

WILLIAMS, MARY (1883-1977), French scholar

Name: Mary Williams
Date of birth: 1883
Date of death: 1977
Spouse: George Arbour Stephens
Parent: Jane Williams
Parent: John Williams
Gender: Female
Occupation: French scholar
Area of activity: Education; Scholarship and Languages
Author: Beth R. Jenkins

Mary Williams was born in Aberystwyth on 26 June 1887 and grew up in Tabernacle Chapel. She was the first child of John Williams (born 1827), a Welsh Presbyterian minister, and his wife, Jane Williams (born 1845). She had a younger sister, Jennie Williams (later Ruggles-Gates) (born 1884) and a brother, John Williams (born 1889), who died in childhood.

Williams received her early education at Aberystwyth Elementary School. In 1895, at the age of twelve, she left Aberystwyth to continue her education in London at Camden School for Girls. She then attended the prestigious North London Collegiate School for Girls, where she obtained a first-class certificate of the London Matriculation Examination in June 1901.

In 1901 Williams returned to Aberystwyth and won an entrance scholarship for three years at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, which was renewed for a fourth year in 1904. She obtained a Double First in German and French in 1905. Like most university-educated women at this time, Williams spent a short period as a secondary school teacher: she was employed as Junior Form Mistress in French and English at Portsmouth County Secondary School for Girls between 1905 and 1906, and as Senior Mistress in French at Llandeilo County School the following year. In 1907 Williams also obtained a Master's degree for her thesis on the Old German version of Perceval, the Story of the Grail.

Between 1907 and 1910 she held a University of Wales Research Fellowship. This enabled her to study at the Sorbonne and the Collège de France in Paris. In 1910 she received her doctorate from the University of Paris for her thesis in French which examined the relation of the Welsh story of Peredur to the French and German versions. A special grant allowed her to remain in Paris until September 1912, with the exception of four months at the National University of Ireland in Dublin where she studied Old Irish intensively. In 1914 Williams also won a Research Fellowship of the British Federation of University Women.

Williams obtained her first academic appointment in 1912 as Assistant Lecturer in French at the University of Manchester. The following year she was appointed Lecturer in French Language and Literature at King's College London, a post she held until 1918. During the First World War, she also taught French and German at numerous London schools, delivered lectures for students reading for the new degree in Commerce in the University of London, and read with students preparing for the Honours B.Sc. degree in Economics and for the Diploma in Engineering. In 1915, the Academic Council recommended that she be appointed a Reader of the University, but, owing to delay caused by the war, the Readership was not conferred by the Senate until January 1919. In 1920, she was appointed Head of Department alongside her Readership in Romance and Philology. During this time she was also a prominent figure in London-Welsh circles through her presidency of the London Society of Old Aberystwythians and the University of London Welsh Society.

In 1921 Williams returned to Wales following her appointment to the Chair in Modern Languages at the newly-founded University College of Swansea. When German became a separate department in 1932, she occupied the Chair of French until 1948. One of her former pupils and the successor to her post in Swansea, Professor Armel Diverres, wrote that, during her tenure at Swansea, Williams 'presented an austere exterior, but those able to probe soon found that she possessed a strong sense of fun and a genuine warmth of feeling' (*The Times*, 31 August 1977). Throughout her life she was passionately engaged with learning and scholarship. Carelessness in language and thought, whether in French, Welsh or English, are reputed to have caused her great displeasure.

On 4 January 1922, she married cardiologist Dr George Arbour Stephens (1870-1945), who was also a member of the College Council and Chairman of the Swansea Education Committee. Both played an active role in the public and political life of Swansea. Williams was President and founder of the South Wales branch of the Modern Language Association and Vice-President of the Swansea Liberal Association.

In 1948, three years after the death of her husband, Mary Williams moved to the University of Durham where she was appointed Professor of French and Acting Head of Department. She held this post until her retirement in 1952, before moving to London briefly, and then returning to Wales.

In 1934 the French Government awarded her the decorations of Officer d'Académie and Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur in recognition of her services to French language and literature. In her acceptance speech, she recalled how her interest in French culture was ignited by her mother who gave her first French lesson and showed her the resemblances between French and Welsh. Williams stressed the value of bilingualism as a way to foster international peace, and held a working knowledge of Welsh, French, German, Latin, Italian and Provençal.

Mary Williams was interested in the history of Welsh music, enjoyed swimming, and played tennis and golf. She was a benefactor of the National Library of Wales, participated in meetings of the Celtic Congress, was a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Society, and was President of the Folklore Society between 1961 and 1963. An active member of the Swansea University Court, she took a special interest in the hall of residence which the university named in her honour in 1967.

Mary Williams died in Aberystwyth on 17 October 1977 at the age of ninety-four.

Author

Beth R. Jenkins

Sources

The Times, 31 October 1977

NLW Archives: [Mary Williams Papers](#), ARCH/MSS (GB0210)

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Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Mary Williams](#)

Additional Links

Wikidata: [Q28600790](#)

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