

FARR, HARRY (1874 - 1968), librarian

Name: Harry Farr

Date of birth: 1874

Date of death: 1968

Spouse: Elsie Olive Farr (née Davies)

Parent: Martha Rebecca Farr (née Harris)

Parent: William Farr

Gender: Male

Occupation: librarian

Area of activity: History and Culture; Literature and Writing; Scholarship and Languages

Author: Walter Thomas Morgan

Born Cardiff, 11 June 1874, son of William Farr, a native of Salisbury, and Martha Rebecca (Harris), his wife. His mother died in December 1875, after giving birth to twin sons who also died in the same month. It appears that William Farr enrolled after the death of his wife as a student in the Cardiff Science and Art School. The *Annual Report* for 1880-81 records that he was one of two senior students who had been appointed pupil teachers, and in the following session he was promoted to be art master. In the meantime his young son, Harry, was sent to Salisbury to be educated. He joined the staff of the Cardiff Free Library, as it was then called, in 1891, was appointed Assistant in charge of the Reference Department in 1896 and Deputy Librarian in 1901. In 1908 he succeeded as Chief Librarian [John Ballinger](#) who left to become the first Librarian of the National Library of Wales. During his 32 years' tenure of office Farr continued and extended the enlightened policies of his predecessor. Two new branch libraries were built at Gabalfa (1928) and Ely (1933), six older branches were extended and children's halls provided where such had not previously existed; public lending centres were provided in schools at Ely, Llanishen, Llandaff North and Rumney to serve areas which boundary changes had brought within the city's jurisdiction. In 1925 a bindery was established at the Central Library for the binding of periodicals and the repair and restoration of rare books and manuscripts. By 1940 the lending department of the Central Library had been rearranged and reorganised. When the collections of the Cardiff Museum, previously housed on the top floor of the Central Library were transferred to the National Museum of Wales, it was decided in 1923 to make use of the vacant space to establish a Research Room for the use of students and others wishing to consult the Library's manuscripts and rare books. The provision of these research facilities together with the construction of a fire-proof strongroom led the Master of the Rolls to recognise the Cardiff Central Library in 1931 as a repository for historical records. At the same time the policy of allocating part of the annual book fund for purchasing manuscripts, deeds, documents, prints and early printed books was vigorously pursued. N.R. Ker in his *Medieval MSS in British Libraries* (1992) lists 32 valuable MSS purchased by the Cardiff Library, 1920-36. In the acquisition of MSS and other expensive items Farr was greatly helped by benefactors who either donated or provided the funds to purchase valuable collections, for example, the famous Havod collection of MSS, the cost of the purchase of which was defrayed by Mr. Edgar Evans of Ely in 1918.

To Farr and his staff belongs the credit for organising the Welsh Book Festivals which were held each year from 1930 to 1939 in the City Hall Cardiff, usually in the weeks before and after St. David's Day. The productions of Welsh book publishers were put on display, books, prints and manuscripts from the Cardiff Library Welsh collections were exhibited, as well as valuable items lent by other libraries and private collectors. Each year a different aspect of Welsh life and letters was taken as a theme and catalogues were produced which served to bring to the attention of a wide public the richness of the Welsh cultural heritage.

A library service to hospitals in the city was commenced in 1931. In 1932 the Regional Library Scheme for Wales was inaugurated and thanks to Farr's efforts Cardiff was selected as the Regional Centre for Glamorganshire and Monmouthshire. Mention should also be made of the public lectures which he organised at the Cardiff Central Library and of the many book exhibitions he arranged, apart from the Welsh Book Festival already mentioned, in particular the Bible Exhibition in 1911, the Exhibition of Early Printed Books in 1913 and the Exhibition of Shakespeariana in 1923, all of which were accompanied by valuable catalogues.

Farr was a well-known figure in the Library world. He became an F.L.A. in 1910 and served on the Library Association Council. In the course of his career he wrote a number of articles and pamphlets on different aspects of librarianship including *Libraries in Rural Districts* (1909) and *Library Work with Children* (1910). He was recognised as a bibliographer of repute and an acknowledged authority on incunabula and early printed books, the editions of Shakespeare and the productions of private presses. He possessed a keen and lively mind and was not afraid to experiment. He even devised a decimal classification of his own, which was in use in the Library until the development of centralised cataloguing led to it being abandoned.

When Farr retired in 1940 the Cardiff City Library Service was recognised as one of the finest in the country and the Central Library as one of the great municipal libraries of Great Britain. But it was not only a municipal library. Its reference department, open till 9 o'clock in the evening, was used by readers beyond the confines of the city. Its Welsh collections served the needs of students throughout Wales.

Harry Farr married in 1913 Elsie Olive Davies, a member of his staff, who predeceased him. They had five children, three sons and two daughters. He died 19 January 1968.

Author

Walter Thomas Morgan, (1912 - 1990)

Sources

Who's who in Wales, (1921)

Journal of the Welsh Bibliographical Society, 10, 2

50th Anniversary Celebration of the Opening of the Central Library. A Brief Survey of the Library Movement in Cardiff (Cardiff 1932), 1932

typescript kindly lent by G.A.C. Dart, Farr's successor as chief librarian, of his 'The history of the Cardiff libraries, 1860-1974', staff records

Additional Links

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