

## Sarah Jane Rees – Cranogwen, a pioneering woman.

By Dr Kathryn Dawes, Ysgrifenyddes y Pwllgor Llangrannog (Welfare Committee Secretary)

Sarah Jane Rees is most commonly known by her bardic name Cranogwen (she even used to sign her letters thus).

She was born in 1839 in a small cottage in Pontgarreg called Dolgoy-Fach, the ruins of which can still be seen via a public footpath below Gilfach farm. The family were not well off; her father captained a small ketch which would have transported goods up and down the coast. He would have had only one or two crew to help him.

Sarah Jane went to the school in the centre of **Pontgarreg** (closed a few years ago). She was said to have a way with words early on, and her mother encouraged her to read her poetry to her.



Sarah Rees - Cranogwen

There were not many options available to a woman at the time, career-wise. Cranogwen's mother determined she should be a seamstress, and she was sent to train in Cardigan. She had no aptitude for the work, and persuaded her father to take her to sea with him instead. This was not quite as radical as it might seem, as there

were women at sea by this time, 'gwragedd y môr'; they often held positions of some status within the community, as they brought back new knowledge and ideas. Cranogwen, even at a young age, did not want to be confined by tradition.

Cranogwen learned fast, and was useful to her father on board. She learned navigation using the old instruments such as sextant and compass, as well as the stars. There is an anecdote about a storm which blew up unexpectedly – Sarah Jane's father was for lying to in the shelter of the cliffs, but Cranogwen argued hard until he relented and took them further out to sea. The waves that came up would have dashed them onto the rocks. Clearly she was a force to be reckoned with herself!

In the **Pentre Arms** you can see a list of the boats built in Llangrannog, in what is now the beachfront car park. Many were lost in local storms.

Cranogwen stayed at sea for around three years, but she had greater ambitions. She went on to study in Liverpool and London, and became a Master Mariner in all but certificate – women were not allowed to graduate such a course, but some still followed it and were generally agreed to be of a good standard to teach. This is what Cranogwen did, setting up at **Ysgoldy** in Llangrannog (the house on the left as you come down the tight hairpin bends). The name means school-house, and here she taught local men the finer points of navigation. They became known as Cranogwen's Captains.

Cranogwen continued to write. Her only published volume of poetry is **Caniadau Cranogwen** (1870), which includes lines from Y Fodrwy Briodasol (The Wedding Ring), which won in Aberystwyth in 1865 against several eminent male bards of the time. This caused quite a stir, as no-one realised the pen-name Cranogwen referred to a woman! The book that the Cranogwen statue is holding includes the beginning of this long poem, a slightly satirical take on marriage. She also founded and edited the first women's magazine in Wales, Y Frythones. Much of her work can be seen on the National Library of Wales website.

Cranogwen was a devout chapel-goer, and paid a large sum towards the completion of **Banc-y-Felin Chapel** and the Vestry (now private houses), which are on the left just before the village garden which is home to the statue. Cranogwen lectured in chapel – women were not allowed to preach. She would stand at the front with her little dog Fan, and although some were not happy about a woman speaking in the chapel, her words were powerful and as news spread, she was invited (and paid well) to lecture elsewhere. She travelled the UK and even spent a year visiting every single Welsh chapel in the United States; at the time the railroads were quite new.

In 1901 Cranogwen founded the **South Wales Women's Temperance Union**, which had developed over 140 branches by 1916. Cranogwen always came back to her 'dyffryn bach Cranog', her beloved Crannog valley. She used her money to build a house called **Brynaeron** for her parents (going into Pontgarreg from the Llainwen crossroads). She lived further down the road at Yr Iet Wen (now called Green Park). She had two 'romantic friendships' in her life, living with women and never marrying.

Cranogwen's inspiration came from the valley, sea and coastline which she loved. **Carreg Bica**, the giant rock guarding the bay, was said to be the tooth of a giant who, crashing around in pain, pulled it out and threw it to the ground. He then moved north, his great feet making the little beaches we see now, and breaking Lochtyn island off from the peninsula. The story was Christianised to make it the Devil's tooth. Above, on Pen Dinas Lochtyn, is an Iron Age fort, little of which can be seen except a ditch. There was plenty of smuggling in the area – with taxes on salt and alcohol, the form of the coastline made for excellent hiding places. But it was the beauty of nature which informs much of Cranogwen's poetry, from the simple to the devoutly religious.

At the top of **Pen Rhip**, the southern cliff at the end of the main beach, you can see the statue of **Saint Carannog**, who settled the village. He was said to be a son of a powerful Welsh chieftain, and he founded Christian settlements at Crantock in Cornwall, Carantec in Brittany and our own



Llangrannog. Cranogwen's family plot is in the church of St Crannog, and by the memorial stone is the path to the **caves** where St Crannog stayed when he first arrived. Legend has it he was whittling outside his cave when a dove came and took some shavings down to the bottom of the hill.

She spent time in South Wales and funded a hostel for women, which opened after her death.

He took this as a sign and built his church there.

Both of the village's statues were created by renowned sculptor Sebastien Boyesen, who lives a short walk from the Cranogwen statue. Interest in Cranogwen was revived with the Hidden Heroines series on the BBC, and the drive to create the first statue of a real Welsh woman in Wales. Seven local women banded together to take on the project in collaboration with Monumental Welsh Women. Public and private funding was secured, along with generous match funding from Ceredigion Council and many, many smaller private donations gathered through fundraising events such as the Talwrn y Beirdd poetry night and an art exhibition in Canfas, Cardigan. The statue was revealed in June 2023 with a procession, performances, song and dance. We hope Cranogwen would be proud of our efforts, and that her story and statue will inspire further generations of women (and men) to reach for their ambitions.

You can see more on [www.cranogwen.org](http://www.cranogwen.org) and [www.monumentalwelshwomen.com](http://www.monumentalwelshwomen.com) – there are currently two other statues to visit!

Kat Dawes



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