

## ELLIS, MARY ELIZABETH (Mrs Mary Gwilym Davies) (1881 - 1974), educationalist and peace campaigner

**Name:** Mary Elizabeth (Mrs Mary Gwilym Davies) Ellis  
**Date of birth:** 1881  
**Date of death:** 1974  
**Spouse:** Gwilym Davies  
**Parent:** Jane Ellis (née Roberts)  
**Parent:** Edward Robert Ellis  
**Gender:** Female  
**Occupation:** educationalist and peace campaigner  
**Area of activity:** Education; Activism  
**Author:** Siân Rhiannon Williams

Mary Ellis was born on 8 February 1881 in Dolgellau, the daughter of Jane Ellis (née Roberts, 1850-1938) and her husband, Edward Robert Ellis (1851-1890). Two siblings, Ellin (or Ellen) Jane (1875-1882) and Robert Iorwerth (1878-1879) died in infancy, so Mary was raised as the eldest of three. She had a younger sister, Jane (1886-1977) and a brother, Griffith (b. 1888).

At the time of her birth her parents ran an ironmonger's and toy shop at 'Birmingham House' at the upper end of the town. Mary's father died when she was nine years old and the family moved to live next door to her grandmother at Bro Aran, Upper Smithfield Street where her mother kept apartments. By 1911, her mother and sister had settled at Cader Villa, or Dolygader, which later became Mary's permanent home.

Mary was educated at Dr Williams' School where she excelled academically and developed her talent as a singer. The school remained important in her life; so much so that when the headship became vacant in 1924 she considered making an application. She remained in contact with the school during the period of office of Constance Nightingale (1892-1967), the headmistress appointed at the time, a pacifist who became her friend.

Mary was influenced by her Nonconformist and Liberal family background. Her mother, sister of the missionary and linguist, Reverend Hugh Roberts (1841-1916), was a faithful member of Salem (CM) chapel, where Mary also worshipped while in Dolgellau. Her father's family were also Welsh Presbyterians, and some were acquainted with leading members of the denomination.

**Sir Ellis Jones Griffith** (1860-1926), barrister and MP for Anglesey between 1895 and 1918, was Mary's older cousin, her father's nephew. Between 1892 and 1914, she spent several extended periods living with Ellis and his wife, the singer and Liberal Mary Owen Ellis Griffith (1862-1941), in London, Anglesey and elsewhere. Through this relationship she became acquainted with the London Welsh social circle and had the opportunity to meet prominent Liberals of the time, to visit the House of Commons and attend Charing Cross chapel.

As a young woman Mary suffered several periods of illness. During her third year at the University College of Wales Aberystwyth she was advised to abandon her degree course for health reasons, and when she resumed her studies she attended the University College of North Wales Bangor. She graduated in the Humanities in 1904, having specialised in English and Latin, and then completed a one-year teacher training course. Mary played a prominent part in student activities in both colleges and regularly performed as a soloist.

She taught at Whalley Grange High School, Manchester for eighteen months before leaving to tutor Ellis Griffith's son, Arundel (1907-09). She then worked as a tutor in English at the École Normale Supérieure, Sèvres, a higher education institution for women on the outskirts of Paris. She returned from the continent in 1911 and taught French for a year at the Colston School for Girls, Bristol but soon suffered another period of illness.

On the eve of the First World War, Mary was appointed an inspector in the Welsh Department of the Board of Education where she joined Menai Rowlands (1873-1951), the first woman appointed to the inspectorate in Wales. Both were responsible for the education of girls. Her appointment was conditional upon gaining a qualification in Domestic Economy, so she subsequently completed a three-month course at Hampstead College, London.

During thirty active years in the inspectorate (1914-43) Mary Ellis became well known in Wales as an authority on girls' education. In the early years she worked in south Wales and was based in Penarth, but after 1927 she became responsible for counties in north Wales, and returned to live in Dolgellau, although retaining responsibility for certain areas in the south.

By 1919, Mary and Menai were joint secretaries of the Women's Section of the Welsh School of Social Service (WSSS). Mary became a leading figure in that organisation's committees and conferences and initiated several developments in the 1920s. She was also involved in the attempt to establish a Union of Welsh Women in 1922 with the aim of uniting the women of south and north Wales to promote progressive social policies.

In the same year, **Reverend Gwilym Davies** (1879-1955), director of the WSSS, also took on the directorship of the recently established Welsh League of Nations Union. Mary worked closely with him to gain the support of the women of Wales for the plan to raise a petition calling upon the women of America to pressurise their government to join the League. She was a key figure in the initial arrangements and became a member of the executive committee established in May 1923 and also of the official delegation to the United States together with **Annie Hughes Griffiths** and **Elined Prys** (later Kotschnig).

Mary Ellis's main contribution to the initiative was her role as coordinator between women in Wales and the leaders of the American women's and peace movements. During the summer of 1923 she corresponded with them, and, in late December, travelled to New York. There she gained the support of the leaders of the country's main women's movements, and, in a short period of time, ensured a suitable reception for the delegation and petition in New York and Washington in February 1924. In America it was said that Mary had charmed women everywhere, winning them over to the cause with her gentle modesty. In Wales she was praised for her bravery and service to her country as 'ambassadors for Wales'.

While in the United States Mary also visited schools and colleges known for their progressive teaching methods, but was accused by the Board of Education of misusing the visit and breaching the professional Code of Conduct by allowing her name to appear in the press in conjunction with a 'political' cause. She avoided being disciplined but received an official warning for the future. Although Mary continued to play an active part in the WSSS and, in the 1930s, became a member of the Women's Committee of the Welsh League of Nations Union, the apex of her public activism was her contribution to the Women's Peace Petition venture.

