

## **Robert Evans (1895-1957): A Christian Soldier**

Robert Evans, known as “Bob Tŷ Cerrig” by his family members, was born in Ganllwyd, near Dolgellau in 1895. After education at the local primary school and Dolgellau Grammar School, Robert was accepted as a ministerial candidate by Bala-Bangor College, the Congregationalist denomination’s college, associated with the University College of North Wales, Bangor. However, one year into his studies the Great War broke out, and Robert decided to join the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC).



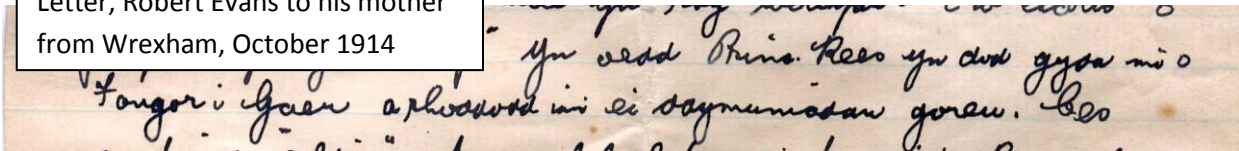
Robert Evans (holding a horseshoe) ,  
with his fellow-recruits to the RAMC

Robert’s choice of unit is revealing. The chapels of Wales were put in quandary at the outbreak of war: given their pacifist inclination, how could they reconcile the teachings of Christ with the call of King and Country to fight the enemy? Reactions differed: some stuck rigidly to their Christian principles and refused to condone any violence; other voices (perhaps the majority – certainly including many of the most significant figures) decided that this was a just war, fought against an aggressor who had violated the basic principles of justice and humanity and who needed to be resisted to the utmost. For those young men who wanted to contribute to the war effort, but without taking up arms themselves, the RAMC was the choice of the brave.

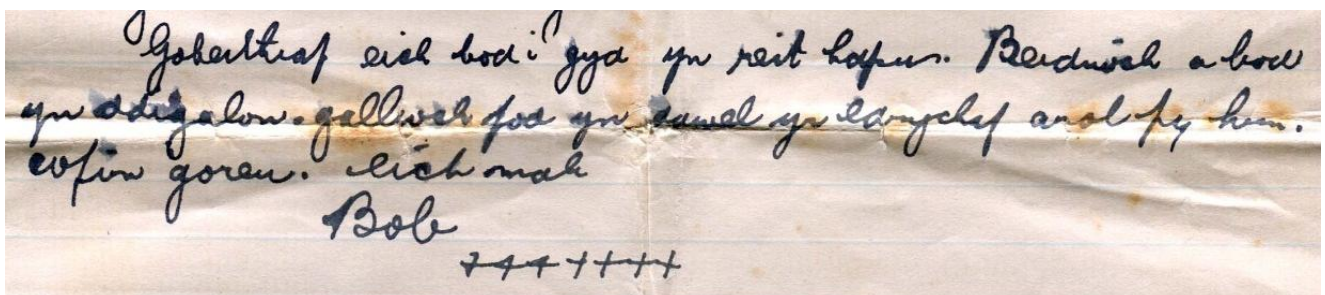
Serving in the front line, they would face the dangers alongside the troops, and as the bullets flew and the shells exploded their job was to evacuate wounded men to the dressing stations.

In early 1916 a specifically Welsh unit of the RAMC would be formed, with the recruiting targeted at theological students: however, Robert joined up much earlier, in October 1914. Although his principal at the Theological College, Thomas Rees, was noted for his anti-war stance, and indeed was heavily criticised at the time for his views, a letter from Robert to his mother states that ‘Yr oedd Princ. Rees yn dod gyda mi o Fangor i Gaer a rhoddodd imi ei ddymuniadau goreu’ (Principal Rees came with me from Bangor to Chester and gave me his best wishes).

