

JONES, THOMAS (TOM) (1908 - 1990), trade unionist and Spanish Civil War veteran

Name: Thomas Jones
Date of birth: 1908
Date of death: 1990
Spouse: Rosa Edwards (née Thomas)
Child: Keith Jones
Child: Moira Jones
Parent: William Jones
Parent: Mary Jones (née Clayton)
Gender: Male
Occupation: trade unionist and Spanish Civil War veteran
Area of activity: Politics, Government and Political Movements; Military
Author: Gwyn Jenkins

Although he was a proud Welsh-speaking Welshman, Tom Jones was in fact born in Ashton-in-Makerfield, Lancashire, on 13 October 1908, the son of a Welsh collier and an English kitchen maid. His father, William Jones, was a native of the Mold area of Flintshire who had moved to Lancashire with his Staffordshire-born wife Mary (née Clayton) because of the higher wages paid at the Bryn Hall colliery at that time.

The family moved to Rhosllannerchrugog (Rhos), Denbighshire, in 1915, when Jones was six years old, and he soon settled into that vibrant Welsh-speaking mining village, rich in character and community spirit.

After leaving school in 1922, Jones found work at the Hafod and, subsequently, the Bersham collieries. This was a time of industrial strife culminating in the General Strike of 1926 and miners' lockout, which strongly influenced Jones's political views. He served for a short time in the army before returning to work in Bersham where he became a member of the union lodge committee. Like many of his contemporaries, he was attracted by the Communist Party but its atheism did not sit easily with his Christian beliefs (he later became a chapel deacon), and he remained a committed member of the Labour party for the rest of his life.

During the 1930s, he became active in the Labour movement as chair of the Rhos Labour Party and the Rhos Peace Council. In September 1934 he was one of the rescuers at the Gresford colliery disaster where 266 miners lost their lives and the following year he was involved in a bitter strike at Bersham colliery.

The growth of fascism in Europe and its opposition to socialism and trade unionism led him to support the republican cause in the Spanish Civil War which had been instigated in 1936 by the fascist forces under General Franco against the democratically elected government of the Popular Front. Jones later stated: 'I hated fascism, I hated authoritarianism and I wanted to prevent another world war.' His military background proved useful when he volunteered for the International Brigade which had been formed in 1936 to support the Popular Front. In 1937 he travelled to Spain, via Paris, Perpignan and Marseilles, and soon participated in several bloody encounters against Franco's army which had been reinforced by German and Italian troops and armour. In the decisive battle in the Ebro valley in 1938, he was severely wounded in the right arm and subsequently imprisoned. He was sentenced to death but although reprieved he was subjected to a brutal regime at the prison near Burgos where he shared a cell with the prominent Irish republican, Frank Ryan. His family in Rhos believed him to be dead but in 1941 he was released as a result of a trade agreement between the British government and the Spanish regime under Franco. He was the last British member of the International Brigade to return home. By this time both his parents had died. Because of his exploits in Spain, he was henceforward known locally as 'Twm Sbaen' or 'Tom Spain'.

In 1942 he married a widow from Rhos, Rosa Edwards (née Thomas), whose husband had died of tuberculosis in 1941. They had two children, Keith and Moira, and he treated the two children from his wife's first marriage as his own. In 1945, following a period working in the Monsanto chemicals factory in Cefn Mawr, near Wrexham, Jones was appointed a General Trades Officer and subsequently a District Officer with Region 13 of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) which was based at Shotton on Deeside. In later years he was often referred to as 'Tom Jones, Shotton' because of his association with that town.

The regional secretary of the union in north Wales at that time was **Huw T. Edwards** who had become a prominent figure in Welsh political and public life in general. Although Jones was later to be critical of Edwards, they worked well together despite differing approaches to union work. Whereas Edwards often sought to charm owners with his genial personality, Jones was a straight-talking rigorous negotiator. He believed that employers 'hated the unions but respected their power'.

