

WILLIAMS, STEPHEN JOSEPH (1896-1992), Welsh scholar

Name: Stephen Joseph Williams
Date of birth: 1896
Date of death: 1992
Spouse: Ceinwen Rhys Williams (née Rowlands)
Child: Annest Wiliam
Child: Aled Rhys Wiliam
Child: Urien Wiliam
Parent: Anne Williams (née Gibbs)
Parent: Rees Rhys Williams
Gender: Male
Occupation: Welsh scholar
Area of activity: Scholarship and Languages
Author: Brynley Francis Roberts

Stephen J. Williams was born in Blaen-y-gors, a small-holding between Ystradgylais and Creunant at the head of the Swansea valley, 11 February 1896, the eighth of the nine children of Rhys and Ann Williams (née Gibbs). The father came from a family of farmers in Llanddeusant, Carmarthenshire, the mother from Alltwen, Swansea Valley. When he was a year old his family moved to Ystradgynlais where his father and uncle opened a small coal mine. He was educated locally and went to Ystradgynlais Intermediate School (Ysgol Maesydderwen today) in 1908 where he won a scholarship to the University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire, Cardiff in 1914. His course was interrupted by World War I and he enlisted in 1915, spending the following four years mainly with the 11th Gurkha Rifles in northern India. He returned to Wales in 1919 and resumed his studies, graduating with first class honours in Welsh in 1921. He taught for a few years in Aberaeron and Llandeilo before being appointed to a lectureship in Welsh at Swansea University College in 1927, the year he was awarded his M.A. degree. He was appointed Professor and Head of department in 1954, a post he held until his retirement in 1961. 'Stephen J.', as he was popularly known, was wiry and lively, both mentally and physically, in spite of his short stature and his genial personality allowed him to work harmoniously with everyone. Nevertheless, he acknowledged that the period following the 'burning' of the bombing school at Penyborth in 1936 was a difficult one for him personally in the college at Swansea.

Stephen J. Williams had wide scholarly interests but his most important contributions were as one of the pioneers of modern studies of medieval Welsh law (the Law of [Hywel Dda](#)) - his edition, jointly with J. Enoch Powell, *Llyfr Blegywryd*, appeared in 1942, 1961 - and as the editor of number of Medieval Welsh prose texts, *Ffordd y Brawd Odrig*, 1929, and the Welsh translations of Old French Charlemagne epics, *Ystoria de Carolo Magno*, 1930, revised edition 1961, 'Pererindod Siarlymaen' 1930, work which led to a seminal article on the craft of the translator in medieval Wales ('Cyfieithwyr cynnar', *Y Llenor*, 1929). He gained the degree of D.Litt. in 1948. A number of his most important articles were republished in *Beirdd ac Eisteddfodwyr* in 1981. Stephen J. Williams was active in providing teaching materials for schools. He was editor of *Yr Athro* to which he contributed articles on literary criticism but his major role was as a grammarian. His standard *Elfennau Gramadeg Cymraeg* was published in 1959, 1980, *A Welsh Grammar*, 1980, and a popular text book, *Beginner's Welsh* (1934) ran into several editions; he also held radio language lessons. As a member of a panel set up to standardise modern Welsh usage he was prominent in attempts to ensure that Welsh was flexible enough to be able to adapt to twentieth-century demands (his article on 'Y Gymraeg a'r dyfodol' appeared in the *Cymmrodorion Society Transactions* 1943), though the proposals known as 'Cymraeg Byw' were generally misunderstood (see his robust article in *Y Faner*, 1981). He served on the University of Wales Welsh Terminology panel and he was consulting editor for the popular *Y Geiriadur Mawr* ([H. Meurig Evans](#) and W.O. Thomas, 1958). He supported all aspects of Welsh life in Swansea, especially Ty'r Cymry and the Welsh Drama Society for which he wrote his 'Y dyn hysbys' in 1935. He was a prominent supporter of the National Eisteddfod, serving as a member of the Council for many years and also as its Chairman, and as a member of the Gorsedd of Bards. He served as adjudicator frequently and he was responsible for translating the words of many of the songs and choral works used at eisteddfodau. He was elected Fellow of the National Eisteddfod in 1975. He and his wife were active members of the Welsh Folksong Society and they were elected honorary vice-presidents together in 1985. A staunch Independent, he was a deacon and church secretary of Henrietta Street chapel in Swansea, and president of the Union of Welsh Independents in 1969.

He married Ceinwen Rhys Rowlands, a soloist and folksong singer from Llandeilo, in 1925 and they had two sons (Urien Wiliam, Aled Rhys Wiliam) and a daughter (Annest). Stephen J. Williams died in Swansea aged 96 on 2 August 1992 and was cremated in Morryston crematorium 8 August.

Author

Dr Brynley Francis Roberts

Sources

Y Cymro, 3 August 1992

Y Faner, 9 February 1990

The Independent, 8 August 1992

Barn, October 1992


Beirdd ac Eisteddfodwyr (1981), ed. Brynley F. Roberts, 1981, with photograph

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