

# Little Billy Brown

by

Barry Napier

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The book was written before the death of Billy Brown in 1993.  
It was therefore modified in 2006. Sadly, there are no photographs  
of Milly as a child, or her home, but I hope the stories will delight you!

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## Introduction

This is a short collection of stories about Milly Napier. Though she died in 1993 her name is still well-known to the older people of Swansea, UK, and to theatre-goers throughout Wales and England, as 'Billy Brown' the 'Comedy Queen of Wales.'

The book only deals with her young days, but from her lively and often naughty beginnings, Milly grew to be a war-time hero, a 'Queen' of theatre, and later a fine Christian.

Why write the book? Because she gave everything to others and should be remembered. And because she loved to bring hope and a smile to everyone around her. She had her faults like everyone else, but her heart was true. Her childhood schemes were many, but always they were executed for just one reason – to give her much loved Mam money to keep the family together. She was a scamp as a child, and she was extremely talented, too. But her biggest talent was her ability to reach everyone of any age or need.

Later in her life, as a young mother, she was saved by the Lord Jesus Christ and this shaped the rest of her sojourn. She gave away all her money to those in need, not just in envelopes or to missionary societies, but personally, whenever she encountered the poor in town, on the street, on a bus or train.

She gave away the coats on her back and even her shoes in bad weather, to people she met! And no-one with fears or worries ever left her side without a smile, such was her gift of encouragement and hope. This was the same woman who, as a child, was a little minx! I am glad to say that God often moves in mysterious ways!

Born to Herbert and Myfanwy Brown, of No. 2 Cross Street, Cwmbwrla, in 1924, her name was Mildred Amy Brown. The cottage where she lived as a child, and the lane called Cross Street, which ran past the old graveyard wall belonging to Babell Chapel, was demolished some years ago. In the 1920's Cwmbwrla was still fortunate enough to retain a village-atmosphere. Today, after a war and dubious 'urban development', the center of the old village is a large roundabout, surrounded by a busy dual carriageway. Old Cwmbwrla is no more, but memories survive.

Mildred, better known by her nickname, 'Billy', started on a singing career at the tender age of three! The older people who once lived in Cwmbwrla still remember the tiny child with a shock of black hair barging her way to the front of the old Gors Mission hall, late in 1927, during an Eisteddfod evening. Hardly able to see above the low stage, Billy demanded in loud voice, 'I want to sing!' That night she walked away with the overall prize, to tremendous applause!

For a number of years following her 'debut', Billy sang in mission halls and churches, by request. It was a time when local eisteddfodau

and hymn-signing were popular and innocent forms of entertainment. So Billy had plenty of engagements.

At the age of about seven or eight, she started singing on the commercial stage and for dance bands. By the time she was a teenager, Billy was an accomplished artiste. During the war, and immediately afterwards, her career blossomed, and she was the most sought-after theatre and concert artist throughout Wales and the West. As she sang and acted to her own comedy routines to packed theatres, critics gave her the title 'Comedy Queen of Wales'.

Wherever she played, Billy Brown had audiences eating from her hand. Recognising her rare talent, producers and agents galore begged her to go to the big cities, to follow an international career. One agent wanted her to go with him to Broadway in the USA. But, for various reasons, she chose to remain at home, and 'retired' after thirty years on stage, in the late 1950's. She continued in song and dance for many more years, but mainly as a teacher – her two daughters took up the stage instead. Both appeared on TV and won countless competitions, and one became a professional singer for a while.

A few years ago, in the late 1980's, Billy organised a charity concert, and the hall was filled to overflowing. People who remembered her were drawn like a magnet. They were not disappointed! I have seen her walk through town, being stopped here and there by older people who peering hard at the now older woman, asked with broad smiles on their faces, 'You are Billy Brown?'

I have heard others stop and bring back memories of her stage shows. And I have heard of how she can turn a doctor's waiting room into a comedy scene! I have also seen her go into a drab, quiet 'bus, and change it within minutes, to a mobile theatre! Regular passengers love to see her, and can never leave the 'bus without holding their sides with laughter! Such is her natural talent. As one male admirer commented to me: 'They don't make 'em like Billy Brown anymore!'

I could go on, but her fans already know far more than I do about her later success-studded career, with their moment-by-moment memories. This brief, but memorable biography, covers her childhood to the age of ten (1924 - 1934). It recollects portions of a unique life, and, I hope, a little of the flavour of old Cwmbwrla.

