

THE BONESETTER OF ANGLESEY HEALING THROUGH MANIPULATION

Two young boys saved from the sea after their ship went down, on a stormy night in the year 1745 off the North West tip of Anglesey in North Wales. According to legend they were found tied to a raft. They spoke in a language unknown to their rescuers. Reliable source states that they were probably Spanish.

It seems they were split up and brought up by local families. One was given the name of Evan Thomas. He spent his early years working on a farm belonging to a Dr Lloyd, and soon discovered he had an uncanny knowledge of the human frame, and was able to treat broken bones. He became famous as a bonesetter - his fame spread across the island and beyond.

Edward Pugh in Cambria Depicta wrote "In this part of the Island i.e. Hollyhead, I have heard much of the worth and extraordinary abilities of Evan Thomas, the self-taught bonesetter of Maes in the parish of Llanfairynghornwy. He seems to have acquired a most consummate knowledge of Osteology, for cases desperate in the extreme have been treated by him with expedition and success, his reputation has not only spread through his native country but has made its way to England, where some unfortunate sufferer has happily experienced his superlative skill. This very day I have been informed that a messenger arrived at his home from Shropshire, with a tender of £300 for his immediate assistance which he has accepted. As such, a mind must be alive to the praise he deserves"

Evan Thomas married Catherine in 1762 and they had four sons, 1764 Thomas Evans, 1766 William, 1772 Richard Evans, and 1775 John Evans. Note: the surname of the children became the first name of the father, as was the practice in those days. They were all gifted, like their father, in the art of bonesetting.

Richard Evans was the one to take the work seriously and having inherited his father's talents, he became a very busy man, because of the copper mine in Anglesey, in full swing at the time, and claimed many victims.

Richard Evans had seven children, three sons and four daughters, Evan Evans, John, Catherine, Ann, Margaret, Richard and Elizabeth. All were capable in the art.

Evan Evans, as a young man, walked from Anglesey to Liverpool to seek employment. After a time he discovered that his skill as a bonesetter was much needed in the city and practised from his home at 82 Groshall Street. He changed

his name to that of his Grandfather, Evan Thomas although why he reverted to his Grandfathers name we cannot explain. His brothers and sisters retained the surname of Evans. His professional card makes interesting reading and certainly shows that if the medical man had the advantage of qualification, the bonesetter is better placed when it comes to advertising:

*"EVAN THOMAS" "BONESETTER" No 3 GREAT CROSHALL STREET
LIVERPOOL. THIRD DOOR FROM THE CHAPEL.*

Respectfully informs his friend and public, that from the extensive practical experience he has had for twenty years, he can refer to a number of persons, both in the town and the principality, who have experienced his successful treatment of several desperate cases of fractured and dislocated bones, and he begs to assure those who may require his services that they shall meet with the utmost care and attention. Evan Thomas has the advantage of the instructions of his father, Mr R E Thomas of Cilmaenan, Anglesey, who is well known in the principality as an eminent bonesetter, as was also his Grandfather, Mr Evan Thomas. Again he plays with the family surname.

His fame as a bonesetter spread worldwide and patients arrived in droves to be treated by him. Evan became that famous he was treating thirty to forty patients per day. This became very upsetting for the medical profession and they turned against him (not all) and encouraged patients to bring charges against him, through the courts, when things went wrong. One important case, in which a butcher by the name of Crowley claiming compensation from Evan Thomas, claimed the treatments were the cause of him losing his leg, who had been previously treated by Dr Thorburn. The treatments were different altogether from that of the doctor. Opening the case in defence of Evan Thomas, Mr Sergeant Wilkins said "I have been looking to see whether there was any case made out and he thought the jury must have discovered the miserable difficulty in which those medical men had involved themselves in coming forward to give evidence against a man to whom a larger amount of gratitude was due from hundreds of the poorer inhabitants of this town, than to any man who walked down the streets. It was not the first time by a great many that he had felt called upon though now with any pleasure to oppose the conduct of the medical profession. The medical profession would not leave him alone.

