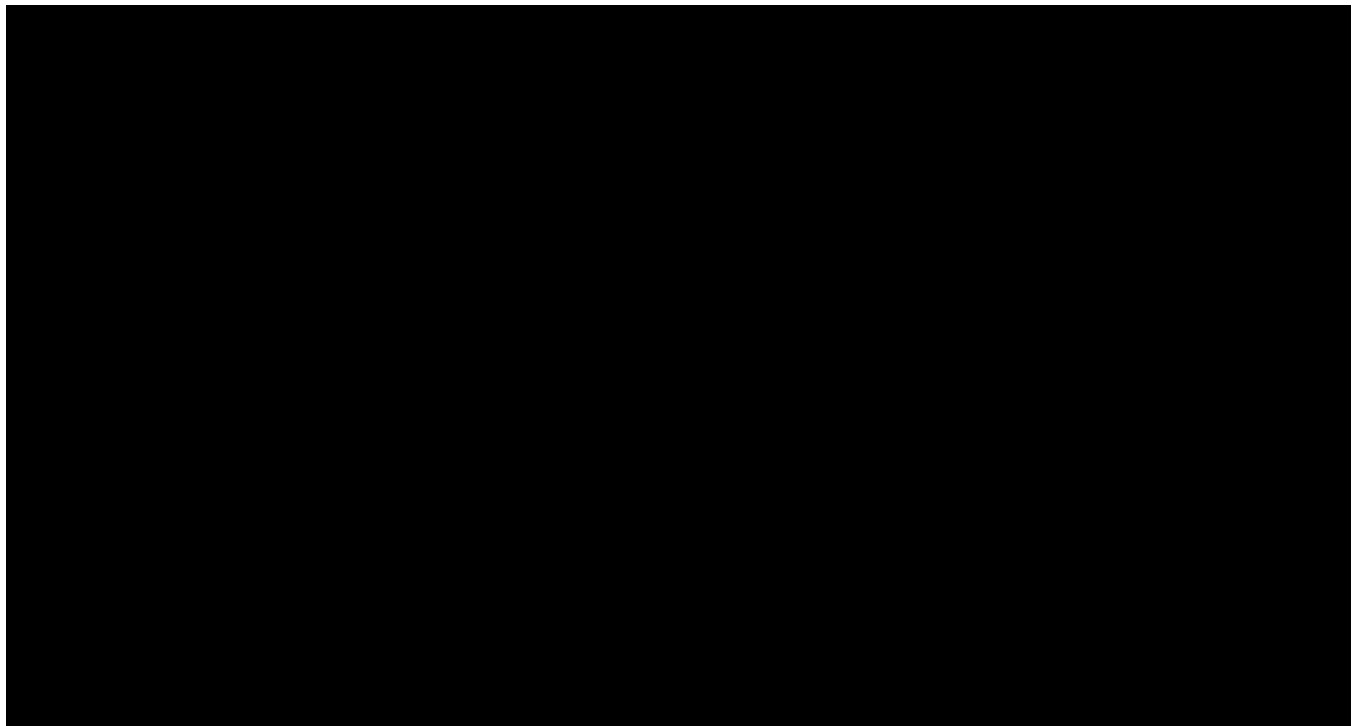


ROBESON, PAUL LEROY (1898 - 1976), actor, singer and political activist



Name: Paul Leroy Robeson

Date of birth: 1898

Date of death: 1976

Spouse: Eslanda Robeson (née Goode)

Child: Paul Leroy Robeson

Parent: William Drew Robeson

Parent: Maria Louisa Robeson (née Bustill)

Gender: Male

Occupation: actor, singer and political activist

Area of activity: Performing Arts; Music; Politics, Government and Political Movements; Activism

Paul Robeson was born on 9 April 1898 in Princeton, New Jersey, U.S.A., the youngest of five children of Reverend William Drew Robeson, a minister from North Carolina of Igbo origin, and his wife Maria Louisa (née Bustill). As a child he was profoundly influenced by the words and example of his father, who had escaped slavery in his teens, as well as the experiences he had of working class solidarity within the community. When Paul was six his mother died in a fire at the family home.

Robeson attended high school in Somerville, New Jersey, where he came into his own singing in choir, engaging in theatrics and excelling in sporting activities, including American football, basketball, baseball and track athletics. In 1915 he won an academic scholarship to Rutgers College, where he joined the American football team, in spite of fierce racialized antipathy which culminated in a brutal hazing leaving him with a broken nose. Though only the third African American to attend Rutgers, Robeson hit the ground running, blazing a wide trail in seemingly disparate activities, chiefly debate groups and oratory, singing, and athletics, all while caring for his father, whom he would lose towards the end of his study. The forces of cultural and legally institutionalised racism arrayed against Robeson in his formative years were not able to suppress his charisma and social adroitness, but rather spurred him to political action in later years.

He attended Columbia Law School, where he met Eslanda 'Essie' Goode, a pathologist in a hospital. They married in 1921, and had one son, Paul Robeson Jr (1927-2014). Robeson joined a law firm, but abandoned his career in law due to racism. His wife encouraged him to take on acting roles, and as his acting career developed she became his manager and public spokesperson. Robeson became known as an actor in 1924 with roles in two Eugene O'Neill plays, *The Emperor Jones* and *All God's Chillun Got Wings*.