So, I give you little Billy Brown, terror of school and chapel (as a teacher said to Bert Brown: Of course, "We all have a, er, love for Mildred, but we look forward to the day she leaves school." Bert replied: 'You can be sure of one thing, missus: she'll be glad to see the back end of you, too!'); business-mogul of the district, graveyard Al Capone, star of stage. At such a young age she was all of these things, and more! I hope you enjoy this account of the childhood antics of one of Swansea's best known daughters.

## Chapter One

### Wiltshire Brown, Miner's Daughter

Cwmbwrla. In the late 1920's this satellite area of Swansea Town was almost at the end of its life. It sat at the mouth of a shallow valley of clay and marshland, perhaps a hundred dark dwellings that had formerly housed workers who fed the surrounding small industries. It was existing the best way it could, in the midst of a worldwide depression.

Not all that long before, the local men (and women and children) worked in the copper works in Cwmbwrla itself, or in one of the numerous clay or coal pits nearby. Or, in one of the several brickworks scattered around the hills. All hard-graft stuff.

A single tram line once connected Cwmbwrla with the Weig Fawr colliery at Percy Street, (now called Meadow Street), off the old Gors road. The line continued farther, and terminated at the coal pit that are now the grounds of Dillwyn-Llewellyn school, near the junction of Gors Avenue and Cockett Road, next to the police station.

Running past the marsh land forming the lower parts of Townhill and Mayhill, and behind the brickworks and clay pit (where an electricity company now stands), the line carried those weary miners who could not afford a ride, to Cwmbwrla. From there, the tram made its bumpy way to Swansea Town.

Towards the River Tawe lay the industrialised Hafod, and the workers' living area known as Mansel Town (Manselton). Once, it was teeming with the life of iron and copper works, and tall masted-sailing ships. It is not so easy to see the evidences of such grand industry nowadays, but you can still find clues.

On the other three sides, westwards, Cwmbwrla enjoyed an uncluttered and unspoilt view of the green hills of Townhill ('The Graig'), Mayhill, Gendros, and the winding country paths leading to Cockett. (All are now housing estates).

The fields of Cockett could lead on to two different areas, the magnificent Gower Peninsular, or, Llanelli and West Wales... or even to the North and Mid-Wales, via narrow country roads.

Streams and woodlands dotted themselves across green fields, and, apart from a brickworks, a small pit, or a clay workings, nothing spoiled the view.

Perhaps the best view of all came after a climb past the rifle-range at the base of Townhill, up to the top of The Graig, and over to Hill farm. The panorama of Gower, the Bay, and even North Devon is, even today, outstanding.

Cwmbwrla, then, was still a village at heart; the War had yet to take its toll. As did the later insidious illness known as 'urbanisation'. As a village it had a close-knit community, held together by the common hardships of life. From all accounts it was a friendly place and had little to do with Swansea Town itself. It had its own shops and its own local entertainments, with a bustling shopping area built in circular shape (and which is now mimicked by the large roundabout).

Nevertheless, it was a village in decline, although it did not know it. Its former places of work were dead or dying. Without work, in a country which relies on capital gain for its economic wealth, a village slowly becomes a ghost.

Herbert Brown moved from the West of England to the Swansea area, during the First World War. He was one of the 'Wiltshire Browns', a member of the gentry. His family consisted of rich landowners, with many business interests throughout Wiltshire and the West, and a succession of Mayoral offices.

Cutting a fine figure in his beautifully tailored suits and leather riding boots, this young gent knew and played the part of the young, rich (and sometimes wild) man-about-town. Every weekend, he rode his dappled stallion into a local town, with a bagful of gold sovereigns. After 'painting the town red', he would sleep off his adventures in the best hotel. It was probably owned by his family anyway.

Right up to the age of thirty, Bert played the true country gent. Then, with the 1914 War came an ethical demand. All men too old for active service were expected to follow a 'gainful employment, helpful to the war effort'. Bert ended up in a Munitions' factory near Swansea, working as a labourer. Far from languishing in remorse, Bert revelled in his new work, just as he had revelled in a different way in Wiltshire!

It was at this time of 'gainful employment' that he met a young woman named Myfanwy. She was a widow who already had four children. But she was a pretty young woman, and Bert's zeal for her soon turned to ideas of marriage!

