

WILLIAMS, GARETH WYN, Baron Williams of Mostyn (1941-2003), lawyer and politician

Name: Gareth Wyn Williams
Date of birth: 1941
Date of death: 2003
Spouse: Pauline Williams (née Clarke)
Parent: Selina Williams (née Evans)
Parent: Albert Thomas Williams
Gender: Male
Occupation: lawyer and politician
Area of activity: Law; Politics, Government and Political Movements
Author: Keith Robbins

Gareth Williams was born on 5 February 1941 near Prestatyn, Flintshire. He was the third child of Albert Thomas Williams (died 1964), a primary school headmaster, and his wife Selina (née Evans, died 1985). He had a sister, Catrin, and a brother John. Welsh was the language of his home in Mostyn and, reputedly, he first learnt English with the aid of Linguaphone records. He was educated at Mostyn primary school, Rhyll Grammar School and Queen's College, Cambridge. A History scholarship took him to Cambridge in 1958, but he was already set on becoming a barrister and switched to study law. He shone academically, winning the University Prize in Jurisprudence in 1962 and performing in the Union (although defeated in the contest for its Presidency by another Welshman, Michael Howard, in the same year), and graduated First Class LL.B 1964, MA 1965.

He married Pauline Clarke on 11 August 1962, whilst still a student, and they had two daughters, Martha (born 1973) and Emma (born 1976), and a son Daniel (born 1981). That marriage ended in divorce, and he married fellow-barrister Veena Maya Russell on 19 August 1994, with whom he had a daughter, Imogen Russell Williams.

After spending a year working as a schoolteacher in north Wales, he was admitted to the Bar at Gray's Inn in 1965 but did the first part of his pupillage in the Temple before completing it in Swansea, where he remained for thirteen years. He moved to London upon taking silk in 1978, and became a Recorder for the Crown Court. In 1979 he acted for George Deakin, a co-defendant in the Jeremy Thorpe case. Deakin's acquittal enhanced Williams's reputation and paved the way for further employment in high profile libel and defamation cases involving Elton John, Graeme Souness and other personalities. He became a member of the Bar Council in 1986 (and its chairman in 1992). He led the Wales and Chester Circuit, 1987-89.

In 1992 his career took a different direction. On the recommendation of the outgoing Labour leader Neil Kinnock he was made a life peer (subsequently, when the 50th anniversary of the Life Peerages Act was marked, he was voted by the Lords as the most outstanding life peer since the creation of life peerages), and became Labour's spokesman on Legal Affairs and then on Northern Ireland. After Labour's election victory in 1997 a succession of posts followed: Under-Secretary in the Home Office, Deputy Leader of the Lords, Attorney-General (1999-2001), Leader of the Lords (June 2001 until his death). He had advocated the reform of the House of Lords, in speeches and in writing, for more than a decade. He attacked the judicial appointments system and saw in old men on the bench folly rather than wisdom. He was certain that it was necessary to make a clear distinction between political appointees, like the Lord Chancellor, and judicial authority. He was a key figure in discussions with the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, when the government considered the composition of the House of Lords. He was probably disappointed with the outcome, but accepted it. He continued, however, to think that there was unfinished business. And not only in this respect. He wanted to see more women in Parliament. He disliked pomposity and mumbo jumbo. If he had ever become Lord Chancellor he had made it clear that he would throw out the traditional wig and tights.

His stance on these and other cognate matters might lead to the conclusion that he was an austere aloof doctrinaire without humour or warmth. That was not the case. He knew when to tell a joke and his jokes were good. He had charm and wit. He could use both effectively whether in the Courts or Parliament. He read avidly, though never the sports pages of any newspaper. At his thanksgiving service in Westminster Abbey colleagues referred to the masterly way in which he was a 'man of steel' who displayed 'tough compassion'. This fusion of qualities was also apparent in the time and energy he gave to various organizations: the Prisoners Advice Service (from 1992), the Commonwealth and Ethnic Bar Association (from 1993) and the NSPCC (from 1993) among them.

Wales did not forget him - the university at Aberystwyth made him an honorary fellow in 1993 - and he did not forget Wales. He agreed to become pro-chancellor of the University of Wales in 1994 and, despite his other responsibilities, was diligent on its behalf. He believed in a national university, while not blind to its defects. His capacity to defuse tension was evident in this sphere too. He could easily have given up on entering government but felt an obligation to stay. It was the way in which he could both acknowledge his Welsh heritage and serve its future.

Gareth Williams died of a heart attack at his home in Evenlode, Gloucestershire, on 20 September 2003. He was buried in the churchyard at St Michael and all Angels, Great Tew, Oxfordshire.

Gareth let it be known that he was in fact born in a taxi on the way from his home in Mostyn to hospital in Prestatyn. In his life, too, he was a man on the move between places and spheres, dazzling in his virtuosity but clear in purpose. His sudden death, at the height of his powers, shocked and saddened the political and legal worlds. He was only the third cabinet minister in sixty years to die in office, and it was a common assumption that he had not yet reached the pinnacle of his career.

Author

Keith Robbins

Sources

The Daily Telegraph, 22 September 2003

The Guardian, 22 September 2003

Personal knowledge

Further Reading

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