

ROBERTS, GWEN REES (Pi Teii) (1916 - 2002), missionary and teacher

Name: Gwen Rees Roberts
Date of birth: 1916
Date of death: 2002
Parent: Hugh Griffith Roberts
Parent: Gwen Rees Roberts (née Evans)
Gender: Female
Occupation: missionary and teacher
Area of activity: Religion; Education
Author: Ffion Mair Jones

Gwen Rees Roberts was born on 2 March 1916 in Morfa Nefyn, Llŷn, the daughter of Hugh Griffith Roberts (died c.1940) and his wife Gwen Rees Roberts. Her mother died aged 31 within a few days of her birth, and approximately three years later, her father remarried a widow whose daughter, Emily, was eight years older than Gwen. The family was further expanded by the birth of a son, Hugh Wilson Roberts (died 1940), to Gwen's father and stepmother. Following his second marriage, Hugh Griffith and the family moved to Cricieth, and it was here and in nearby Porthmadog that Gwen attended primary school before undertaking her secondary education at Pwllheli. It was also in Cricieth that she came into contact with the Children's Special Service Mission, which used to meet for a month every summer on the beach there. The young Gwen was influenced by this group, and she became aware when she was fifteen years old through her contact with them of God's call to serve overseas.

Her awareness of this calling continued throughout her time at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, from 1935, where she studied Zoology and Geography before graduating with honors in Botany in 1938 and gaining teaching qualifications in 1939. Following this, she turned her sights towards realizing her religious calling. She was accepted by the Foreign Mission of the Presbyterian Church of Wales and a year of training was arranged for her at Carey Hall Missionary Training College for Women, Selly Oak, Birmingham. The prospect was that she would go on to work as a missionary in India shortly after finishing at Carey Hall, but due to the outbreak of the Second World War, Gwen had to wait four years before her departure. She spent this period as a biology teacher at Porthmadog Grammar School, lodging with her elderly step-aunt in Cricieth. She was also involved in the activities of the Brownie Pack at the town; running a Sunday school; a Bible Class; and an English-language discussion group for evacuee children from Liverpool. These pursuits all mitigated the frustration of the wait and were good experience for the future, she later said. In November 1944, she embarked on the journey from Liverpool to Bombay (Mumbai) to begin a period of over twenty-three years as a missionary in the Mizoram area (earlier the Lushai Hills) in north-east India.

Gwen Rees Roberts sailed on *The Stirling Castle* as part of a convoy of ships on what was a memorable journey. Despite the dangers of a wartime voyage, the Welsh among the missionaries kept up their spirits by walking the decks at night singing Welsh hymns. Gwen made lifelong friends, including Marian Prichard, who traveled to work as a senior nurse at the Shillong hospital in the Khasi Hills, and [Revd Meirion Lloyd](#) who accompanied Gwen on the journey onwards through the jungle and along poor roads to Aizawl. They were to settle there, Gwen sharing a bungalow with Katie Hughes (Pi Zaii; 1889-1963), who became a firm friend and supporter. She also got to know the doctor Gwyneth Parul Roberts, who performed surgery to remove her appendix six months after her arrival.

The work before her was extremely varied and challenging. Her main duty was to succeed Katie Hughes as headteacher of the Welsh Mission Girls' School (later known as the Presbyterian Church Girls' School and, in honour of Gwen, as Pi Teii's School), but she also taught part-time subjects in which she had specialized at university, working at the first secondary school in the area; in a 'night College'; at the Church's Teacher Training School; at the Theological College, where she taught English and the historical geography of Palestine; and trained village Sunday school teachers during the summer holidays. Throughout her time in Aizawl, she displayed ingenuity and determination in order to overcome difficulties. Many of these were of a practical kind linked to a lack of elementary resources such as appropriate classrooms for teaching domestic science; a shortage of supply in the water tank during the dry season; and the lack of roads for travel. In the latter case, she contributed to solving the problem by leading the whole school out to dig alongside the cart roads in order to widen them. She was also occupied in looking after the spiritual and religious welfare of her pupils, and would pray individually with some of the girls, an experience she described as 'special'. More typical of direct missionary work, she would travel out to villages near and far with a group of other missionaries (including a nurse, a conciliator, and a teacher), where they would offer help to the sick, listen to young children singing, discuss hygiene practices with the communities, and hold religious services.