Letter, Robert Evans to his mother  
from Wrexham, October 1914

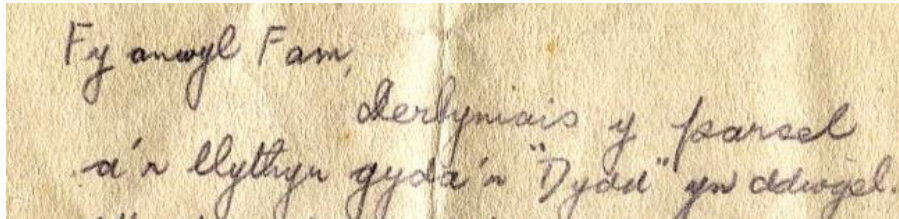


The last sentences of this letter to his mother have some significance as they give us an idea of Robert’s state of mind as he joined up. Popular conceptions of the Great War are dominated by darkness and the tragic waste and futility, but here, writing before most of the terrible atrocities had happened, is a young man confident that he is doing the right thing. The positive mind-set seen here in the early days of the war is something that was shared by most of the men that enlisted.



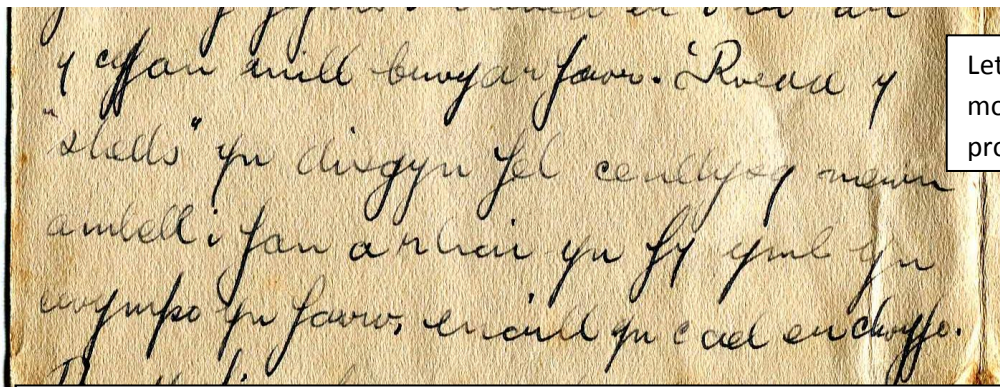
‘Gobeithiaf eich bod i gyd yn reit hapus. Peidiwch a bod yn ddigalon, gallwch fod yn dawel yr edrychaf ar ol fy hun. Cofion goreu, eich mab, Bob’. (I hope that you are all happy. Don’t be down-hearted, you can be sure that I will look after myself. Best wishes, your son, Bob).

This is the first of a number of letters and postcards written by Robert to his family during his time with the RAMC to have survived. They provide an insight into his experiences and feelings, although there are some points that need to be borne in mind as we read them. Given that most of these letters are to his mother, with the express purpose of letting her know that he is well, there must be an element of self-censorship. Although he does give some details of what he has seen in the trenches, much of the content of the letters is rather bland, such as thanking his mother for her letters and parcels.



Letter, Robert Evans to his mother from France, probably 1916

'Fy anwyl Fam, Derbyniais y parcel a'r llythyr gyda'r "Dydd" [papur newydd Dolgellau] yn ddiogel.' (My dear Mother, I safely received the parcel and the letter with the [Dolgellau newspaper] "Dydd").

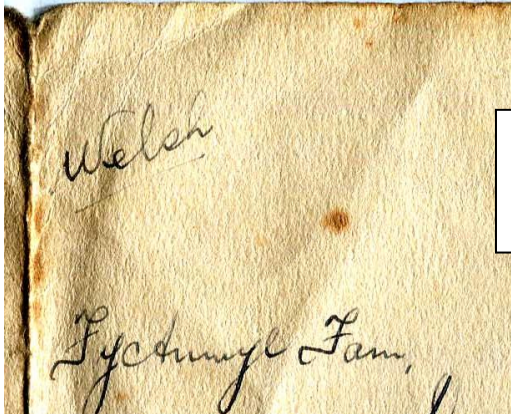


Letter, Robert Evans to his mother from France, probably 1916

'Roedd y "shells" yn disgyn fel cenllysg mewn ambell i fan a rhai yn fy ymyl yn cwmpo yn farw, eraill yn cael eu clwyfo' (In some places the shells were falling like hail, and some men by my side died, while others were wounded)

