

WILLIAMS, DAVID REES (later REES-WILLIAMS, DAVID REES), 1st BARON OGMORE (1903-1976), politician and lawyer

Name: David Rees Williams
Date of birth: 1903
Date of death: 1976
Gender: Male
Occupation: politician and lawyer
Area of activity: Law; Politics, Government and Political Movements
Author: David Lewis Jones

Rees Williams was born on 22 November 1903, the only child of William Rees Williams, a veterinary surgeon, and Jennet David, of Garthcelyn, Bridgend. Through his father, he was related to Elizabeth Williams, the Maid of Sker.

Educated at Mill Hill School and the University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire, he qualified as a solicitor in October 1929, being Honoursman of the Law Society. A brief period with a South Wales firm was followed by four years in Malaya where he qualified as a barrister with the Straits Settlement Bar, lectured on commercial and company law in Penang, and was named a defending counsel on the roll of the State of Kedah. On his return to Cardiff, Williams established his own firm, Edwards and Rees Williams, at 11 Park Place. He was also appointed Clerk to the Cardiff Assessment Committee, a post he held from 1935 to 1945, and Honorary Legal Adviser to the South Wales and Monmouthshire Council of Social Services.

Like his father, Williams's chief interest, outside work, was the Territorial Army in which he served as an officer with the 6th (Glamorgan) Battalion of the Welch Regiment. On active service throughout the Second World War, he rose to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the Royal Artillery and a Staff Officer, 1st Grade. In 1944, he was a legal instructor at the staff centre where officers were trained to take part in a military government. Towards the end of that year, he changed his family's name to Rees-Williams.

When the British zone of Berlin was formed, Rees-Williams became the chief legal officer in General Montgomery's government. Meanwhile, he was elected in 1945, with a slim majority, the Labour Member for Croydon South, defeating the Conservative Member, Sir Herbert Williams, in a straight fight. Rees-Williams was recruited by the government to assist in paving the way towards a solution of two problems in the Far East. The Japanese had occupied Sarawak, a British protectorate, ruled by the English family of Brookes. After the war, Sir Charles Vyner Brooke, the Rajah, decided to hand over the territory to direct British rule. Before the agreement was concluded, questions were asked in the House of Commons about the views of the people of Sarawak. In response, the government persuaded Rees-Williams and L. D. Gammans, the Conservative Member for Hornsey, to visit Sarawak in order to establish if the cession of the territory "was broadly acceptable to the native communities". The two members had to work quickly because the Council Negri, the legislative council of the territory, was to meet on 15 May 1946 to consider the cession proposal.

Rees-Williams left London on 23 April 1946, followed a little later by Gammans, who was recovering from a brief illness. They sailed along the coast of Sarawak on *H.M.S. Public*, as they canvassed popular opinion. Neither was prepared to sleep ashore and this meant that they consulted the Malay and Chinese communities living in the coastal towns but had only limited contact with the people living inland. After a brief survey, Gammans and Rees-Williams concluded that opinion in Sarawak was favourable to the proposals. They remained in Sarawak to witness the proceedings of the Council Negri where the careless use of procedure offended the lawyer in Rees-Williams. Cession was agreed by 18 votes to 16, a majority obtained by European votes. Neither of the two members was particularly favourable to the Brooks family and Gammans was particularly scornful of the Rajah's wife, Sylvia Brooke, on the grounds that she frequented a 'low-down cabaret'. Both Gammans and Rees-Williams persuaded their liaison officer to take them twice to the cabaret. Their tour of Sarawak was both hasty and cynical; wisely, the government decided not to publish the narrative of their visit. Anti-cession feeling remained strong in the territory for a number of years.

In 1947, Rees-Williams went to Burma. Under British rule, the colony consisted of Burma proper, populated by Burmese, and of the Frontier Areas, where the population in each area was not Burmese. A vigorous Burmese nationalist movement had emerged during the Japanese occupation and Aung San, its leader, demanded that the frontier area peoples be involved in discussions on the constitution for an independent Burma. In answer to the request of the government, Rees-Williams agreed to chair a committee 'to enquire as to the best method of associating the frontier peoples with the work of the new constitution for Burma'. He arrived at Rangoon on 2 March 1947 and found that the Secretary to the Committee was W. B. J. Ledwidge, a young man from the Burma Office, whose 'blue shirt, khaki shorts and pink ankle socks infuriated the Governor and none too pleasing to me'. The Director of the Frontier Areas was John Lamb Leyden OBE, a Flintshire man, whose conduct during the war had been heroic; Rees-Williams persuaded Leyden to accompany them to the frontier areas because he did not 'fancy being launched into those wild parts accompanied only by Mr Ledwidge, who was a complete stranger to them, in his pink socks.'

The Committee, which consisted of Rees-Williams as Chairman, four members from Burma proper and four members from the frontier areas, was required to finish its work with expedition. Lack of time and lack of transport meant that meetings were held at two centres rather than in each area where witnesses could be interviewed locally. Evidence was taken at seventeen sessions between 18 March and 21 April 1947; the main conclusions of the report were agreed on 23 April and the report signed on the following day. The report contains an excellent survey of the frontier areas of Burma and the conclusions do indicate that a desire for full autonomy within an independent Burma existed in some of these areas, but it was optimistic in claiming that the witnesses were unanimous in desiring representation at the constituent assembly. Rees-Williams protected the British government from accusations that the frontier peoples had been handed over to the Burmese nationalists. Since independence, the history of the minorities within the Union of Burma has been tragic.