In January 1942, she married Gwilym Davies at Bethel chapel, Tywyn and was given special permission to do so by the Board of Education due to the wartime circumstances. She was now 61 years old, and retired from the inspectorate the following year. At that time, tributes from colleagues praised her 'zeal for women's rights' and noted the influence that 'Cymru Fydd's mission' had had on her career. Wales and the Welsh language were extremely important to her. As an inspector she organised courses for teachers on Welsh literature and language, and during the 1920s she was a member of Cylch Dewi, a nationalist circle in Cardiff.

Towards the end of the war Mary moved to Aberystwyth to be with Gwilym, settling at 8 Marine Terrace. She continued to support and assist him with his work to further international cooperation and global citizenship education. They spent ten years together prior to Gwilym's death in 1955. Following the loss of her husband, Mary set about safeguarding the future of the 'Peace Message of the Youth of Wales' which Gwilym had founded in 1922, by collaborating with Urdd Gobaith Cymru, the Welsh League of Youth. For many years, she would help prepare the annual pamphlet and correspond with recipients of the message from around the world.

In her final years, Mary ensured that the achievements of Ellis Jones Griffith and Gwilym Davies, two people who had been central to her life, would be remembered. She contributed to a radio programme on Ellis' life and provided **T. I. Ellis** with material for a biography (1969). She initiated the small volume published as a tribute to Gwilym, edited by Ieuan Gwynedd Jones (1972). She also organised her own papers and presented them to the National Library of Wales.

Mary died in Aberystwyth on 15 February 1974 aged 93 and was buried in Llanelltyd churchyard. She donated significant sums of money in her will to support several national organisations, including the National Library of Wales, Urdd Gobaith Cymru's International Section (to ensure the future of the youth peace message) and Coleg Harlech, to fund a student grant bearing her name.

Author

Dr Siân Rhiannon Williams

Sources

NLW Archives: Uncatalogued material, Cell 3/7/1, Donated by Mrs Gwilym Davies, Aberystwyth, 1972021, October 1971/ August 1972/ February 1973

NLW Archives: T.I. Ellis a Mari Ellis Papers, [Welsh League of Nations Union, A357-361](#); [Ellis Griffith Biography \(1969\), F43-54](#)

NLW Archives: Sir Ellis Jones Ellis-Griffith 1873-1954 Papers, [206-8](#)

NLW Archives: Gwilym Davies, 1902-55 Papers, [GB0210 Welsh School of Social Service 1911-40, III/3](#)

The National Archives: Department of Education and Science, [ED 92/10, Annual Reports by HMI Miss M Rowlands on Domestic Subjects and subsequent correspondence 1912-13, 1913-14, 1914-15](#)

The National Archives: Department of Education and Science, [ED92/12, Annual Reports by HMI Miss M Rowlands on Domestic Subjects and subsequent correspondence 1916-17, 1918-23; South Wales Report HMI Miss M Ellis, 1916-17](#)

The National Archives: Department of Education and Science, [ED 270/32, Inspectors' Qualifications and the subjects in which they have examined with salary details, 1914-39](#)

The National Archives: Department of Education and Science, [ED270/56, Directories of Education in Wales: Inspection Arrangements and Lists of Local Education Authorities, List 6 1919-1938](#)

The National Archives: Department of Education and Science, [ED270/67, Board of Education List showing Inspectors' Qualifications 1939](#)

The National Archives: Department of Education and Science, [ED270/68, Education in Wales: List of Inspectors and Inspection Arrangements. List 6 1941](#)

Welsh Government Library and Archives: Education in Wales Directory, List 6 (1927-38)

Aberystwyth University Archives: Cylch Dewi Membership List, [Cylch Dewi Archive](#), GB 982 CD

[University College of Wales Magazine](#), 1901-02

[The magazine of the University College of North Wales](#) 1903-05

['The Women of Wales To the Women of America', The Woman Citizen](#), 23 February 1924, pp. 13, 30

T. I. Ellis, *Ellis Jones Griffith* (Llandybie 1969)

Ieuan Gwynedd Jones (ed.), *Gwilym Davies, 1879-1955 a tribute* (Llandysul 1972)

D. Ben Rees (ed.), *Llestri gras a gobaith: Cymry a'r cenhadon yn India* (Lerpwl 2001)

Further reading

Siân Rhiannon Williams,"Llysghenhades Dros Gymru" ("Ambassadress for Wales"): Mary Ellis ac Apêl Heddwch Menywod Cymru at Fenywod America, 1923-4', *The Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, Vol. 30, 2024, pp.69-88

Jenny Mathers and Mererid Hopwood (eds.), *The Appeal 1923-24* (Talybont 2024)

[The Welsh Women's Peace Petition](#), National Library of Wales

Additional Links

Wikidata: [Q124250956](#)

**Published date:** 2024-12-04

**Article Copyright:** <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/>

PDF

Print

Cite

The Dictionary of Welsh Biography is provided by The National Library of Wales and the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies. It is free to use and does not receive grant support. A donation would help us maintain and improve the site so that we can continue to acknowledge Welsh men and women who have made notable contributions to life in Wales and beyond.

Find out more on our [sponsorship page](#).

Donate

APA Citation

X

Williams, S. R., (2024). ELLIS, MARY ELIZABETH (Mrs Mary Gwilym Davies) (1881 - 1974), educationalist and peace campaigner. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Retrieved 1 Dec 2025, from <https://biography.wales/article/s15-DAVI-ELI-1942>

Copy to Clipboard

LGC  
NLW

LLYFRGEL  
THE NATION



Nodiwr gan  
Llywodraeth Cymru  
Sponsored by  
Welsh Government