As well as the self-censorship there is the question of official censorship, particularly given that Robert naturally wrote in Welsh to his family. Although soldiers were officially allowed to write home in Welsh, this could be discouraged in certain circumstances while serving overseas where there was no Welsh-speaking officer available to check the letter's contents. One of the surviving letters (25 June 1916) was written in English – a language that his mother in rural Merionethshire could not speak – presumably because of a problem with censorship, and this letter (which would obviously have to be translated by an intermediary at home) is written in a very formal tone.

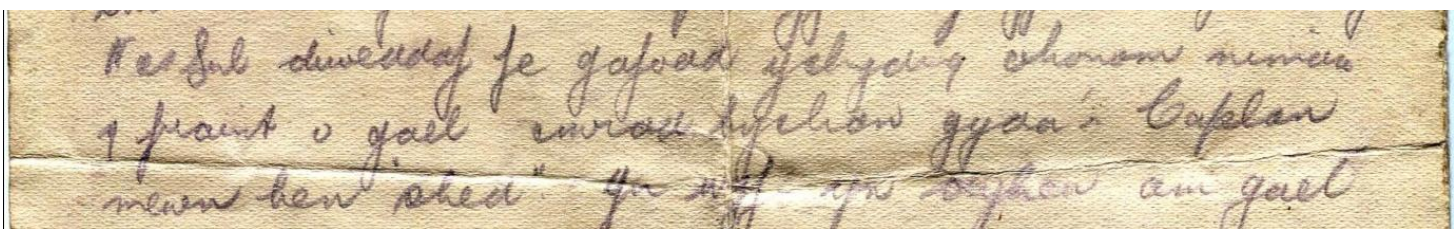
However, a later letter (no date, but most probably 1916) notes that the letters are now being sent via London for censorship.



Letter, Robert Evans to his mother from France, with a notification to the censor that it is in Welsh

One of the principal themes that arises throughout Robert Evans' correspondence is that of his religion. It is a very common perception that men during the Great War lost their religion due to the atrocities with which they were faced. There are plenty of examples of Welshmen who found themselves questioning all the ideas they had received about a kind and just God when they witnessed the barbarity of the trenches. However, the story of Robert Evans, who saw the harshest side of war while serving in the trenches in France, provides an alternative pathway. The question of religion arises in all of Robert's letters, which are infused with references to his faith. Despite all he witnessed, Robert's religious beliefs were reinforced by his experiences.

In one of his letters from France (probably written 1916) he notes how he and some of his comrades had the privilege of having a service, held in a shed.