He did not need the paltry wages he earned making bombs, and did not need to worry about finances. After all, Bert had previously thought nothing of running through a bagful of gold sovereigns in one night, and his inheritance was magnificent, even by today's standards! So they married despite warnings from his parents.

Immediately, the 'Wiltshire Browns' refused to recognise the match, and cut Bert off without a penny! Fortunately, it was a true match, and this sudden fall from gentry to worker made no difference to the state of the marriage. When the War ended, Bert threw himself into whatever work he could find, usually labouring as a navy, digging up roads, with the same enthusiasm he had had for his previous money-burning adventures. But without his horse!

Bert and Myfanwy lived in a cottage; No.2 Cross Street, Cwmbwrla. It faced the graveyard of Babel Chapel. Cross Street was pinched between the lower parts of Middle Road and Carmarthen Road, and has long since been demolished, but I am sure the graveyard still remembers Bert's goat, and the antics of Billy Brown!

## Chapter Two

### The Debut

The couple, already with four children: Lil, John, Winny and Nell, began to add to their collection of youngsters. Another five, in fact! (One, Charlotte, died as a baby). The first was Morfy. Then came the star of the plot, Milly ('Billy'), Neville and Jean. Neville, the only son of Myfanwy's second marriage (and inevitably spoilt!) was named after Bert's mother's family.

Bert never bore a grudge against his estranged family, although he now lived in relative poverty. He was an enterprising man, and he made sure that, somehow, he could provide at least the essentials for his family. 'Neville' was a way of not forgetting his mother, a French aristocrat who fled from besieged Paris following Napoleon the Third's war against Prussia. She later opened a private school in Wiltshire, and was every inch a lady of means and pride. Bert's marriage to a 'poor miner's daughter' was too much for her to bear! Thus Bert moved swiftly from life of riches, to one of hard graft and poverty.

Milly was born on October 28<sup>th</sup>. 1924, and grew to be her mother's lifelong companion and shadow. For the first two years of her life, Mildred Amy Brown was quiet and reserved. Probably, it was the only time she was quiet! Then, at the grand age of three, came Milly's first big break, at the Gors Mission in Cwmbwrla.

Local Eisteddfods and singing festivals were major affairs. They had been part of the pattern of Welsh life since before the 1904 Welsh Revival, and filled a need in village cultural life. They also became a starting point and platform for many of Wales' best-known orators and singers – especially when they offered cash prizes! However, even in days of stark depression and lack of food, a cash prize never really superceded the honour of entering (and, hopefully, winning).

It was 1927, and Mrs. Brown was busily training Morfy, who was then five, to sing 'Jesus Loves me This I Know', ready for the Cwmbwrla Eisteddfod to be held that winter. For three months, night and day, Mam took Morfy into the cramped Front Room and coached her. Of course, no-one could afford a piano, and coaching was without music.

Every night, little Milly, aged three (very slim, petite, with huge brown eyes and tumbling black hair) would sit quietly, listening. When the singing finished, she would be packed off to bed, and Morfy would hum a few more bars before nodding off to sleep.

At last, The big day came. Mam and Morfy nervously rehearsed the worn-out hymn before making their way to the Mission Hall. Everyone in the community attended these functions. Men sat in their best suits (if they had one) and starched collars, blacked boots pinching their feet. Women wore their best Sunday dress and hat, and children wore their Sunday School clothes.

The entire Brown family (to date!), and a retinue of aunts, made their way down Cross Street in the winter darkness, then Carmarthen Road towards Cwmbwrla Square, where the Mission stood (and still remains). They entered the somber, painted hall, filled to capacity with excited children and proud relatives. Every young entrant was backed by a fiercely proud family, who, naturally, all thought their child to be the best.

The low stage at the end of the hall had a metal rail around its edge, and a heavy curtain across the front. The air of expectancy as everyone waited for the curtain to open was equal to any first night in a London theatre!

Then, without dimmed lights, the heavy curtains were drawn awkwardly open. All the entrants lined up in rows on the stage, according to their age group. They were ready to show the Cwmbwrla world their talents. The first hopeful stepped forward to be greeted by the chief judge, the Rev. Morgan. He was a respected and loved man, large framed and amiable, and a cultural king-pin. After a short introduction, the contest got under way, and the audience settled down for the free entertainment.

