

DAVIES, Sir WILLIAM (LLEWELYN) (1887 - 1952), librarian

Name: William (Llewelyn) Davies
Date of birth: 1887
Date of death: 1952
Spouse: Gwen Davies (née Llewelyn)
Parent: Jane Davies (née Evans)
Parent: William Davies
Gender: Male
Occupation: librarian
Area of activity: Education; History and Culture; Literature and Writing; Scholarship and Languages
Author: Gildas Tibbott

Born at Plas Gwyn Schoolhouse, near Pwllheli, Caernarfonshire, 11 October 1887, the third child and younger son of William Davies and his wife Jane (Evans), both natives of Llanafan, Cardiganshire. His father, formerly the Earl of Lisburne's gamekeeper, was then similarly employed at Broom Hall, near Pwllheli. When he was five his father entered the service of Sir Osmond Williams, Castell Deudraeth, and the family moved to Minffordd, Penrhyndeudraeth. He was educated at Porthmadog County School 1900-03 and at Penrhyndeudraeth pupil-teacher centre, where he was a pupil-teacher, 1903-06 before entering the University College of Wales, graduating B.A. (1909) with honours in Welsh and M.A. (1912) by virtue of a dissertation on 'Phylipiaid Arduwyl', a group of sixteenth and seventeenth century Arduwyl poets. On leaving college he held various teaching appointments in elementary, secondary, and evening schools in north and south Wales and as a part-time lecturer at the University College, Cardiff. During World War I he served in the Royal Garrison Artillery and later as a commissioned officer in the Army Education Service.

In September 1919 Davies entered upon his life-work when he was appointed first assistant librarian under Sir John Ballinger at the young National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth. When Ballinger retired in 1930 Davies succeeded him as chief librarian, a position which he held until his death. The task which faced him was a formidable one - to continue and develop the work, so successfully begun, of building up in Wales a national library which would rank among the great libraries of the world. His experience as Ballinger's deputy, his interest in Welsh history and literature, his bilingualism, his zeal and enthusiasm, together served him in good stead and his efforts were crowned with outstanding success.

Much of that success was achieved in connection with his collection and preservation of manuscripts and records. He was convinced from the outset that one of the National Library's most important functions was to collect and preserve the mass of manuscripts and documentary material relating to Wales which was scattered (often in a state of neglect) throughout the Principality and further afield - the raw material needed by present and future historians. He laboured indefatigably towards this end, his task being facilitated by the changing economic conditions which brought about the disintegration of large estates and the vacating of old country houses. The list of individual owners, institutions, and official bodies that responded to his diplomatic persuasion to transfer their records to the Library, either absolutely or on permanent loan, is a notable one. Of the approximately 3,500,000 documents housed in the Library when Davies died all but 200,000 or so were acquired during his period of administration. Extensive collecting and effective preservation, however, were not enough; adequate steps had to be taken to make the records available to researchers without undue delay. By substituting the production of handy, typewritten, brief-entry schedules and handlists for that of printed detailed calendars, and by subsequently introducing the compilation of subject-indexes to their contents, he greatly accelerated the rate at which individual collections were made available.

Since his concern for the preservation of records arose not from selfish motives but from a realisation of their historical value, he was always anxious to persuade other bodies to take steps to preserve records in their custody. He urged the various county councils of Wales to establish county records committees and gave to municipal, ecclesiastical, and other bodies and to individuals both valuable advice and practical assistance. He kept the Library in close touch with other bodies with similar aims through his membership of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, the Society of Antiquaries, the executive committee of the Council for the Preservation of Business Archives, and the British Records Association, of which he was a vice-president representing the interest of Wales.

The presentation of records was only one of several channels through which Davies rendered conspicuous service to Wales and its culture. As the National Library's principal administrative officer he was responsible for organising the lending of books to adult study classes throughout Wales, for operating in eleven Welsh counties the Regional Libraries Scheme for Wales and Monmouthshire, and for the selection, acquisition, and distribution of books for patients in the sanatoria of Wales. During World War II he established a national committee to provide Welsh books for men and women serving in the forces. He missed no opportunity, through lectures, broadcast talks, and publications, of bringing the Library into closer contact with the Welsh people. In 1937 he published *The National Library of Wales: A Survey of its History, its Contents, and its Activities*, whilst two years later he launched the publication of *The National Library of Wales Journal*, which he continued to edit for fourteen years. For varying periods he was honorary editor of the journals of the Welsh Bibliographical Society, the Cardiganshire Antiquarian Society, and the Merioneth Historical and Record Society; he was also associate-editor of *Y Bywgraffiadur Cymreig* and *DWB*. A member of numerous academic and cultural bodies, he was a leading spirit in every organisation promoting the intellectual life of the Principality. Endowed with exceptional organising ability, he was a hard and conscientious worker who was never satisfied with work of an inferior standard.

His manifold services were duly recognised by the conferment upon him of a knighthood in 1944 and of the degree of LL.D., *honoris causa*, by the University of Wales in 1951. In the year of his death he was High Sheriff of Merioneth.

Davies married in 1914 Gwen, daughter of Dewi Llewelyn, grocer and baker, Pontypridd, and afterwards adopted the additional name of Llewelyn. There was one daughter of the marriage.

He died at Sherborne House, Aberystwyth, 11 November 1952, after and a long and painful illness. After cremation his ashes were scattered in the grounds of the great Library which he loved and served so well.

Author

Gildas Tibbott, (1900 - 1979)

Sources

[*The Times*, 12 November 1952

Journal of the Welsh Bibliographical Society, 7 (1953)

The Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, 1953

private information]

personal knowledge

Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [William Llewelyn Davies](#)

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