Mr Thomas had rectified cases after which medical men had failed. He had performed cures and if his opponents and himself were weighed in the balance of the truth and justice, he knew who would touch the beam carriage and all if they had fair

play, Mr Thomas does not profess to be a pathologist or a physiologist but he simply professes to be a bonesetter and curer of bruises and sprains." The case was won by Thomas. In another case Thomas challenged the doctors to point out any arm or leg he had set wrongly. They couldn't and the case was won.

Evan Thomas was married in 1830 and there were seven children, five sons and two daughters, Margaret and Ann, Dr Hugh Owen Thomas, Dr Richard Evan Thomas, Dr Owen Robert Thomas, Dr John Lewis Thomas and Dr Evan Thomas.

Because of his treatment at the hands of the medical profession, he realised that the days of the bonesetter were numbered and he ensured that his sons would receive a good medical education.

His eldest, Hugh Owen Thomas, studied at Edinburgh, London and Paris, before entering into partnership with his father, which was scorned upon. Using the words of Dr Hywell Jones, another member of the family, "What Evan Thomas did not realise was, if his sons were qualified doctors, they would have to live with the stigma of being their fathers sons and, what's worse, any form of association with him and his work would be deprecated." He continued to practise in Liverpool for some years after his sons qualified and one or two of them, regardless of the consequences, assisted him in his work. On his retirement in 1863, he was presented with a portrait of himself in oils, a silver tea and coffee service and illuminated address, the inscription summarising the respect he had earned:

"Presented to Mr Evan Thomas in token of the high esteem in which he was held by the citizens of Liverpool and for the valuable services rendered to society"

Returning to Anglesey he was again in much demand and lived another twenty years.

It is when we consider the life of Hugh Owen Thomas, the eldest child of Evan Thomas, that the story emerges on an altogether different level of achievements. Whereas before we have been dealing with men and women, whose local reputation was built on their inbred manipulative skill, their uncanny feeling of true bony alignments and confidence and experience to maintain it, we are concerned with a man, who not only inherited their skill, but allied it to a sharp scientific brain, anatomical knowledge, medical training and enthusiasm for his work. He provided a link between his uneducated and unqualified ancestors and many of the now accepted principles of modern orthopaedic surgery. Whereas so far as the story has been romantic, remarkable, it now ascends to its pinnacle and relates to a man who endowed untold blessings on mankind.

Hugh was born in Anglesey on the 23rd August 1834 and spent his early years there. He proved to be a delicate child, but during his early education, his headmaster realised he was a boy of above average intelligence and his influence remained with him. In 1854 his father decided that the four brothers were to be medically qualified and all entered medical school at the universities of Edinburgh, London and Paris.

Hugh had realised at the beginning that he could learn a great deal from his father, but before long he set up a practice on his own in Hardy Street. He was never short of work. He was appointed medical officer to many clubs and societies, such as Shipwright Iron Works and Boiler Makers. He also treated many of the sea going people in the neighbourhood. He worked in the very heart of the dockland and soon realised that his premises were too small and moved to 11 Nelson Street, and when that proved to be insufficient, an extension had to be built so that he could have his own workshop, which was filled with modern machinery to facilitate the making of new surgical instruments, which he devised. He still retained the house in Hardy Street as his own private hospital – it was the only hospital in which he ever practised. He employed a blacksmith, saddler to finish off the various splints, and others who made the adhesive plasters, bandages and dressings.

It was a great pity that his medical colleagues barred him from holding hospital appointments. They would argue that his past association with his father excluded him from such an honour, but the more likely reason was Hugh's own character and temperament. His teaching and methods were well in advance of its time, though he was tolerant of fair criticism, he had no patience with the foolish and his fiercely independent spirit and beliefs did not endear him to his opponents. It was many years later, when he was not alive to appreciate it, that his teaching was recognised by the medical profession, and today No 11 Nelson Street is referred to as the birthplace of Modern Orthopaedic Surgery in Great Britain.

