

THOMAS, DAVID ALFRED (1856 - 1918), first viscount RHONDDA, businessman and politician, Liberal Member of Parliament

Name: David Alfred Thomas

Date of birth: 1856

Date of death: 1918

Spouse: Sybil Margaret Thomas (née Haig)

Child: Margaret Haig Mackworth (née Thomas)

Parent: Rachel Thomas (née Joseph)

Parent: Samuel Thomas

Gender: Male

Occupation: businessman and politician, Liberal Member of Parliament

Area of activity: Business and Industry; Politics, Government and Political Movements

Author: Brinley Thomas

He was the grandson of a JOHN THOMAS, of Magor, Monmouth; born in 1770, who migrated c. 1790 to Merthyr Tydfil and became haulage-contractor to the **Crawshays**; he married into a yeoman family of Merthyr Vale, and had four children. Of these, the youngest, DAVID THOMAS (1811-1875), became a prominent Congregational minister at Clifton (*Memoir*, by his son Arnold Thomas). The eldest, SAMUEL THOMAS (1800 - 1879), was educated at Cowbridge, became a shopkeeper at Merthyr Tydfil, but afterwards (c. 1842) turned to prospecting for coal. He married, as his second wife, Rachel, daughter of Morgan Joseph, a mining engineer of Merthyr Tydfil, and by her had seventeen children, of whom D. A. Thomas was the fifteenth, born 26 March 1856 at Ysgubor-wen Aberdare, where Samuel Thomas and his brother-in-law, Thomas Joseph, had, in 1849, opened a colliery. After his education at Dr. Hudson's School, Clifton, and Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge (B.A. 1880, M.A. 1883, Hon. Fellow 1918), D. A. Thomas went to Clydach Vale at 23 years of age to study coal mining at first hand. On 27 June 1882 he married Sibyl Margaret, daughter of George Augustus Haig, Pen lthon, Radnorshire; they had one daughter, **Margaret Haig**.

In the first phase of his career (up to 1906) D. A. Thomas's real interest was politics: he topped the poll four times as Liberal Member of Parliament for Merthyr Tydfil. But success eluded him in Westminster; and when, after the 'landslide' of 1906 Campbell-Bannerman did not give him office, he was bitterly disappointed and turned all his energies to the Cambrian collieries. The amassing of a fortune was to be the substitute for the prizes of politics, and in a few years a series of shrewd deals led to the establishment of the Cambrian Combine with a capital of £2,000,000. His appetite as a capitalist and his taste for sharp polemics brought him into frequent clashes with the militant leaders of the South Wales Miners' Federation. Grandiose plans of Anglo-American industrial combinations and the opening up of the remote northwest of Canada were included in the wide sweep of his horizon as a captain of industry. Empire building in the world of business was not, however, to be his chief claim to fame. **D. Lloyd George** sent him on an important mission to the United States in 1915, after which he was made a peer; in December 1916 he was appointed president of the local Government Board; in June 1917 he became Food Controller. Thus D. A. Thomas came back to his first love - politics - and the unbending individualist proved himself an outstanding success as the architect of a great socialist experiment - food rationing. He died of heart failure on 3 July 1918 at his home, Llan-wern, Monmouth

Viscount Rhondda had a boyish zest for life and a remarkable capacity for managing men. His enthusiasm knew no bounds: a passion for bird-nesting which he acquired as a boy at Ysgubor-wen remained with him all his life. Apart from his towering influence on the development of the South Wales coalfield, he was not absorbed in the national life of Wales. He was a true Victorian individualist for whom life was a tournament offering glittering prizes to the enterprising. He will be chiefly remembered for his masterly administration of Great Britain's food supply in the darkest year of the First World War.

Besides his contribution on *The Coal Trade* to Cox, *British Industries under Free Trade*, 1903, D. A. Thomas published, in 1896, *Some Notes on the Present State of the Coal Trade*, and in 1903, *The Growth and Direction of our Foreign Trade in Coal (1850-1900)*, which was awarded the Guy Medal of the Royal Statistical Society, and was afterwards brought down to 1913. He left £20,000 to Caius College to provide 'Rhondda Scholarships.'

Author

Professor Brinley Thomas, (1906 - 1994)

Sources

David Evans, *In Memory of the Rt. Hon. Viscount Rhondda of Llanwern, P.C.* (1918)

J. Vyrnwy Morgan, *Life of Viscount Rhondda* (London 1918)

Margaret Haig Mackworth, Viscountess Rhondda, *D. A. Thomas, Viscount Rhondda, by his Daughter [Viscountess Rhondda] and Others* (London 1921)

Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigienses*

Further Reading

T. Marchant Williams, *Welsh Members of Parliament, 1894* (Cardiff 1894)

NLW Archives: General Election 1906 Wales and Monmouthshire. A Souvenir containing photographs, biographical sketches etc., of all the Welsh MPs: David Alfred Thomas

NLW Archives: Vote for D. A. Thomas

Evan John Evans, William Flavel Hurndall, 'David Thomas, B.A.', *Pulpit memorials: photographs and specimen sermons of twenty Congregational ministers, with brief memoirs by several friends* (London 1878), pp. 412-428

Wikipedia Article: "D. A. Thomas

Images

H.J.B. Wills, Lord Rhondda age 10

H.J.B. Wills, Lord Rhondda age 12

H.J.B. Wills, David Alfred Thomas

NLW: Lord Rhondda as a youth at college

NLW: Lord Rhondda age 25

NLW: Lord Rhondda 1918 in characteristic pose

NLW: David Alfred Thomas

NLW: Lord Rhondda at the door of Llanwern Park

NLW: Lord & Lady Rhondda at the doorway, Llanwern Park

NLW: Lord Rhondda with Llanwern Herd Stock Bull, "Sir Sam"

NLW: Lord Rhondda with Llanwern Herd Stock Bull, "Father Christmas"

NLW: David Alfred Thomas

NLW: Samuel Thomas

National Museum Wales: David Alfred Thomas, 1st Viscount Rhondda (1856-1918)

National Portrait Gallery: David Alfred Thomas, 1st Viscount Rhondda

Additional Links

NLW Archives: D. A. Thomas (Viscount Rhondda) Papers

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