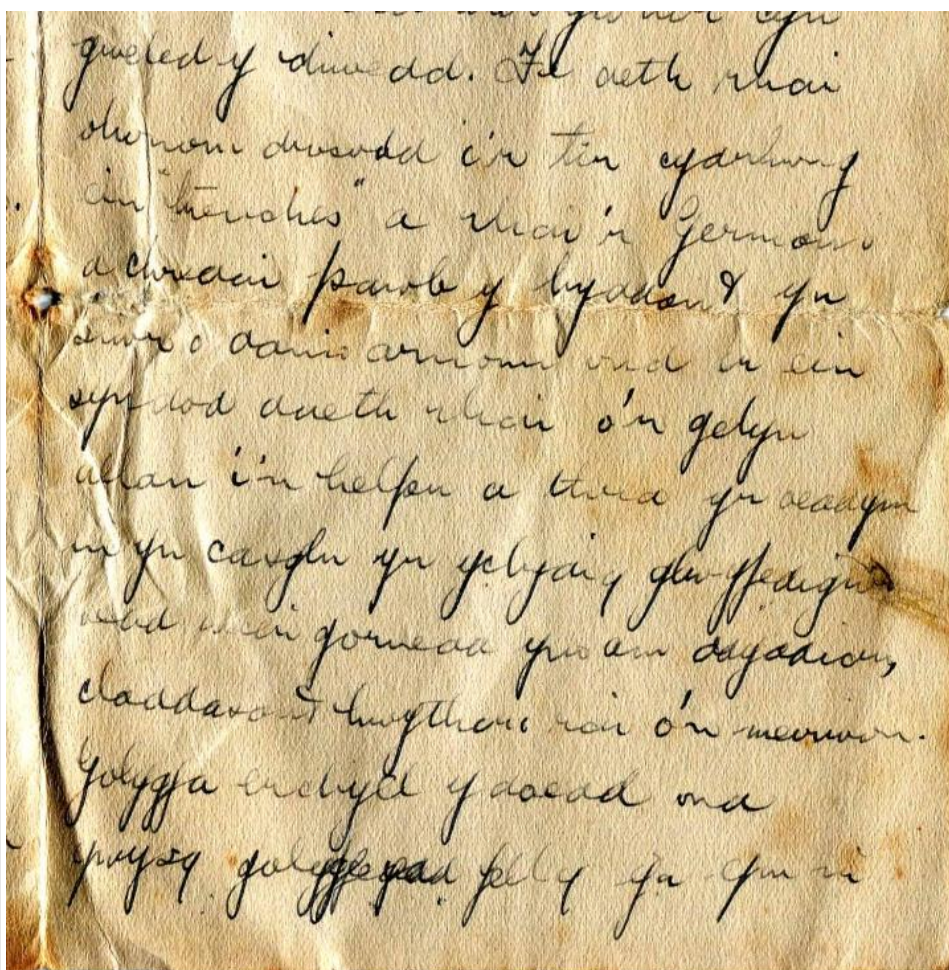
'Nos Sul diwethaf fe gafodd ychydig ohonom ninnau y fraint o gael cwrdd bychan gyda'r Caplan mewn hen "shed". (Last Sunday night a few of us had the privilege of taking part in a small service with the Chaplain in an old shed).

He then goes on to write that he is looking forward to having a Sunday Service back home as he finds a Welsh service more fulfilling than any other ('Yr wyf yn dyheu am gael Sul eto yng Nghymru oherwydd rywfodd neu gilydd fe gaf fi fwy o flas a'r gwrdd Cymreig nag a'r unrhyw gwrdd arall').

This inter-connection between Robert's faith and his Welshness is revealing, and helps us to understand what elements of his Welsh identity were important to him and his comrades. It indicates that holding on to the familiar, the comforting images of home, helped them to cope with the demanding circumstances they faced.

One of Robert's letters (just dated 'Saturday'! – but most probably from 1916) gives us a further indication of how Robert sought to make sense of the situation, trying to find a light amidst the darkness.

'Fe aeth rhai ohonom drosodd i'r tir cydrhwng ein "trenches" a rhai'r Germans a chredai pawb y byddant yn siwr o danio arnom ond er ein syndod daeth rhai o'r gelyn allan i'n helpu a thra yr oeddym ni yn casglu yr ychydig glwyfedigion oedd wedi gorwedd yno am ddyddiau, claddasant hwythau rai o'n meirwon'. (Some of us went over to the land between our trenches and the Germans and all of us believed that they would be sure to fire upon us but to our surprise some of the enemy came out to help us and while we were collecting the few wounded who had lain there for days, they buried some of our dead')



This kind of evidence is unexpected – and perhaps it is rare to find a soldier willing to think of the ‘enemy’ as human beings with feelings and consciences. However, it highlights the fact that the 270,000+ men from Wales who served were all individuals, none of whom went through exactly the same experiences and emotions.



Robert Evans, in a photograph taken at Fulham Military Hospital in 1919



Robert Evans’ war medals, and a photograph of him taken in later years



After the war, Robert Evans returned to his theological studies and graduated in 1924, thereafter taking charge of chapels in Yr Hendy and Llanbryn-mair. He was a committed pacifist, and supported a number of young men in his congregation during the Second World War when they decided to be conscientious objectors, and to refuse to be called up. (He also gave succour to those members who *did* enlist, and to their families). Robert’s war experiences did not alter his faith in God, but they did change his opinion about whether it was ever right for man to wage war.

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