DAVIES, NOËLLE (1899 - 1983), littérateur, educationist, and political activist

Name: Noëlle Davies
Date of birth: 1899
Date of death: 1983
Spouse: David James Davies
Parent: Thomas Cornwall Ffrench
Parent: Georgina Ffrench (née Kennedy)
Gender: Female
Occupation: littérateur, educationist, and political activist
Area of activity: Literature and Writing; Education; Politics, Government and Political Movements
Author: Syd Morgan

Noëlle Davies was born at Bushy Park, Mount Talbot, Co. Roscommon on 25 December 1899, the eldest daughter of Thomas Cornwall Ffrench (died 1941), farmer, and his artistic wife Georgina (née Kennedy, died 1941); she had a younger sister, Rosamund (died 1966).

Privately-tutored to the age of thirteen, the Church of Ireland congregant attended the French School, Bray, County Wicklow (1914-1918) then Trinity College Dublin, gaining a double-first in Classics & Modern Languages (1922) and Diploma in Education (1923). Bright and competitive she won many prizes and distinctions, notably the prestigious College title of Scholar in 1920. She held student office in the all-female Elizabethan Society and Dublin University Student Christian Movement. Noëlle lived off-campus at Trinity Hall, the female students residence and quasi-independent academic hub. In Dublin during the revolutionary period (1916-1922) she followed it enthusiastically but took no part. Her Irish nationalism and progressive Christianity permeated all her writings and actions.

Embracing Padraig Pearce's ideas of national education, she lectured at the International People's College in Helsignör, Denmark from January 1924, where she met David James (Dai) Davies (1893-1956). They rapidly developed a deep and loving relationship and symbiotic intellectual partnership. In Dublin from August 1924, with Margaret Cunningham, warden of Trinity Hall, she organised an influential campaign to establish an Irish Folk High-School, intending to marry Dai and both teach there. Frustrated by State support for denominational education, in May 1925, they abandoned the scheme, married, and left for Wales, she for the next thirty years. Noëlle published her political biography of the Danish folk high-school pioneer N. F. S. Grundtvig (1783-1872 as *Education for Life* in 1931. The following year, the couple acquired Pantybeilïau in Gilwern, Monmouthshire, to set up a Welsh Folk High-School. With Noëlle as secretary and practical support from fellow nationalists, they worked to establish it until 1938. Although this failed, Pantybeilïau developed as an influential political salon for Plaid Cymru, particularly a cadre of 'university women' like Noëlle. Ceinwen Thomas (1911-2008) lived as part of their family from 1941. Constantly promoting national education, after returning to Ireland in 1957 Noëlle was active in Daon-scoil na hEireann and funded scholarships in the 1960s and 1970s to enable young Plaid Cymru members to attend on Summer courses in small European nations.

Hugely significant for the new Welsh Nationalist Party founded in 1925, the couple became students at Aberystwyth University; Noëlle for her doctorate, Dai as an undergraduate, in 1925. They joined the Party and in 1930, Dai was appointed to lead its research. In practice, it was a joint appointment. Dai made this clear to Saunders Lewis, 'She could lecture on Economics and almost any other of my subjects, if necessary as we have largely studied them together'. She was co-researcher and co-author of many of 'his' works, starting with *The Economics of Welsh Self-Government* (1931). This seminal publication was derived from Noëlle's 1926 translation of the German Marxist Fritz Croner's *Sturm Über England! Die Schicksalskrise des Britischen Weltreichs*. They jointly authored *Cymoedd Tan Gwmwl* (1938), *Can Wales Afford Self-Government?* (1939) and *Wales, Land of Our Children?* (1941). Through their inter-war research, guided by Saunders Lewis, they not only created the Party's economic policies but broadened its philosophy. Lewis praised both in a letter of 1931, 'You are creating a new and richer nationalism in Wales, a new Welsh mind, which is not narrowly literary and one-sided, but is fully humanistic and in close touch with reality.' It is an apt description of Noëlle. He thought highly enough of her - along with Professor T. H. Parry-Williams - to obtain her nomination of his candidature for the University of Wales parliamentary election in 1931. Authoring *Is Monmouthshire In Wales?* (1943), they both led a long Party campaign against its partition from the country. Importantly, they were able to produce this prodigious research output as they were financially independent due to an investment portfolio gifted to the couple by Noëlle's father on their marriage.