Unlike other men, Sunday was not regarded as a day of rest. On that morning he held his free surgery, when upwards of two hundred of the unfortunate and poverty stricken member of society would receive his expert care without any charge whatsoever. Many proved to be of great interest and in the latter part of his life, many surgeons from far afield, who had read his book and were eager to see his revolutionary methods practised, would be present. It is sad to think that his principles were far better appreciated in distant parts than in his own town! To emphasise this point, quoting Dr John Ridlon of Chicago, "I entered a door standing open, over which was this legend – H.O.T Surgery 1866"

I was in a narrow room with shelves of medicine bottles on the left and a stained counter shelf below on which sat a crying child, supported by its mother. Strapping the child's feet into iron splints, was a thin little man dressed in black with a cap with a glazed peak over one eye, thick lenses spectacles, a ragged brindle beard and a cigarette in his mouth. When the child stopped crying, I stepped forward and handed him my card. He read it aloud and asked, "What can I do for you? I am Mr Thomas"

I said, "Mr Thomas, I have read your book on the Hip, Knee and Ankle and I have come three thousand miles to find out whether I am a fool or you a liar." There was a twinkle behind the thick lenses and he said, "I think we'll find out in half an hour". Thus began two wonderful days.

Dr Ridlon was the first in America to make use of a Thomas splint, as a recount, he put it on a child who had a hip disease and who had been treated by the method then in vogue for six months, with no apparent improvements. It was completely corrected by the Thomas splint in about two weeks, and without complaints or discomfort. Thomas seemed to me to feel keenly the attitude of the physicians and surgeons of his country, that they looked down on him as a bonesetter, that he was ostracised professionally. Altogether he visited twelve other orthopaedic surgeons throughout, as he says, not one had a kindly word to say of Thomas, but I was able to compare their work to his, one could gain more useful knowledge following Thomas around for half an hour than elsewhere in Great Britain for a month.

Such was Hugh Owen Thomas in his lifetime; his premature death at the age of 56 years was contributed to by his commitment to his work. Though unwell, he travelled to Runcorn to attend a patient, but his fever was exacerbated by his long wait in the cold station waiting room and he developed pneumonia, a condition his fragile frame was not equipped to combat. No better summary of his can be written than that which appeared in the 'Lancet' at the time:

"A grief so profound and widespread as that which was manifest at Liverpool on the tenth instant, when the remains of Dr Hugh Owen Thomas were laid to rest, is seldom witnessed. There can be no more eloquent or touching testimony, to the worth of a mans character, than the tears of the poor among whom he lived. The toilers at our docks and warehouses are not insensitive beings, and the daily struggle of their lives is too earnest to admit of much display of sentiment. To see thousands of them men as well as women, as anyone might have done in Liverpool last

Saturday, stirred to their very depths by an emotion that found expression in passionate sobs and tears, as they lined the streets, or pressed forward to gaze into the open grave, proves that its silent occupant had won his way to their hearts. Many geniuses died before their creations were appreciated, Hugh Owen Thomas was one of them. What is worse, had it not been for his nephew, it is virtually certain all his teachings and beliefs would have perished with him."

The hand of destiny, which guided Robert Jones to Nelson Street, has now become part of surgical history. As a young man, he was nurtured in the Thomas home and absorbed the maxims expounded and practised by his uncle.

One of the greatest things Robert Jones ever did was to make the principles of Hugh Owen Thomas acceptable to the medical profession. No son could have shown loyalty, affection and devotion to his family than this nephew towards his uncle.

It is said that Richard Evans of Pwllheli, the last of the family to practice gainfully as an unqualified Bonesetter, would not let anyone know the ingredients of his special Liniment (Muscle Oil) other than members of his family. He continued to practice until his death in 1954

Extracts from a book in Welsh by H Hughes Roberts B.A., translated, 1934, called "Bonesetters of Anglesey, also by Dr W Hywel Jones.

Photograph – Richard Evans, his surgery at Pwllheli – note the glass panel in the door, now preserved at the Orthopaedic Hospital at Oswestry – also the (muscle oil – Olew Gwynau) name above the surgery is:

ADFERLE – meaning A Place to Restore

Mr R Evans