With Edwards away on numerous public duties, much of the day to day activities of the union were left in Jones's capable hands and, when Edwards retired in 1953, Jones was appointed his successor. Jones believed the TGWU to be a more realistic union than some one-industry unions since, as he argued, it could 'look through many windows'. It did, however, mean that he had to travel throughout north Wales to deal with issues relating to untemperamented types of workers, such as quarrymen, bus drivers and roadmen. He sought to settle disputes through pragmatic negotiation, believing that strike action could often be counter-productive.

Jones, like Edwards, was not on good terms with the right wing general secretary of the TGWU, **Arthur Deakin** (1890-1955), himself a product of north-east Wales trade unionism. He found some of Deakin's successors at the TGWU, notably Frank Cousins and Jack Jones, more amenable, as they shared Jones's socialist outlook.

In 1968 the north and south Wales regions (regions 13 and 4) of the TGWU were amalgamated to form an all-Wales region and Jones became its first secretary. This was a difficult task, as there were rivalries between some north and south officers as well as among members, but Jones commented: 'For too long the hills have divided us - now we must be united.' At the same time, despite some earlier misgivings, he became an enthusiastic promoter of the concept of establishing a Wales TUC, recognising the need for unions to co-operate in the changing industrial and political landscape brought about partly by the devolution of powers from Westminster to Wales. In 1972 Jones and the secretary of the south Wales region of the National Union of Mineworkers, **Dai Francis**, united to propose the establishment of a 'Democratic Trades Union Congress' in Wales to replace the two regional Advisory Committees of the British TUC. Jones and Francis were formidable and highly respected union leaders and, despite some opposition from within Wales, and from the TUC centrally, Wales TUC was eventually established in 1974, a year after Jones's retirement.

Apart from his union activities, Jones was prominent in Labour party circles, acting as chairman of the East Flintshire Divisional Labour Party and being nominated a member of the Welsh Regional Council of Labour. He was also appointed a member of the Welsh Economic Council, created in 1965 as part of the then Labour Government's national planning strategy, and of its successor body, the Welsh Council, set up in 1968.

After retirement, he was appointed a member of the Merseyside and North Wales Electricity Board (Manweb). In 1980 he became the Vice-President of Coleg Harlech and was active as a member of its executive committee until his death. He often lectured there on his experiences in Spain and on the Spanish Civil War in general.

Earlier, Jones had also been one of the directors of the ill-fated independent commercial television company, Wales (West and North) Television Ltd., known universally as 'Teledu Cymru', which broadcasted Welsh language programmes to parts of Wales in 1963. Once described as being 'based more on idealism than on realism', Teledu Cymru proved unviable and became the only ITV contractor to fold in the middle of its franchise. Jones was later critical of the individuals responsible for the running of the company.

Forged by hardships and traumatic experiences, Tom Jones was a determined fighter for the rights and welfare of working men and women. Despite his straight-talking no-nonsense approach to his responsibilities as a trade union officer, he had a good sense of humour and an infectious chuckle. He was awarded several honours during his lifetime, including an OBE in 1962 and a CBE in 1974, and the University of Wales awarded him an honorary MA in 1989. Perhaps more significantly, the Spanish government made him a Knight of the Order of Loyalty in 1974.

Tom Jones died at his home, 2 Blackbrook Avenue, Hawarden, Flintshire, on 21 June 1990, and was cremated at Pentrebychan crematorium, Wrexham, on 26 June 1990.

He is commemorated by the designation of a room called the Tom Jones Room in the regional office of the trade union 'Unite' in Cathedral Road, Cardiff, the former headquarters of the TGWU in Wales. In 2019 a lively anti-fascist festival called the 'Gŵyl Twm Sbaen Festival' was held in Wrexham with the intention of it becoming an annual event.

Author

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Further Reading

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Additional Links

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Published date: 2021-08-04

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APA Citation

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Jenkins, G., (2021). JONES, THOMAS (TOM) (1908 - 1990), trade unionist and Spanish Civil War veteran. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Retrieved 10 Nov 2024, from <https://biography.wales/article/s12-JONE-THO-1908>

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