

DAVIES, ALUN (1916-1980), historian

Name: Alun Davies
Date of birth: 1916
Date of death: 1980
Spouse: Margaret Davies (née Gulwell)
Child: Jonathan Davies
Parent: Ben Davies
Parent: Sarah Davies (née Bowen)
Gender: Male
Occupation: historian
Area of activity: History and Culture
Author: Prys Morgan

Alun Davies was born in the manse of the Welsh Independents in the main street of Llandysul, Cardiganshire, 30 October 1916, one of four children of [Rev. Ben Davies](#) (1878-1958), minister of the Welsh Independents, and his wife Sarah (née Bowen). The eldest child was Nan (Arianwen), the second Elwyn Davies, Secretary of the University of Wales, the third was Alun, and the fourth the broadcaster [Hywel Davies](#). Elwyn and Nan were born at Plasmarl, Swansea, but Alun was born after the family had moved first to Pontardulais and thence to Llandysul. Two other sons died in babyhood and they were buried in the family plot at Bwlchnewydd, Carmarthenshire. Sarah Davies survived until 1965, outliving her son [Hywel](#). Another grave was opened at Bwlchnewydd for Nan and for Alun's ashes.

Alun Davies attended the local elementary school and the county school at Llandysul (he was allowed to attend the secondary school at the age of eight) and from Llandysul he went to the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth in 1934. He graduated there in history in 1937 and then went to France to study for an MA at the Sorbonne under the famous Georges Lefebvre. He had already travelled to Germany and France as a schoolboy and had been in Germany in 1936. He was in the Cité Universitaire in Paris when the German army suddenly invaded Paris in 1940, and he had to drop everything and flee from Paris to try somehow to get to Britain. Having slept overnight on the forecourt of the Palace of Versailles he jumped on a train for St Malo and got back home safe, and immediately joined the army. Selected by the army to be a military interpreter, he was sent to learn Japanese at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. Among his colleagues there were John Silkin (1928-1987), the novelist Richard Mason (1919-1997), Peter Parker who was later the head of British Rail, and John Watkins who was to become a French lecturer at Bangor. He was quickly promoted in the 14th Army in Burma as an intelligence officer, firstly a captain then a major. He managed to tramp all through the forests of Burma, taking part in the reconquest of Burma, and was demobilized from the army in 1946. He then returned to Aberystwyth where he was appointed history lecturer. There in 1948 he met his future wife Margaret Gulwell from Kenfig Hill, Glamorgan, and the two were married 25 July 1951 at Ebenezer Chapel, Cardiff, and they lived in a flat at no 9 Laura Place, Aberystwyth. One son, Jonathan, was born to them in Hackney Hospital, 23 April 1959.

Alun Davies was a lecturer at Aberystwyth up to 1955, being given some sabbatical leave at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes in Paris and researching at Caen in order to write on the peasantry of northern France at the time of the French Revolution. He was appointed in 1955 as a reader in the London School of Economics, attracted there mainly by Professor Medicott. His title was Reader in International History and his chief occupation was to supervise research students in conjunction with [Sir Goronwy Edwards](#) (1891-1976) the director of the Institute for Historical Research at London University. During his time in London he held the important post of secretary of the Royal Historical Society. He was in 1961 appointed to the chair of Modern History at the University College of Swansea, and made his home at Eaton Crescent. In Swansea he worked closely with his colleague [Glanmor Williams](#) (1920-2005) to build up a strong history department which lay stress on Wales side by side with international history. During this period he was appointed member of the University Grants Committee. He was a member of the Gorsedd of Bards and a keen Independent, and a member for decades at Henrietta Street Church, Swansea. He wrote articles on the modern history of France and on the Welsh in Patagonia, but his health declined rapidly during his career at Swansea and he had to retire in 1979, and by December of that year it was found he was suffering from cancer of the throat and oesophagus. He was taken to the Royal Marsden Hospital in London for treatment, but died there after a few months 20 March 1980. His funeral was held at Henrietta Street Chapel, and his ashes were buried in the family plot in Bwlchnewydd cemetery, Carmarthenshire.

Alun Davies will be remembered as one who had a brilliant academic career, a popular lecturer, but above all as a warm-hearted, agreeable and interesting man who created a lively circle of Welsh scholars in his department at Swansea. It is also strikingly evident, from a letter wishing him well by Field-Marshal Slim, that he had had a notable career as a military officer in Burma during the war.

Author

Prys Morgan

Sources

Western Mail, 2 April 1980

Information from his widow

Personal acquaintance

Additional Links

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