

GRENFELL, DAVID RHYS ('DAI') (1881-1968), Labour politician

Name: David Rhys Grenfell
Date of birth: 1881
Date of death: 1968
Spouse: Beatrice May Grenfell (née Morgan)
Child: Eileen Grenfell
Parent: Ann Grenfell (née Hopkins)
Parent: William Grenfell
Gender: Male
Occupation: Labour politician
Area of activity: Politics, Government and Political Movements
Author: John Graham Jones

He was born at Penyrheol, Gorseinon on 27 June 1881, the son of William and Alice/Ann Grenfell. She was the daughter of William Hopkins. His father was a coalminer who originally came from Blaenavon in Monmouthshire. The only formal education which he received early in life was at Penyrheol Elementary School which he left at just twelve years of age to become a coalminer, but he was assiduous in attending various night school classes to study mining, geology and mathematics between 1900 and 1903. He spent the years 1903-05 at Nova Scotia, where he worked with people of many nationalities and thus laid the foundation of his wide knowledge of languages, and he also gained his manager's certificate there in 1904. On his return to the United Kingdom in 1905, he became involved in the sinking of the pit for the Mountain Colliery and then became employed at the Loughor Colliery, gaining his under-manager's certificate there in 1906 and a first-class manager's certificate in the following year.

Grenfell taught at a number of evening classes himself from 1907 to 1911, and was appointed a miners' agent in 1916 for the Western Region of the South Wales Area of the Coalminer's Federation on the death of William Morgan. He also became active in the local Labour Party in 1916; and in 1920 he was adopted prospective candidate for the Gower division. He entered parliament as the Labour MP for the Gower constituency at an all-important by-election held on 20 July 1922 held on the death of John Williams MP, subsequently retaining the division until his retirement from the House of Commons in 1959. His constituents always remained loyal to him, even in the Labour débâcle of 1931.

He served as a Parliamentary Private Secretary during the minority Labour administrations of 1924 and 1929-31, and became a member of the Labour Party National Executive Committee in November 1935. During the 1930s he was an avid supporter of the movement to secure the appointment of a Secretary of State for Wales, but he had no truck with Welsh nationalism. He visited Spain in November 1936 during the Spanish Civil War as one of an official deputation of MPs. He served as a member of a large number of parliamentary committees and commissions, notably the Royal Commission on Safety in the Mines in 1936, and was a member of the Parliamentary Advisory Committee from 1929 until 1945. He was the only Welsh MP to serve on the National Council of Labour in 1939.

Grenfell was the Secretary of State for the Mines during the Second World War from May 1940 until June 1942, a most critical period. Here he made the argument for the nationalization of the coal industry, a case which he again pressed after the war, notably in his volume *Coal* (1947). He soon became renowned as an extremely conscientious minister who always answered supplementary questions in the House of Commons with great thoroughness and detail. But it was [Major Gwilym Lloyd-George](#) who was chosen as the senior minister to head the new Ministry of Fuel and Power formed in the summer of 1942. Nor, to general surprise, was Grenfell appointed to any official position in the post-1945 Attlee administration, and on occasion he was quite capable of taking a highly independent line on some issues. Generally, however, he remained loyal to the Attlee government and his leader. Grenfell also served as the chairman of the Welsh Parliamentary Party from 1935 (succeeding Sir Henry Haydn Jones MP), and he was a member of the Welsh Tourist Board from 1948 until 1951. In 1951 Grenfell was sworn of the Privy Council. He was the Father of the House of Commons between 1953 and his retirement in 1959. He was always considered a man of sound convictions and an able debater in the House of Commons. He was reluctant to retire from parliament in 1959, but was pressurised to stand aside by the Gower Divisional Labour Party. He had no wish to go to the House of Lords. Grenfell held office in many local bodies, and was made an Honorary Freeman of Swansea for his contribution to public service. A bust of him now stands in the Swansea Guildhall.

He was made a CBE in 1935 and was awarded the honorary degree of LL.D. by the University of Wales in 1958 in recognition of his extensive public work. He was also awarded the Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur in 1953. Grenfell was a member of Gorsedd Beirdd Ynys Prydein. He had a command of the English, Welsh, French and German languages and also possessed

some knowledge of Russian. He was the author of the volumes *Industrial Planning* (1935) and *Coal* (1947), the latter published by Gollancz and running to more than 200 pages.

He had married in 1905 Beatrice May, the daughter of John Morgan of Gorseinon, and they had one daughter Eileen who remained unmarried. Beatrice Grenfell was herself a Glamorgan county magistrate who died in about 1970. Both husband and wife were active members of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion. The family lived at 'Ardwyn', Camglas Road, Sketty in Swansea. D. R. Grenfell died on 21 November 1968 aged 87 years, and was buried at Brynteg Cemetery, Gorseinon. His papers are in the custody of the South Wales Coalfield Archive at the Swansea University library.

Author

Dr John Graham Jones


Sources


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Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [David Grenfell](#) 

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