

WILLIAMS, Sir JOHN (1840 - 1926), baronet, Court physician, principal founder of the National Library of Wales

Name: John Williams

Date of birth: 1840

Date of death: 1926

Spouse: Mary Elizabeth Anne Williams (née Hughes)

Parent: Eleanor Williams

Parent: David Williams

Gender: Male

Occupation: baronet, Court physician, principal founder of the National Library of Wales

Area of activity: History and Culture; Literature and Writing; Medicine; Royalty and Society; Scholarship and Languages

Author: William Llewelyn Davies

Born 6 November 1840 at Bailey, Gwynfe, Carmarthenshire, third son of David Williams, Blaenllynant, Welsh Congregational minister and farmer, and Eleanor his wife. Educated at a local school, at the Normal school at Swansea (he then thought of preparing for the ministry), and at the University of Glasgow (1857-8), he was (20 July 1859) apprenticed to Dr. W. H. Michael and Dr. Ebenezer Davies, Swansea, proceeding (1861) to University College Hospital, London (M.B. 1866, and M.D. 1867; F.R.C.P.). He returned to Swansea to practise and it was at Swansea that he began to lay the foundations of the remarkable private library of books, manuscripts, and prints in Welsh or of Celtic interest which he was later to transfer to the infant National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth as a foundation collection. In 1872 he married Mary Elizabeth Anne Hughes (died 1915), daughter of Richard Hughes, Ynystawe, near Swansea. He returned to University College (London) Hospital as house surgeon and then followed many years of brilliant professional work, including teaching, in the course of which he came to enjoy the patronage of the royal family, a connection which began in 1886. When he retired he was emeritus professor of midwifery at University College, London, and consulting obstetric physician to University College Hospital. He was a principal promoter of a movement which secured funds for a Welsh hospital in South Africa during the Boer War. He was also a pioneer in the advocacy of a Welsh national campaign for the eradication of tuberculosis. He had been created a baronet (by queen Victoria) in 1894; he was made a K.C.V.O. in 1902, and G.C.V.O. in 1911; he was also awarded honorary doctorates (LL.D. - by the Universities of Glasgow, Aberdeen, and Edinburgh, and D.Sc. - by the University of Wales in 1905).

Sir John Williams was responsible, in part, for the inauguration of the 'Record Series' published by the Hon. Society of Cymmrodorion. In 1903 he decided to return to Wales (to Plas Llanstephan, Carmarthenshire) in order to be more closely in touch with those Welsh cultural movements in which he was particularly interested. He had continued to add to his private library, and was closely associated with the work of the 'Welsh Library Committee' of the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, the members of which were aiming at the creation of a national library and a national museum for Wales. In 1898 he took a step which was destined to have a momentous influence - he purchased the 'reversion' of the

magnificent Peniarth (Merioneth) collection of manuscripts in Welsh, Latin, and other languages, his intention being to present this collection, when it became his absolute property, to the National Library of Wales, if that institution were established at Aberystwyth. In the meantime he worked hard to further the cause - speaking at public meetings, writing to the press, etc. His dream was realised when, in 1905, a committee of the Privy Council decided that Aberystwyth should be the home of the National Library and again, when, before the end of January 1909, he was able to transfer the Peniarth manuscripts (of which he had become the sole owner only a few weeks previously) to the National Library of Wales which had begun its career on the first day of that month in its temporary home, the Old Assembly Rooms, Aberystwyth. Sir John also transferred the Llanstephan manuscripts (formerly the Shirburn Castle manuscripts) and the bulk of his valuable collection of books, etc. It was, therefore but natural that he should have been named (in 1907) as the first (Charter) president of the National Library and that he should be re-elected on more than one occasion. He came to live at Aberystwyth in September 1909. When he died (24 May 1926), it was learnt that he had also bequeathed to the Library a very large sum of money (the capital of which is being retained in perpetuity) together with the residue of his private library. Sir John succeeded [Lord Rendel](#) as president of Aberystwyth College in 1913.

Author

Sir William Llewelyn Davies, (1887 - 1952)

Sources

The National Library of Wales Journal, [Sir John Williams centenary number](#), Vol. i, part 4, pp.173-232

Who's who?, 1927

Annual Report of the National Library of Wales, particularly the first and second

W. Ll. Davies, *The National Library of Wales* (Aberystwyth 1937)

Reports on Manuscripts in the Welsh Language (Historical Manuscripts Commission 1898–1910)

personal knowledge

Ruth Evans, *John Williams 1840-1926* (Cardiff 1952)

Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Sir John Williams, 1st Baronet, of the City of London](#)

Additional Links

NLW Archives: [Sir John Williams Deeds and Papers, 1324-1926](#)

VIAF: [53672979](#)

Wikidata: [Q7528143](#)

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