Later in the year, on 7 October, Rees-Williams was appointed Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Colonial Office. Ministers at the Colonial Office carried a heavy burden of work; they were coping with the effects of the Second World War, they were expected to visit the colonies, and they had to answer considerable criticism from the Conservative Party in Parliament. Rees-Williams participated in all this work; in 1948, he visited Africa twice; in April he spent a month in East Africa, while in July he travelled to West Africa, arriving home on 27 September, accompanied by sixty delegates to the first conference of legislative councils in British Africa, in which he took part, almost immediately on his return.

Re-arrangement of the parliamentary constituencies in Coventry meant that Rees-Williams stood for Coventry West at the 1950 general election. He failed, by a small number of votes, to gain this seat, but returned to politics when he was given a barony in the June honours list. He chose, after the river that runs through Bridgend, the title of Baron Ogmore, of Bridgend in the County of Glamorgan. Lord Holden, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, decided suddenly to stand down for personal reasons. Lord Ogmore was the obvious choice to succeed him and, within a month of entering the House of Lords, he was back in the government.

Again, he travelled abroad to represent the government, being part of the British Delegation to the United Nations in September to October 1950, and leader of the British delegation to the conference on African defence at Nairobi in August 1951. For a brief period, from 1 June 1951, he held the post of Minister of Civil Aviation, until Clement Attlee, the Prime Minister, restricted by a small majority in the House of Commons, called and lost a general election on 25th October.

In opposition, Lord Ogmore spoke regularly from the Labour benches in the House of Lords, particularly on colonial matters. He helped to form, and became with Tungku Abdul Rahman and Dato Sir Cheng-lock Tau, one of the three presidents of the Malayan League of Friendship. By 1959, Lord Ogmore was disenchanted with the Labour Party and, in particular, with its policy of nationalization of industry, which he believed was no longer acceptable to a majority of people. He could not support the Conservative Party because of their outdated views on world affairs, especially in Central Africa. Believing in liberty and radical democracy and also convinced that neither of the two main parties had a real answer to the problems and needs of the Welsh people, Lord Ogmore joined the Liberal Party which he had supported as a young man. Within a year, the Liberal Party Council elected Lord Ogmore to the executive committee of the party. He served as President of the Liberal Party in 1963-64 and became deputy leader of the Liberals in the House of Lords in 1965. When he spoke on the party's manifesto for Wales, prepared for the 1966 general election, Lord Ogmore highlighted the policy for an elected legislature or council for Wales. On 30 January 1968, Lord Ogmore introduced the Government of Wales Bill [H.L.] to establish a Parliament in Wales. He resigned, in April 1966, as the governor representing Wales on the Commonwealth Institute because of the government's refusal to establish a branch in Wales, as in Scotland. A member of the Investiture Committee, he carried the coronet at the Investiture of the Prince of Wales in 1969.

A collection of Lord Ogmore's political papers 1957-1976 is held by the National Library of Wales, as well as a copy of his unpublished memoir, entitled 'The Dedication of a Prince' (*NLW Facs 621*), on the Investiture in 1969.

Living in Chelsea, Lord Ogmore played an active part in the life of the London Welsh community. While President of the London Welsh Association, he attended its functions regularly and presided over the St. David's Ball at the Royal Festival Hall. He also presided at a great festival held at the Albert Hall in March 1958 to prepare for the British Commonwealth Games at Cardiff that summer and to mark the centenary of the birth of **Sir Owen Edwards**. Lord Ogmore did not speak Welsh as a child, but learned it as an adult and became a firm defender of the language; he was strong in his support of the Welsh Language Bill 1967. Lady Ogmore was equally active in London Welsh events, being a keen participant in the ladies' circle at the London Welsh Centre.

Lord Ogmore spoke decisively and he was capable of hard work. Throughout his career, he was involved with organisations and committees dealing with varying subjects. On 30 July 1930, he married Alice Alexandra Constance Wills, the daughter of Walter Robert Wills, Lord Mayor of Cardiff 1945-46. They had three children: Gwilym Rees, Joan Elizabeth, and Morgan Rees. Lord Ogmore died at the Westminster Hospital on 30 August 1976; the funeral was held on 3 September at the United Reform Church, Allen Street, London, and, later on the same day, at the Mid-Glamorgan Crematorium, Coychurch. Constance, Lady Ogmore, died on 30 November 1998. Lord Ogmore was succeeded in his barony by his elder son, Gwilym Rees Rees-Williams, 2nd Baron Ogmore (5 May 1931 - 9 November 2004), who left two daughters; and by his younger son, Morgan Rees Rees-Williams, 3rd Baron Ogmore (born 19 December 1937). Elizabeth Rees-Williams (born 1 May 1936) married (1) Richard Harris, the actor, 1957-1970; (2) Rex Harrison, the actor, 1971-1975; (3) Peter Aitken 1980-1985; (4) Jonathan Aitken, 2002-.

Author

David Lewis Jones

Sources

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Shelby Tucker, *Burma: the curse of independence* (2001)

Hugh Tinker (ed.), *Burma: the struggle for independence 1944-1948* (1984) Vol. 2, includes a long extract from the British Library's BL/IOR/MSS/EUR/E/362/8, Lord Ogmore's account of his time in Sarawak and Burma

for the narrative of the Members' visit to Sarawak, see The National Archives TNA/PRO/CO/537/1640

information from Mrs Eirlys Bebb, London

Further Reading

Lord Ogmore Papers 54: Investiture of the Prince of Wales

Wikipedia Article: [David Rees-Williams, 1st Baron Ogmore](#)

Additional Links

NLW Archives: [Lord Ogmore Papers](#)

Wikidata: [Q5238956](#)

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