

DAVIES, JOHN (1882 - 1937), secretary of the South Wales District of the W.E.A., 1919-1937

Name: John Davies
Date of birth: 1882
Date of death: 1937
Spouse: Ruby Davies (née Part)
Parent: Jane Davies
Parent: William Davies
Gender: Male
Occupation: secretary of the South Wales District of the W.E.A., 1919-1937
Area of activity: Business and Industry; Education
Author: John Davies

Born 5 May 1882 at Bryn-bedd, Blaenpennal, Cardiganshire, son of William and Jane Davies. The family moved in 1883 to the Rhondda valley where William Davies was killed in the Maerdy Pit explosion of 1885. John Davies was brought up by his widowed mother in the Cardiganshire village of Llangeitho, one of the cradles of Welsh Calvinistic Methodism and the religious traditions of his boyhood home left a deep impression upon him. After attending the Llangeitho British school, he was apprenticed at the age of thirteen to a draper at Porth, Rhondda. Two years later his health broke down and for the rest of his life he was afflicted by a weakness of the chest which obliged him to spend lengthy periods of recuperation at Llangeitho, and he continued to visit the village whilst his mother was alive. He was often called upon to speak at the society at Capel Gwynfil, and his talks were always polished. He had returned to the Rhondda by 1898 and the six-month coal strike of that year awakened in him an interest in social and industrial questions. He became a voracious reader and was later to claim that he was the first to read the Porth public library's copy of *Das Kapital* from cover to cover. By 1903 he had left the Rhondda for Swansea where he was employed at Ben Evans's department store and was active in the Shop Assistants' Union. From 1904 to 1906 he worked in shops in London; there he developed a life-long interest in the problems of Welsh immigrants to English cities and, through his membership of Willesden Green CM chapel, he was strongly influenced by the Welsh religious revival of 1904-05. From 1906 to 1914 he lived in the Swansea valley where he was closely involved in the work of the Independent Labour Party. One of the founders of the Swansea Valley Socialist League, he was secretary of the Swansea Trades Council and, from 1909, a member of the staff of the socialist weekly, *Llais Llafur*. Rejected for military service, he worked from 1914 to 1917 with the Y.M.C.A. on Salisbury Plain. In 1917 he conducted research for Seebohm Rowntree on housing conditions in west Wales and in 1918 became the organiser of the Agricultural Labourers Union in Pembrokeshire and Cardiganshire.

In December 1919, out of 131 applicants, John Davies was appointed secretary of the South Wales District of the W.E.A., a post he held until his death in 1937. During the early years of his secretaryship, the Association was faced with severe financial problems and by 1922 he was owed six-months salary. He proved adept at soliciting funds from the wealthy while he was at the same time concerned that the Association should be seen, in the polarised atmosphere of the 1920s, to be aligning itself with working class causes - in 1926, for example, he was minutes secretary of the Cardiff Strike Committee and duplicated the local strike bulletin using the Association's equipment. Unorthodox in his administrative methods, he was rebuked by headquarters for not conforming to regulations over branch organisation. Nevertheless, under his guidance the work of the W.E.A. in Wales expanded rapidly, the number of students attending classes and courses rising from about 250 in 1919-20 to over 8,000 in 1937. In the struggle between the Association and the National Council for Labour Colleges for leadership of working class education in south Wales, the period of John Davies's secretaryship saw the W.E.A. drawing decisively ahead of the NCLC in its number of classes and members.

In addition to his work with the W.E.A., John Davies was joint secretary of the University of Wales Tutorial Classes Committee and was closely associated with [Thomas Jones](#) (1870 - 1955) in the foundation of Coleg Harlech, serving on the council of the college from its inception. He was a member of the Committee on Rural Education in Wales established in 1927 by the President of the Board of Education. During the depression of the 1930s he was actively involved in efforts to relieve distress in the south Wales coalfield, serving as chairman of the executive committee of Community House, Senghennydd, and secretary of the South Wales Committee of the National Council for Social Service.

John Davies was one of the few socialists of the inter-war years to have an extensive personal knowledge of both industrial and rural Wales. His knowledge of Wales was considered to be encyclopaedic and in the later years of his life he put it to good use in the gossip column he contributed weekly, under the pseudonym 'The Watchman', to the Saturday issue of the Welsh edition of the *Daily Herald*. Although considered by some to be difficult and eccentric, John Davies possessed a genius for friendship, and enduring compassion for the deprived and an unquenchable faith in the possibilities of adult education.

In 1928 he married Ruby Part of Somerset, national women's organiser of the Workers' Union. There were no children. He died on 5 December 1937 and was buried at Llangeitho. A memorial volume to him was privately printed by the Gregynog Press.

Author

John Davies

Sources

John Davies born 5th May, 1882. Died 5th December 1937(Newtown 1938) (Gregynog Press, n.d.)

South Wales Voice, 11 and 18 December 1937

Y Llenor: cylchgrawn chwarterol dan nawdd cymdeithasau Cymraeg y colegau cenedlaethol, XVI, 4

Peter Stead, *Coleg Harlech, the first fifty years* (Cardiff 1977) (Cardiff, 1977)

Richard Lewis, 'Leaders and Teachers, the origins and development of the workers' educational movement in Wales, 1906-1940' (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wales, 1980)

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