

MEREDITH, JOHN ELLIS (1904-1981), minister (Presbyterian Church of Wales) and author

Name: John Ellis Meredith
Date of birth: 1904
Date of death: 1981
Gender: Male
Occupation: minister (Presbyterian Church of Wales) and author
Area of activity: Literature and Writing; Religion
Author: D. Ben Rees

J. E. Meredith was born on 7 August 1904 in Denbigh, one of the two sons of James and Margaret Meredith and christened in Fron Presbyterian Chapel by the Reverend Tom Roberts, Deputy Editor of the weekly newspaper, *Y Faner*. His father was an elder at Cricor Chapel, Pentrecelyn and there was a connection on his mother's side with the family of the Reverend Henry Rees of Liverpool. When he was 4 years old, the family moved to Padeswood near Buckley in Flintshire, where his father, a railway man, had been transferred. He received his schooling in the primary school in Buckley and the Alun County School at Mold. At the end of the First World War the family again moved, to Gwyddelwern near Corwen where James Meredith had been appointed station master. J. E. Meredith became a pupil at Tandomen County School, Bala, and he entered the University College of North Wales, Bangor to study for his BA degree.

He became involved in the social and political activities of the Student's Union, becoming its President for 1925-6. The following year he was the first Welshman to become President of the National Union of Students of England and Wales. This brought him into connection with well known people such as Bertrand Russell, Lord Beveridge and Lady Nancy Astor. He led delegations abroad. On one of those trips in 1928 to Italy he received the blessing of Pope Pius XI at the Vatican and wrote an article for *Y Fford Gron* (January 1931) on 'Kissing the Pope's Ring'. He also had a conversation with the Dictator Mussolini in his private room in Rome's Palazzo Chigi.

J. E. Meredith graduated from Bangor in philosophy in 1928 and then proceeded to study theology at Oxford University in 1928, where he was a member of Jesus College, sharing rooms with T. Rowland Hughes, who became a lifelong friend. J. E. Meredith served as Secretary of the Dafydd ap Gwilym Society and he made an important contribution to the Welsh life of the University and the city. He graduated in 1930 with Distinction and took his MA in 1934. He followed the pastoralia course at Bala College before being ordained in 1931 on receiving a call to Bethania, Presbyterian Church of Wales, Aberdare, one of the foremost churches in the East Glamorgan presbytery at that time. The same year he married Elizabeth Jones, Blaen-y-Cwm, Cynllwyd, Llanuwchllyn, whom he had known from his schooldays in Bala. She had graduated from the University of Liverpool, and taught in the city as well as in Southport.

In a period of unemployment the young minister gave leadership, inspiration and hope to the young people of the chapel. He was fortunate in having the support of two of his Presbyterian colleagues in the Cynon Valley, Revered J. R. Evans of Mountain Ash and Revered D. O. Calvin Thomas of Trinity Chapel, Aberdare, all three proud of their pacifism. He also valued the continuing friendship of some of his fellow students at Oxford, T. Rowland Hughes, Professor Alun Moelwyn Hughes and Reverend Glyn Parry Jones. He received golfing lessons from Dai Rees, the professional at Aberdare Golf Club, though it cannot be claimed that he spent much time at the game. Later in life he became a keen fisherman.

