

EMRYS-ROBERTS, EDWARD (1878-1924), first professor of pathology and bacteriology at the Welsh National School of Medicine

Name: Edward Emrys-roberts
Date of birth: 1878
Date of death: 1924
Spouse: Rosamond Emrys-Roberts (née Painter)
Child: Kenyon Emrys-Roberts
Parent: Mary Roberts (née Evans)
Parent: Edward S. Roberts
Gender: Male
Occupation: first professor of pathology and bacteriology at the Welsh National School of Medicine
Area of activity: Education; Medicine
Author: Alun Roberts

Edward Emrys-Roberts was born 14 May, 1878 in Liverpool, the eldest son of E. S. Roberts of Dawlish, Devon and Mary Evans, youngest daughter of Emrys Evans of Cotton Hall, Denbigh. Educated at Liverpool College between 1890 and 1895 he became a medical student at University College, Liverpool, gaining the MB ChB qualification of what was then Victoria University in 1902. In 1900, while still a student, he joined the Welsh Military Hospital of the South African Field Force and served as a dresser with great credit, gaining the medal with three clasps. In 1904 he was awarded the MB ChB of the University of Liverpool.

From 1903 to 1906 Emrys-Roberts held the prestigious Ethel Boyce Fellowship in gynaecological pathology at the University of Liverpool, publishing in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society* 'a note on the question of nutrition of the early embryo with special reference to the guinea-pig and man'. This work formed the basis of the Liverpool MD which he obtained in 1908. By then he had been working for two years as a demonstrator in pathology at the University of Bristol and as a pathologist to the Bristol General Hospital, positions in which he excelled.

Meanwhile, the Cardiff Medical School, part of the University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire and at that time entirely a preclinical institution, was aspiring to become a full medical school with a clinical as well as a preclinical dimension. With the building of new pathology facilities at the Cardiff Infirmary (shortly to become the King Edward VII Hospital) the Treasury was persuaded in 1908 to provide funding for a new chair in pathology and bacteriology at the hospital, an essential prerequisite for creating a clinical medical school. The chair was advertised in the spring of 1910. In the face of strong competition from Harold Scholberg, the senior pathologist at the Infirmary, who enjoyed the backing of his hospital colleagues, Edward Emrys-Roberts was selected to the chair, an appointment which created much resentment locally, and, according to the memoirs of one of the senior physicians, Ivor Davies, in the appointment of Emrys-Roberts 'lay the *fons et origo* of the subsequent disagreement between the hospital and the college' during the 1920s.

It is fair to say that the primary responsibility for the feud lay with Scholberg whose unwillingness to 'forgive' the College authorities for appointing an 'outsider' to the chair of pathology was a cause of contention for years. Nevertheless, he and Emrys-Roberts managed to work together sufficiently to enable a routine clinical pathology service to be shared between them. For his part Emrys-Roberts strove, from the outset, to establish good relations with his hospital colleagues, joining the Cardiff Medical Society in the autumn of 1910, and giving scientific lectures to the members. In 1913 he became a member of its executive committee, later becoming the society's honorary secretary.

Since systematic undergraduate clinical teaching in pathology could not take place in Cardiff until the establishment of a clinical school in 1921, Emrys-Roberts' teaching activities during the early years of his appointment were largely confined to postgraduate teaching on the School's Diploma in Public Health course, to which, as a lecturer and as an examiner he made a significant contribution. Indeed, it was partly because of his absence on war duties that the DPH course was suspended for most of the First World War. From the outset however Emrys-Roberts was anxious to promote clinical research in the medical school, a theme he presented at his College inaugural lecture given in October 1910 and reinforced at the official opening of the new pathology department at the King Edward VII Hospital in 1912. In reality, however, his research output before the war was modest, confined to an article on status lymphaticus for the *Journal of Pathology and Bacteriology* in 1914. Nevertheless, such was his reputation as an authority on this matter that he became secretary of the Medical Research Council committee set up to investigate the condition.

Emrys-Roberts' energies in the development of his academic department were diverted, with the outbreak of the First World War, into supporting the war effort. Early in 1915 he was appointed officer in command of the Welsh Mobile Pathological Laboratory, serving in France, mainly with the First Army, during which time he specialised in the bacterial

infections of wounds, a subject on which he would publish after the war. Unfortunately, another legacy of the war was Emrys-Roberts' contraction, while abroad, of a dysenteric condition which would ultimately lead to his untimely death.

Nevertheless, despite his indifferent health, Emrys-Roberts played a full part in the management of the medical school during the years immediately before and after its elevation to full medical school status. As a demonstration of his commitment to the promotion of clinical research, when in 1920 the MRC designated the King Edward VII Hospital as one of a select group of British hospitals deemed worthy to be allocated radium for research purposes, Emrys-Roberts accepted local responsibility for looking after the material, an arrangement which continued up to his death. His own developing research interest was in the pathology of anthracosis among coal miners. Indeed, when his own condition was finally assessed as terminal he bore the news with equanimity, only observing 'now I cannot work out that idea on anthracosis'.

Outside medicine Emrys-Roberts's main recreational interests were fishing and particularly archaeology. A member of the Cambrian Archaeological Association since 1914, he was a keen participant in the society's summer programme of excursions and at the time of his death he was serving as one of the society's local secretaries for Glamorgan.

On 15 January 1924 Emrys-Roberts died at his Penarth home at the age of 45, leaving a widow, Rosamond, youngest daughter of J. Wynne Painter of Amlwch, Anglesey, whom he had married in 1910, and a family of six young children. Three days later, following a funeral service at All Saints church, he was buried in Penarth Cemetery.

Author

Dr Alun Roberts

Sources

Glamorgan Archives, *Minutes of the Cardiff Medical Society*

Alun Roberts, *The Welsh National School of Medicine, 1893-1931: The Cardiff Years* (2008)

Who's who in Wales, 1920

Journal of Pathology and Bacteriology, vol.27, 1924

British Medical Journal, 26 January 1924

The Lancet, 26 January 1924

Western Mail, 16 January 1924

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Published date: 2013-06-17

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