Active in the Welsh Nationalist Party's intellectual renaissance during World War Two and its pivot to target Labour constituencies, Noëlle was co-opted onto its South Wales Committee (1940) and commissioned by the Party to write short biographies of apposite 'national heroes'. Most notable, with over 4,000 printed, was *Connolly of Ireland: Patriot & Socialist* (1946), aimed to 'make nationalists out of the socialists'. Post-War, while Dai and Ceinwen gravitated towards the Welsh Republican Movement, Noëlle remained true to the leadership of Gwynfor Evans and became a more active branch speaker and election campaigner. Chastened by the horrors of World War Two and the advent of atomic weapons, she developed a comprehensive international policy for a Free Wales. Building on Plaid Cymru principles, she published and spoke on the value of small nations to the United Nations, and against Great Power hegemony. Global social justice and international movements of active citizens were integral to her vision. Her principles still inform Plaid Cymru policy to this day. Her championship of people in small nations included practical support for Baltic refugees from Stalinism and defending Breton nationalists against French convictions of collaboration.

When Noëlle returned to Ireland in 1957 after the death of her husband, Gwynfor Evans declared in his address at her farewell dinner, 'No native of Ireland [has] enriched the life of Wales to the extent that [she] has done' and 'we should not allow her graciousness and unassuming nature to blind us to the fact that her mind is one of the most brilliant to concern itself [with Wales].' Back in Dublin, she continued to put her principles into practice as a founding member of the Celtic League (1961), the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement (1964) and other progressive civic movements.

Noëlle was a lifelong transnational literary figure. She spoke six languages. From an early age, she wrote poetry and prose. A country and romantic poet and multilingual translator, adding literary criticism and biography in later life, her works were published in small magazines and newspapers in Great Britain and Ireland, pre- and post-War. Her selected poems, *Middle Country* (1936) was published in Wales and she edited *Pencader Poems* (1952) for Plaid Cymru. She was part of the poetic and literary circle promoted by Pennar Davies during the post-War burgeoning of Anglo-Welsh literature. Describing herself as 'minor poet', her known poems amount to 35,000 words, many of which reference Wales, as do many other writings throughout her long life.

Since her Trinity College days, she exuded an intellectualism and feminism which, while in keeping with the times, practiced an unrelenting self-confidence in her own equality. While the history of women within Welsh nationalism is largely unwritten, Noëlle and many of her Party contemporaries lived a proto-post feminism - acting despite patriarchy. This was forged in Irish women's networks in the face of Free State reaction but had parallels with many University of Wales women graduates: Aberystwyth's Alexandra Hall and Cardiff's Aberdare Hall had the same ethos as Dublin's Trinity Hall. Although receiving a privileged Irish woman's education, Noëlle transcended typicality through liberating new networks on both sides of the Irish Sea. Eschewing the Irish Revolution's violence, she embraced its Romanticism, as evidenced in her literary and political works, finding a more congenial home within Plaid Cymru than its close ally, de Valera's Fianna Fáil.

Noëlle Davies died on 14 February 1983 at Bushy Park, and was buried in the Ffrench family plot in Mount Talbot Cemetery.

Author

Syd Morgan

Sources

Noelle Davies, NLW ex 2600: D.J.D. Some memories of our life together

NLW Archives: Dr Noelle Davies Papers

Helga Mullins, Bushy Park: Noëlle Davies' Personal Papers, Artefacts & Oral Interviews

Roscommon County Library, Davies Collection

Trinity College Dublin, Manuscripts & Archives Research Library

Plaid Cymru, *Welsh Nation*

Transcript of BBC radio programme, 'At Home Today', on Danish Folk-High Schools, 1944

'Personal Reminiscences': recording of interview with Jim Fahy, RTÉ, 1983

Further reading

NUI Galway: Landed Estates Database: Bushy Park

Additional Links

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