JONES, EMRYS (1920-2006), geographer

Name: Emrys Jones
Date of birth: 1920
Date of death: 2006
Gender: Male
Occupation: geographer
Area of activity: Nature and Agriculture
Author: Harold Carter

Emrys Jones was born at 3 Henry Street, Aberaman, Aberdare, Glamorganshire, 17 August 1920. His parents were Samuel and Annie (née Williams) Jones. The geologist Sir Alwyn Williams, his mother's nephew, was a cousin. From his upbringing in the mining valleys, and like many of his contemporaries of the depression years, he inherited a tradition of total commitment to Wales, its language and culture and to political and social radicalism.

From Aberdare Boys' Grammar School he went up to what was then the University College of Wales at Aberystwyth to read Geography in 1938. He graduated with first-class honours in geography in in 1941, and gained his MSc in 1945, his PhD in 1947. At Aberystwyth he came under the academic tradition which had been established by H. J. Fleure and carried on by Daryll Forde and Emrys Bowen. The Department was then entitled 'Geography and Anthropology' and although there was little formal teaching of anthropology the nature of the geography taught was strongly influenced by it.

The later appointment of Alwyn D. Rees in 1946 was to have a strong confirming influence on the nature of the material taught and researched. It was against this background that Emrys Jones's post graduate research was developed, especially his doctoral thesis on Tregaron. That work led to several publications but the most significant was 'Tregaron: the Sociology of a Market Town in Central Cardiganshire' in *Welsh Rural Communities*, a volume edited by Elwyn Davies and Alwyn Rees (1960). Both the title and the context are worthy of note. It was unambiguously called 'the sociology of' and appeared along a set of essays which were on rural communities by authors native to the areas on which they wrote. In contrast that by Emrys was on a town, however small, and by a researcher from a different background.

Emrys spent a post-doctoral year in the USA with a Rockefeller Scholarship in social science where he investigated the Americanisation of Welsh communities in upper New York State. His first academic post was an assistant lectureship in the Department of Geography at University College London, 1947-50. However that was not followed by promotion to a full lectureship since the then Head of Department considered his work to be in the field of sociology. This incident reflected the marked differences in the field of geography at the time and the conflict between the interpretation current at Aberystwyth and that of the more conventional and traditional mainstream. That convention decreed that the subject should rest on and begin with the physical environment and should proceed to the interpretation of its impact upon human activity, indeed at the extreme of its determinant impact. But true to his Aberystwyth inheritance Emrys believed in the primacy of social, political and economic forces in the creation of those spatial patterns which were the core of geographical study. Moreover, the visual landscape had been moulded by long periods of human activity and the nature of that activity was of paramount import. These conflicting views of the nature of geography dominated much of geographical dogma of the time expressed in the two themes of environmental determinism on the one hand and what was called 'possibilism' on the other, where in the phrase of the day, 'man' was master of the possibilities offered by the environment and the judge of their use. Geography, therefore, began with culture and not necessarily with the physical environment. As a response to the exposition of the necessity of environmental foundations Jones published a paper in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* in 1956 entitled 'Cause and effect in Human Geography', setting out the 'possibilist' case. Throughout his subsequent writings it was the basic element of culture or way of life which was the mainspring of his investigations. It is not difficult to see in this the strong awareness from his youth of how so much of the character of the south Wales coalfield had been determined by the rapine of the coal owners and iron masters. It was in the character of those people that geographical interpretation needed to begin.

In 1950 he was appointed to a lectureship at Queen's University, Belfast, where the Head was Estyn Evans, himself a graduate from the geography department at Aberystwyth and a pupil of Fleure. This was a working context much more in line with Emrys's philosophy of geography and it was while at Belfast (1950-58) that he more fully developed the two themes which were to dominate his subsequent career. The first was subsequently epitomised in a book published, jointly with John Eyles, in 1977 and entitled *An Introduction to Social Geography*. This laid down the firm conviction of the fundamental need for the understanding of social processes in any interpretation of the character of the earth surface. Manifestly such an approach became paramount in the understanding of the internal structure of cities and devoting himself to the examination of Belfast he produced a pioneering work in the emerging specialism of urban geography, *A Social geography of Belfast* published by OUP in 1960. Urban geography was the second theme which dominated his work.

By the time of the publication of his book on Belfast Emrys had moved to London as Reader in Social Geography at the London School of Economics (1959). There he transferred his urban work from Belfast to London and began a series of publications devoted to the capital including *An Atlas of London and its Region* in 1968. Likewise he moved his more general investigations from the smallest of towns where he had begun to the very largest. He became an acknowledged specialist on the world's metropoles. A more general book, *Towns and Cities* (1968), was followed by *Metropolis: the World's Largest Cities*, in 1990.

Emrys Jones became Head of Department at LSE in 1961 and in that post he was instrumental in the furthering of the status of human geography. When it was established, the Social Science Research Council did not include geography as one of its disciplines. It was largely due to the efforts of Emrys that this was rectified and a Human Geography Subject Committee was established in 1967 on which he served in its initial years. This was just one of the areas in which he exerted a prime influence in the promotion of geography as a social science. It is also worth noting that one of Emrys's first loves was architecture, indeed it was only financial problems that meant he studied geography rather than architecture. He kept that interest through his life and at LSE developed links with the Bartlett school of Architecture which led to an involvement in planning, Milton Keynes being one of the areas in which he was concerned. He retired from the Chair in 1984.

Although living in London Emrys maintained his total commitment to Wales and things Welsh. He became a driving force in the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion and was chairman of Council 1983-89 and President from 1989 to 2002. That commitment was best demonstrated in the book he edited and published in 2001 on *The Welsh in London. 1500-2000*, partly as a celebration of the 250th anniversary of the founding of the Cymmrodorion. It is significant that he wrote much of the book himself. One other example of his links with Wales was the Llandovery Lecture of the Aberystwyth Old Students Association. It was called 'Where was Wales' and was published in the *Cymmrodorion Transactions* for 1994.

Emrys Jones was a true scholar. He was awarded the Victoria Medal of the Royal Geographic Society, honorary degrees by Queen's University Belfast and the Open University and the Cymmrodorion Medal in 2001. He was elected a Senior Fellow of the British Academy in 2003. He was bibliophile, widely read in literature in both English and Welsh. He was a man of great charm with a mischievous sense of humour. He was married to Iona Hughes in 1948 and they had two children, Rhiannon, who predeceased him in 1980, and Catrin. He died at the Hospice of St Francis at Berkhamstead 30 August, 2006. His ashes lie partly in St Mary's Church in Berkhamstead and partly in his wife's family church at Brynsiencyn, Anglesey.

Author

Harold Carter

Sources

The Guardian, 15 September 2006

Professor Emrys Jones PHD, DSc, DUniv, FRGS, FBA, Aberdare Boys' Grammar School website (accessed May 2012)

personal knowledge

Further Reading

ODNB: Jones, Emrys (1920–2006)

Wikipedia Article: Emrys Jones

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