in love with prince Maelon Dafodrill but something happens that prevents that relationship. Depending on the variant of the story, either her father has already promised her in marriage to another, or she realizes that she wishes to remain a virgin and follow a pious life or Maelon makes advances which she rejects causing him to rape her. Dwynwen then prayed to God for his help in removing her love from Maelon at which point he turns into a block of ice. God granted her three wishes which Dwynwen used by asking for Maelon to be unfrozen; to allow her to become a nun and live a chaste life; for God to hear her prayers when she prayed on behalf of others who were lovelorn. Having had her wishes granted, Dwynwen was able to live her life as a nun and intercede on behalf of heartbroken lovers. Thus, the patron-saint of Welsh lovers came was created but there is no factual evidence for this story. Her popularity owes much to the fact that Iolo Morganwg wrote about Dwynwen at a time known as the first Celtic revival when the public were very keen to embrace their oral history as part of a renewed interest in Celtic culture.

The third key story concerns her religious life on Ynys Llanddwyn off the southeast coast of Anglesey where she gave her name to the parish and church of Llanddwyn.¹⁵ During the Middle Ages, the church became an important site for pilgrimage. Young people would travel large distances to visit Dwynwen and ask her to divine their future in the well called 'Ffynnon Fair' which contained Holy eels (although some say they were fish).¹⁶ The ritual started with Dwynwen sprinkling breadcrumb on the water, then a handkerchief belonging to the lovers was laid on the surface of the water and depending on the movements of the eels their fate would be decided. The lovers would make an offering to Dwynwen's coffer, and she would then proceed to intercede in pray for them. In fact, such was the popularity of the site and the generosity of the lovers that Richard Kyffin, rector of Llanddwyn c. 1480 – 1502 and dean of Bangor cathedral was able to build a grand house for himself on the island where he lived like a nobleman.¹⁷ In addition to the ritual of Ffynnon Fair, lovers would also visit the wishing well known as 'Crochan Llanddwyn or Llanddwyn's Caudron, located close to Ynys Llanddwyn, believing that if the water bubbled when they carried out their ceremonies it indicated that their love would be returned in kind.¹⁸ People would also visit Dwynwen to cure their ailments and one ritual for this was for the afflicted person to sleep upon a rock called 'Gwely Eryth' and after waking up they carved their initials into the ground, thus effecting a cure.¹⁹ After Dwynwen died, circa 460 CE, the island continued to be a site of pilgrimage right

¹⁴ Huws, Daniel, 'The earliest Bangor missal', *Daniel Huws, Medieval Welsh manuscripts* (Cardiff and Aberystwyth: University of Wales Press, 2000), 269–286, p. 122.

¹⁵ National Churches Trust, < <https://www.nationalchurchestrust.org/church/st-dwynwen-llanddwyn-island>> [accessed 13 April 2024].

¹⁶ Hugh Owen, 'Llanddwyn Island', *Transactions of the Anglesey Antiquarian Society and Field Club*, 1920. Available at: <http://www.tpwilliam.co.uk/hanes_pdf_ch8e_1> [accessed 13 April 2024].

¹⁷ Catrin Stevens, *Santes Dwynwen*, p.8.

¹⁸ Owen, 'Llanddwyn Island', 2016.

¹⁹ Owen, 'Llanddwyn Island', 2016.

up until the Reformation and beyond when such sites were closed, and veneration of the Saints prohibited. Gradually the site fell into disrepair and pilgrims no longer visited. A simple cross standing over 4m high was erected by the Anglican Church in memory of Dwynwen follow by the erection of a Celtic style cross close the church ruins by Hon. F. G. Wynn of Glynllivon, also in memory of its Dwynwen. Today Ynys Llanddwyn is a National Nature Reserve.²⁰



Figure 3. St Dwynwen's Church, Llanddwyn c. 1778 by Thomas Pennant. National Library of Wales

²⁰ Catrin Stevens, *Santes Dwynwen*, p.20.



Figure 4. By Alistair Young - Crosses On Llanddwyn Island, CC BY 2.0.²¹

By the start of the 20th century, Dwynwen had fallen out of favour and almost been forgotten as Saint Valentine had become the DeFacto Patron saint of lovers in Wales and the habit of sending cards on his feast day was widely adopted.²² His popularity caused a surge of commercial interest, turning the 14th of February into the spend-fest we now all know. Dwynwen had to wait until just over halfway through the 20th century for her renaissance which came in the form of a student at University College, Bangor, Vera Williams who was, like so many other young people in Wales, fighting for the future of their language.²³

²¹ Alistair Young, Crosses On Llanddwyn Island, <<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=18339026>> [accessed 13 April 2024].

²² Catrin Stevens, *Santes Dwywnwen*, p.15.

²³ *ibid*, p.15.

Vera was instrumental in getting four cards to celebrate Saint Dwynwen's day designed and printed in a small batch and by the start of the 21st century cards and other related items were widely available in shops.²⁴

In summary, there is sufficient evidence to show that Sante Dwynwen was a real person from the 5th-century C.E, not just a legendary figure, who came from the important Three Holy Families of the Island of Britain. The story of her fear of Maelgwyn Gwynedd, King of Gwynedd is incomplete yet there is enough evidence from the Llanbeblig Hours to suggest that some event occurred, but we have no idea of what or when. As to the story of her relationship with Maelon Dafodrill, the subsequent events that resulted in her moving to Ynys Llanddwyn and her becoming the Welsh Patron saint of lovers, there is no evidence at all. It might be that this is oral history that has been embellished with time and telling but this will never be known. However, it is this story alone that is pivotal to her becoming the person we know her as today. Her fame was, without doubt, aided by the Celtic Revivals which subscribed to the importance of oral histories from long ago and more recently by those fighting for the survival of the Welsh language. It would be pleasing to think that awareness of Dwynwen continues to grow in Wales and further afield but without the commercialism that we now associate with Saint Valentine.

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²⁴ *ibid*, p.17.

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