Robeson built a reputation in Britain with his powerful performances in the musical *Show Boat* at the Theatre Royal in 1928, including a Royal Command performance at Buckingham Palace. He was the first Black actor to play Othello in London in 1930 and New York in 1943. He played roles in a myriad of films, of varying merit in the eyes of the critics, but all with kudos

for Robeson's performances. He enjoyed effusive praise but would admit to missteps in choosing roles earlier in his career, such as in the case of 'Bosambo' from *Sanders of the River* with its pro-colonial overtones.

Robeson's association with Wales and lifelong bond with the Welsh people began as a result of a chance encounter in the winter of 1929. After performing in Show Boat in London's West End he heard the singing of a Welsh miners' choir on a march from the Rhondda. Moved by their plight and drawn in by their heartfelt recitation, Robeson joined their march, giving impromptu performances of 'Ol' Man River' and spirituals. Having established a camaraderie that transcended racial, national or class divisions, Robeson and the miners were able to raise enough proceeds for the miners to return home on a goods train with food and clothing for their families.

Robeson visited the Rhondda Valley that year, and returned to Wales several years later, revitalizing his bond with the Welsh people, including a concert at the Llandudno Pier Pavilion in 1934. He also spent time in the multi-ethnic community in Cardiff's Butetown, where one of his mother's in-laws, Aaron Mossell (1863-1951), lived. In 1937 he sang to raise funds for the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War, and this elicited from him a solemn declaration that would go on to become his epitaph: 'The artist must take sides. He must elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative.'

Wales was the stage for Robeson's final British film, *The Proud Valley* (1940), in which he played an African-American sailor, David Goliath, a name and figure evoking gentle strength, who makes the voyage from the USA to Cardiff. In a scene reminiscent of Robeson's real life encounter with the Rhondda miners, David overhears a local choir in the mining village of 'Blaendy' singing Mendelssohn's Elijah and joins in by singing a baritone aria. Throughout filming Robeson was integrated into the local community, staying as guest with the families of miners. Robeson later stated: 'There is no place in the world I like more than Wales' (*Western Mail*, 24 February 1949).

Robeson's political activism and vociferous defence of human rights worldwide put him at loggerheads with the forces of oppression in society; the political and cultural institutions of America subjected Robeson to an inordinate amount of personal scrutiny and interrogation, and took overt and discreet action to curtail his liberty and his influence. Having previously visited and been warmly welcomed in Russia under Stalin, and after witnessing the rising Fascist sentiment in Germany, Robeson became something of a persona non grata within his native country. He made several declarations of support for the Socialist cause and denunciations of Fascism, however his son noted his private ambivalence about the inherent contradictions of Stalinist Russia. During the McCarthyite era efforts to 'contain' him included retroactively removing mention of his participating in American college football and being an All-American, confiscating his passport, and making it increasingly difficult to procure any of Robeson's artistic works domestically.

In 1954-5, with the encouragement of the politician [Aneurin Bevan](#), Robeson recorded a number of radio concerts for listeners in Wales. In October 1957 he used the transatlantic telephone cable from New York to address an audience of over 2,000 at the Miners' Eisteddfod in Porthcawl's Grand Pavilion, singing the spiritual 'Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?' and other songs to which the Treorchy Male Voice Choir responded with a rendition of 'Y Delyn Aur'.

In 1958, Robeson had his passport restored after an eight year period following what was ultimately deemed a violation of his constitutionally protected liberty, thanks in part to petitioning of south Wales miners. No longer confined to the bounds of the United States he took full advantage of his restored liberty. While on a national tour of the UK that year, including concerts in Porthcawl, Cardiff and Swansea, he made a point of attending the National Eisteddfod in Ebbw Vale, where he met Aneurin Bevan and was presented with a hymn book by [T. H. Parry-Williams](#) and proclaimed: 'You have shaped my life - I have learnt a lot from you. I am part of the working class. Of all the films I have made the one I will preserve is The Proud Valley.'

Robeson's activities throughout this period were accompanied by a concomitant deterioration of his physical and mental health, aggravated by overt hostility from Western governments and also what his son Paul Robeson Jr. suspected to be covert attempts by intelligence services to neutralize his father. His wife Essie died in December 1965 and this period would mark his gradual retiring from public life as he transitioned to living with first his son in New York, then his sister in Philadelphia.

Paul Robeson died due to complications of a stroke on 23 January 1976 in Philadelphia. He would go on to lie in state in Harlem before being interred in his final resting place of Ferncliffe Cemetery, Hartsdale, New York. Robeson entered the world in inauspicious circumstances during great social and political upheaval, but his charisma, humanity, erudition, and mellifluous voice granted him rare agency to shape the course of the twentieth century.

An exhibition entitled 'Let Robeson Sing' travelled around Wales in 2001, and in the same year the Welsh rock band Manic Street Preachers released the song 'Let Robeson Sing'. In 2010, Susan Robeson launched a project at Swansea University, supported by the Welsh Assembly, to create an online learning resource in her grandfather's memory.

Author

Jamie Griffiths

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Further reading

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Wikipedia Article: [Paul Robeson](#)

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