In 1937 J. E. Meredith received a call to Tabernacl Chapel, Aberystwyth, and the associated congregation at Ebeneser, Penparcau, where he fulfilled his life's work. In Aberystwyth he placed emphasis on a ministry that encompassed the life of the chapels, the town, the colleges and Welsh culture. Always immaculately dressed, he laid stress on the propriety of services of worship and the sacraments of the church. He was an excellent speaker in both English and Welsh. He would often discuss his sermons at his home in Elm Bank, Llanbadarn Road with his wife, who had a great interest in the origin, meaning and charm of words. In his lectures on pastoralia at the Theological College in Aberystwyth, his emphasis was on proclaiming the comforts of the Gospel to congregations. He himself had the particular gift to make a Seiat (Society) meeting a source of joy. He cared tenderly in his visitation to the sick as Chaplain to the town hospital and he was generous to the financial needs of the hospital. He represented the Presbyterian Church of Wales on the Committee that prepared a new translation of the *Welsh Bible* in 1988. In addition to a number of articles, he published *Ffordd y Bywyd*, a study handbook for young people, in 1937, and *Hanes yr Apocrypha* ('*The History of the Apocrypha*') in 1942, the only book in Welsh on the subject. He was invited to deliver the Davies Lecture in 1970 and choose as his subject 'Gwenallt Bardd Crefyddol' ('Gwenallt, religious poet'), and the lecture was extended and published as a book, under the same title, in 1974. As an appendix, *Gwenallt's* autobiographical essay, first published in *Credaf* ('*I Believe*') in 1943 was reprinted. J. E. Meredith was the editor of *Credaf*, a collection of personal essays by ten lay people around Aberystwyth who used to meet to discuss their Welsh Christian values. In 1962 he prepared a brief study of the life and work of Thomas Levi, one of his predecessors as minister in Tabernacl and contributed to a memorial volume on Gwilym Davies edited by Ieuan Gwynedd Jones in 1972. The denomination was important to him, and he served as Moderator of the General Assembly in 1970-71. his valedictory address was published in 1971 as Keeping pace with tomorrow in Wales, in which he faced what he regarded as the threat of conservative dogmatism and emphasised the importance of worship and the gospel of hope.

In Aberystwyth J.E. Meredith played a prominent part in every aspect of the life of the town and the educational institutions. He was a loyal member of the local Free Church Council, acting as its President and served six times as the Mayor's Chaplain. He served as the Chairman of the local Committee for the United Theological College, giving loyal support to the Principal W. R. Williams (a member of his church) and Principal S. Ifor Enoch. He served as Chairman of the International Committee for the Welsh League of Youth, he was on the Court of Governors of the University College of Wales (1939-1981), a member of the College Council (1952-1981) and assisted as need arose in the provision of Religious Education in the Department of Education and the Department of Extra Mural Studies. He was also an enthusiastic member of the Bedd Society, a literary group where he enjoyed the company and contribution of intellectuals such as Professor Idwal Jones and Professor R. I. Aaron.

He gave of his best to Welsh culture and he had strong convictions with regard to the Welsh language. When Ifan ab Owen Edwards decided suddenly one week in 1939 to start a Welsh Language Primary School the following Monday, he received the support of parents of four children. Of the first five children enrolled one was John Wyn, eldest son of J. E. and Elizabeth Meredith and the other children of the family, Margaret Wyn, Ruth Wyn and David Wyn followed the same educational path. When three years later Ifan ab Owen Edwards was chosen as President of the School, J. E. Meredith became Chairman of the Governors. He led the deputation to the Education Committee of Cardiganshire County Council and won support for the school to be funded, not by parents and sympathisers, but by the local Education Authority. He understood the concerns and the campaigning of the Welsh Language Society 30 years later and expressed his personal support.

Lack of courtesy was especially distasteful to him. As a person he was generous (he was never able send anyone from the door of the Manse empty-handed), good and considerate, and he possessed a great sense of humour. He possessed a voice ideal for radio and he was a regular broadcaster. He was the first to utter the famous words from Saunders Lewis's play, Buchedd Garmon on BBC Radio Wales and he also read the poetry of T. Gwynn Jones and R. Williams Parry on the same medium. At the National Eisteddfod of Wales in Cardiff in 1938 he adjudicated the Chief Recitation Competition and carried out the same task in other eisteddfodau. He wrote some attractive lyric poetry with much charm. He appreciated the visual arts, the work of Raphael in particular (Florence was one of his favourite cities). J. E. Meredith had strong convictions on temperance. He preached on the need for temperance and campaigned against the idea of introducing a bar in the Students' Union at Aberystwyth and he was a leading supporter of the campaign to keep the public houses closed on Sundays in Wales.

J. E. Meredith retired in 1969 and moved to live in North Parade, Aberystwyth. In 1977 he suffered a seizure which caused loss of speech and which forced him to spend the rest of his life in hospital. He died suddenly at Dolgellau Hospital on Thursday, 16 April 1981 from heart failure. His funeral service, according to his wishes, was held at Bangor Crematorium and his remains were interred at Llanuwchllyn cemetery. A Memorial Service was held to him at Tabernacl Chapel, Aberystwyth on 15 May 1981 when a plaque was unveiled in his memory by his son, John W. Meredith.

Author

D. Ben Rees

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information from his children, and most helpful co-operation from David W. Meredith

personal knowledge

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