Mrs. Brown waited patiently for the moment when her prodigy, Morfy, would step forward. Milly sat contentedly on her knee, not taking much notice. The under-fives finished. It was time for Morfy's age group, and she waited, biting her lip. At last it was her turn, and she stepped forward to the centre of the stage. The judge introduced her, and gave a music sheet to the pianist. Morfy stood perfectly still, arms in front, waiting for the opening bars. Then she started to sing.

She had just got past the first line, 'Jesus Loves Me This I Know', when Milly perked up and listened. Suddenly, she shot off Mam's lap, like an arrow from a bow. Mam tried to call her back, but to no avail. Little Milly, her black hair bouncing, ran straight down the aisle towards the stage.

Without hesitation, she climbed up onto the stage and stood next to the towering figure of Rev. Morgan. The surprised judge looked down at the minute figure; she was barely taller than the metal rail. Smiling, he

asked her what she wanted. No answer. Huge brown eyes looked up into the dizzy heights at this seeming giant.

“What do you want, my dear?” came the question again.

“I know that song!” replied Milly, matter-of-fact.

“You do?”

“Yes. I want to sing it!”

The audience laughed and clapped delightedly. Amused by such a confident intrusion, the kindly judge decided to give everyone an extra treat.

“Well, my dear, I can’t let you sing as you are. You’re far too small. No-one can see you through the rails!”

So a box was found, and tiny Milly was placed on top.

No-one, judge, neighbours, or even Mam, expected to hear what came next. Milly, however, stood confidently waiting. The music started, and Milly sang. Instead of the usual, faltering, almost tuneless tones of a child, there came the most beautiful, melodic, steady notes of a born singer! Every note was sung to perfection, and, as Milly continued her hymn, the audience was stunned into silent admiration.

When the final bars were sung there was absolute silence, then, rapturous applause! The audience had heard nothing like it before! At the age of three, Milly gave Cwmbwrla a sample, a preview, of a remarkable talent.

Amidst claps and cheers, Milly was presented with the overall prize for all age groups, a lovely blue, silk purse, tied with a blue ribbon. The judge hung it around her neck; it was weighed down with four half-crowns, a fortune! Milly ran down the aisle excitedly.

“I won it! I won it!”

She ran to Mam and promptly handed over her prize, with everyone clamouring to give her praise. All Milly could do was jump up and down in excitement, shouting “I won it!” She continued shouting for so long, a well-off lady pressed another half-crown into her hand, to quieten her down.

Far from taking no notice during the previous three months, Milly had unwittingly memorised every word and note! As the years went by, she was to increase in talent, and won every talent competition she entered, always giving the prize to her Mam.

The Gors Mission was Milly's debut. Until the age of seven, she spent her time singing in local churches by (frequent) request; all good groundwork for a future singer and 'Comedy Queen of Wales'!

## Chapter Three

### Milly Versus Rev. Thomas

In 1929 the Gors Mission in Cwmbwrla was run by a Rev. Thomas. He was known for his tireless generosity and helpfulness.

He would offer, say, a pair of shoes to a woman who was known to be badly off, with a disclaimer like "Would you care to take these off our hands? My wife bought them some time ago, and they don't fit her now." In fact, whatever he gave away would be brand new, and bought purposely for someone he had in mind.

Besides being a generous and kindly soul, Rev. Thomas also took on the usual clerical role of cultural leader. In this role he took it upon himself to teach Milly the rudiments of singing. Thus it was that Milly, at the age of six, had a fairly extensive repertoire of songs and hymns; the songs being mostly of the sentimental sort. (By this time, she was also known as 'Billy', a Wiltshire nickname form of 'Milly').

It was coming up to winter, 1929. Milly was age six, and the Reverend decided to coach her for a coming Band of Hope concert in the Mission. Several times a week, Billy made the short journey to his home in Carmarthen Road (this was at the time when ministers of churches actually lived where they were accessible; near to their people, and sharing the common lot!).

Both student and teacher entered the small front room. The cleric sat at a wheezy, rickety, old wind-organ, and Billy stood to the side of it. On this particular occasion, the man was teaching her a real tear-jerker, all about 'Poor Nelly', entitled 'Out In The Stormy Night'! The Reverend pumped up and down on the foot-pump pedals, and the wheezy machine whined into action, sounding rather like the opening refrains of bagpipes!

He gave the cue, and Billy began to sing. The song was repeated several times, and minor mistakes were corrected on the way. This went on for about a week, the same song being improved and altered all the while.

Then came the fatal night! Billy stopped for a usual piece of correction, and Rev. Thomas leaned back to ease his aching shoulders

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