As an educator, Gwen Rees Roberts had a vision regarding education for women that conformed with the objectives of the

Mission. Contrary to the demand of the local inhabitants for lessons in academic subjects for their daughters, she believed in providing as broad a curriculum as possible, emphasizing the learning of skills such as weaving or domestic science, together with cultural subjects, an approach to learning that would 'be doing more for the future women and mothers of Lushai' than anything else that could be offered. One of the cornerstones of this approach was 'The Project Method', which combined practical aspects with work in the field of language, business, and academic disciplines, for example by setting the girls the task of making doormats ('The Cotton Project'). To support this range of teaching and learning methods, Gwen Rees Roberts wrote textbooks at the request of various committees in Mizoram: she produced material in the field of Hygiene, General Science, and for training Sunday school teachers (through a pamphlet on 'How to tell stories to children'). The task that gave her most pleasure, however, was a request from the Regional Theological Literature Committee to write a book about the geography and history of Israel and Jordan; her personal experience of traveling to Israel, Jordan, and Egypt in 1962 proved critical in the realization of this work. The books were all produced in the Mizo language. Although Gwen's knowledge of it was very limited when she arrived in Aizawl, and she wrote her first commission in English, she came to speak, read, understand, and even write the language very satisfactorily, and managed to compile the later books in the native language, receiving help to correct them before they were printed. The willingness to learn Mizo was vital to her as a matter of common courtesy, and she held the same attitude towards other languages encountered through her missionary visits to several areas in north-east India - Bengali, Khasi, and Hindi, the latter adopted as the official language of the Union of India in 1949. In this linguistic melting pot, she regarded her Welsh-English bilingualism as a great advantage.

Gwen Rees Roberts's years in Mizoram ended under the cloud of the Mizo National Front uprising against the Government of India, which had been brewing since the end of 1965. In the first week of the insurrection, in March 1966, the Girls' School was taken over by the Front, and the flight of Government Airforce jets over Mizoram, causing destruction to buildings, shops, and homes, intensified the dangers for the residents. Gwen and others from among the missionaries were led through the jungle to safety by a former pupil of hers, reaching the village of Durtlang. She remained in Aizawl for another two years, living under a military government and subject to freedom-restricting curfews. However, at the beginning of January 1968, instructions came for all expatriates to leave the country, and the work of the Mission throughout north-east India was brought to an end. Gwen was allowed to stay until a furlough allocated to her began on 19 February, but she was informed that she would not be able to return to continue her work in the area.

After her departure, Gwen Rees Roberts worked as a liaison officer for the Mission Board of the Presbyterian Church of Wales from 1968 to 1985, with her home and office situated at Coleg y Bala. Her urge to see the world continued and she traveled in Britain and Western Europe during the 1970s and 1980s. She also returned three times to Mizoram: in 1974, 1985, and 1994. The welcome she received on the first visit was overwhelming: 'in every village I was mobbed by people wanting to shake hands and speak to me', she said - an arresting image considering how small of stature she was. Her commitment to the local community in Bala equaled that shown in Mizoram: the first woman to hold the position of deacon at Capel Tegid, she presented talks there and at the town's English Methodist Chapel; at the home for the elderly, Bronygraig; to the Rotary Club; and to the British Heart Foundation. Pamphlets which she created during the 1960s for Welsh Sunday schools, introducing their Mizoram equivalents and one of her most beloved heroines, 'Pi Zaii' (Katie Hughes, were no doubt received with enthusiasm by the children of the churches. Their awareness of their fellow Christians in a country completely unknown to them would have been further deepened by the visit of the Mizo Gospel Choir, which was welcomed to Wales by Gwen in May and June 1984.

Gwen Rees Roberts died on 3 January 2002. One mourner who attended her funeral service at Capel Tegid, Bala, took note of the numbers present, over four hundred, all of whom Gwen would have described as her 'family'; and of equivalent 'family' members in India, who held a service at the same time, ensuring that this was an 'international farewell' to one who was a heroine on two continents. Gwen was further commemorated at an event in Capel Mawr, Denbigh, on 2 November 2002.

Author

Ffion Mair Jones

Sources

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NLW Archives: [Gwen Rees Roberts Papers](#), 1, 2, 3/1, 3/2

Images

[photograph of Gwen Rees Roberts with local people at Mizoram](#)

Additional Links

NLW Archives: [CMA: Calvinistic Methodist Archive/Missions/Personal files/Miss Gwen Rees Roberts](#)

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