

WILLANS, JOHN BANCROFT (1881 - 1957), country landowner, antiquarian and philanthropist

Name: John Bancroft Willans

Date of birth: 1881

Date of death: 1957

Parent: Mary Louisa Willans (née Nicholson)

Parent: John William Willans

Gender: Male

Occupation: country landowner, antiquarian and philanthropist

Area of activity: History and Culture; Land Ownership; Philanthropy

Author: Herbert Noel Jerman

of Dolforgan, Kerry, Montgomeryshire, J.P., F.S.A.; born 27 May 1881 in Liverpool, only child of John William Willans (1843 - 1895), chief engineer of Liverpool Overhead Railway, and of Mary Louisa née Nicholson (1847 - 1911), grandson of Benjamin Willans (1816 - 1895) of Blaina, Monmouth. He was educated partly by private tutors, including Sir Leonard Woolley, and partly at Haileybury. He lived in Kerry from 1894 onwards, after his father had bought the Dolforgan estate from the Waltons. He served in World War I on non-combatant duties mainly in Italy, and on his return he devoted himself to public service in Montgomeryshire. He was High Sheriff of Montgomeryshire, 1917, J.P. from 1919, County alderman of Montgomeryshire, 1904-1907 and 1910-1919, member of Montgomery county council 1934 until his death, serving as chairman of the County Records Committee and County Library Committee. He represented Montgomeryshire County Council on the Court of Governors of the University of Wales 1934-1957, of University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, 1907-1927, and of University College of North Wales, Bangor, 1936-1957, Life Governor of U.C.W., Aberystwyth, from 1919; member of Council 1914-1957 : he represented U.C.W. on the Court of Governors of National Museum of Wales 1921-1957, and was a member of the Court of Governors National Library of Wales 1942-1957; member of Council 1945-1957.

His interests lay mainly in the antiquarian and genealogical fields, in the preservation of the national heritage and in his Unitarian faith. He was a Life Member of the Cambrian Archaeological Association from 1901 and of the Powysland Club from 1899, being its Chairman of Committee at the time of his death. He published a book *The Byways of Montgomeryshire* in 1905; this was kindly reviewed, albeit with helpful criticism, by Archdeacon D.R. Thomas in *Mont. Coll.* 1907. He contributed regular articles to *Mont. Coll.* between 1910 and 1951, most of them recording his own researches into aspects of the history of the Kerry area. His constant, but always unobtrusive, philanthropy during his lifetime towards the causes which reflected his main interests - in his later years at some personal sacrifice - was considerable. It was not surprising, therefore, that his main residuary legatees should also reflect the same interests: the U.C.W. received £11,000, the N.L.W. £12,000, and the General Assembly of the Unitarian and Free Christian Churches a similar residual amount (this was in addition to some £3,500 in specific bequests to the Unitarian movement). An appreciation of his altruism would not be complete without a reference to his remarkable generosity to young students. Inspired by his close friend, Prof. H.J. Fleure he was never happier than when helping them financially with the background to their studies, by providing them with the means to undertake field work and often by taking them, entirely at his own expense, on cultural visits to places of interest in Europe. It is accordingly fitting that U.C.W. decided to perpetuate his memory by establishing the annual J.B. Willans Lecture at the College. He found his own recreation in walking, travelling, voracious reading and in his gardens and woods. Motivated as he was throughout his life by a deep social conscience, sense of public duty and religious faith, his contribution in his fields of interest to the cultural and educational life of Wales, and especially of Montgomeryshire, although always essentially reticent, was substantial. He was unmarried. He died 12 April 1957 at Salop Infirmary and was buried in Kerry churchyard.

Author

Herbert Noel Jerman, (1909 - 1994)

Sources

Burke's Landed Gentry, 1937

H. Noel Jerman, *The late Mr. J. B. Willans, Montgomeryshire collections: relating to Montgomeryshire and its borders*, Vol. 54, pp.175-6

The Montgomeryshire County Times, 20 April 1957

South Wales Echo, 5 September 1957

personal knowledge, and the official records of the relevant authorities and institutions

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