

SUNDERLAND, ERIC (1930-2010), academic

Name: Eric Sunderland
Date of birth: 1930
Date of death: 2010
Spouse: Jean Patricia Sunderland (née Watson)
Child: Frances Anne Sunderland
Child: Helen Rowena Sunderland
Parent: Mary Agnes Sunderland (née Davies)
Parent: Leonard Sunderland
Gender: Male
Occupation: academic
Area of activity: Scholarship and Languages
Author: Keith Robbins

Eric Sunderland was born in Blaenau near Ammanford, Carmarthenshire on 18 March 1930, the second son of Leonard Sunderland (1898-1990), Sanitary Inspector to Amman Valley Council, and his wife Mary Agnes (née Davies 1901-1997). His elder brother was Terence Raymond Sunderland (1921-2012). Eric was educated at Amman Valley Grammar School; University College of Wales, Aberystwyth (1947-50), BA First Class Geography and Anthropology; University College, London, Ph.D Anthropology (1954). He married Jean Patricia Watson (1931-) on 19 October 1957, and they had two daughters, Helen Rowena (1958-) and Frances Anne (1960-).

After initially working for the National Coal Board as a researcher, he took up a lectureship in Anthropology at the University of Durham in 1958 and was appointed to the Chair in that subject in 1971, holding it until 1984 while also serving as the university's Pro-Vice Chancellor (1979-1984). In 1984 he became Principal of the University College of North Wales, Bangor (being redesignated Vice-Chancellor of the University of Wales, Bangor a decade later) and retired in 1995. He served as Vice-Chancellor of the (federal) University of Wales 1989-1991. He was awarded an LL.D from the University of Wales in 1997. It was a recognition of the notable part he had played in steering both institutions through difficult times. Bangor, at the time of his appointment, had been riven by internal disagreement, chiefly on linguistic matters. Morale was low and the financial situation somewhat precarious. Sunderland addressed the problems with the insight of an anthropologist. A fluent Welsh speaker, he opened up necessary lines of communication and ushered in a new climate in relationships. Not that he shirked steps - such as the closure of long-established departments - that would be necessary in order to restore financial health. Likewise, as the University of Wales struggled to find a structure which both acknowledged the identity of its constituent institutions and the value of its collective potential, he played a part in reaching the accommodation which appeared to be being achieved by the time he left office. His last formal involvement in Welsh university life was as President of the University of Wales, Lampeter (1998-2001).

From early in his career in Durham he had demonstrated his ability and capacity to serve in various roles beyond his responsibilities, academic and administrative, within his own institution. For twenty years from 1978 he served as Secretary-General of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, and then served as its President until 2005. His services to that body brought him its Gold Medal, but it had also made him a familiar figure in anthropological circles around the world. He also served, 1989-1991, as President of the Royal Anthropological Institute, London. These appointments testified not only to his professional standing amongst anthropologists but also to his skill in handling the complexities of such organizations. Amongst his publications were collaborative books on *Genetic Variation in Britain* (1973), *The Exercise of Intelligence: Biosocial Preconditions for the Operation of Intelligence* (1980) and *Genetics and Population Studies in Wales* (1986).

It was scarcely conceivable that, on retirement, he would step aside from bodies in which he was already involved or resist the approaches for his services which would inevitably be made. Until 2010 he continued to chair the Gregynog Press, where his personal interest in and enthusiasm for fine books could be put to good effect. He chaired the Welsh Committee of the British Council (1996-2001). These roles were combined with a seemingly ever extending range of service, particularly within Gwynedd, where he continued to live, and in Wales generally. He served on the Court of Governors of the National Museum (1991-1994) and on the Broadcasting Council for Wales (1996-2000). It fell to him to be Chief Counting Officer for the 1997 referendum on Welsh devolution. The trust he clearly enjoyed from all sides can also be seen in his appointment in 2001 as Chairman of the Commission on Local Government Electoral Arrangements in Wales (for the National Assembly for Wales). He served as High Sheriff of Gwynedd (1998-1999) and followed, until 2006, as the county's Lord Lieutenant (and Keeper of the Rolls). He was the Regional Chairman for Wales for the Art Fund (2005-2010). Other bodies with which he was associated or to which he was elected include the Order of St. John of Jerusalem (from 2000), Welsh Livery Guild (from 2001), the Institute of Biology (from 2009), the Learned Society of Wales (2010). It was appropriate that this rich array of public service in Wales and beyond should receive recognition. He was appointed OBE in 1999 and CBE in 2005. He was made a Freeman of Bangor in 2005.

Eric Sunderland died from pancreatic cancer in Beaumaris, Anglesey, his final place of residence, on 24 March 2010. His funeral was held at Bangor Cathedral.

Some people make their contribution by a single-minded and exclusive concentration upon a particular field of scholarship or activity. That was not Eric's way. The value of his life, and the secret of his success - and perhaps it was an aspect of his academic specialism - lay in his capacity to understand 'where people were coming from' and shape ways in which diversity could be a strength rather than a source of conflict. That did not mean that he lacked conviction or had no strong objectives and aspirations of his own. He was a man from West Wales who flourished in North Wales (as he had done also in the North of England). He was a proud Welsh speaker but in his own ancestry and family (on whose support and love he depended) and in his academic life he brought different worlds together. How he achieved that depended upon qualities of humour, artistic and musical sensitivity, intelligence, and sturdy application, all of which, happily, he possessed in abundance.

Author

Keith Robbins

Sources

The Independent, 17 May 2010

The Times, 27 March 2010

Personal knowledge and information from the family

Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Eric Sunderland](#)

Additional Links

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