

DAVIES, CASSIE JANE (1898 - 1988), educator and Welsh nationalist

Name: Cassie Jane Davies
Date of birth: 1898
Date of death: 1988
Gender: Female
Occupation: educator and Welsh nationalist
Area of activity: Education; Patriots; Politics, Government and Political Movements
Author: Llion Wigley

Cassie Davies was born in Blaencaron, near Tregaron, on 20 March 1898. She was christened Cathrin Jane, but was known throughout her life as Cassie. One of ten children, six boys and four girls, she was raised on a mountain farm, Cae Tudur, where her family's history stretched back as far as the seventeenth century. Her father, John, led the singing at Blaencaron chapel and had a melodious tenor voice, as well as a fiery temper. Her mother, Mari, was a milder character and a talented storyteller and rhymester. Cae Tudur was always a home full of humour and fun, and the family themselves created all of the entertainment, a fact which is emphasised in Cassie's autobiography, *Hwb i'r Galon*. She formed a quartet with her brothers and sisters, under the watchful guidance of their father, which competed regularly and successfully at local eisteddfodau. She learnt verses from the Bible and poetry with her mother to recite on Sunday, and her remarkable memory and gifts as a storyteller were developed from a young age.

She went to Blaencaron school at three years old. The teacher, Mrs Edwards, only spoke Welsh to the children on Sundays. Cassie was the first pupil from the school to win a scholarship to the County School in Tregaron, and her family sacrificed a great deal to support her academic abilities. At the County School, she was among a group of notable talents, including **Ambrose Bebb** and **Kitchener Davies**, who came under the influence of the charismatic history teacher S. M. Powell. Although English was the language of the majority of lessons, Powell believed in the importance of teaching the children some of the area's history and legends in their mother tongue. The First World War cast its shadow over her family during her period at secondary school: she lost one brother and another returned with his nerves irreparably shattered.

English was the subject of her first degree at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, where she was a student in the years following the war. She graduated easily without being inspired by the course or the teaching, and decided to return to study for a higher degree in Welsh. She described this decision as a turning point in her life. This was the period in which the Welsh cultural life of the college developed rapidly, with the Celtic Society flourishing under the inspired leadership of her friend **Iddwal Jones** from Lampeter. Cassie herself played an important role in developing entertainment in Welsh at the College through organising 'nosweithiau llawen' and concerts, and her nationalism was awoken in the process. She was among the small group at the first Welsh Nationalist Party (Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru, later Plaid Cymru) summer school in Machynlleth in 1926, and she was responsible for organising the entertainment at these formative events for many years. Supporting the new party was a brave venture in an area as firm in its Liberalism as Ceredigion in the 1920s, but with her characteristic solidity she stayed loyal to the cause for the rest of her life.

After completing her M. A., she spent a year's training at the Education Department in Aberystwyth, before starting work as a teacher in the Secondary School for girls in Carmarthen. She fought against the wholly English atmosphere at the school, and quarrelled with the headmistress in her efforts to improve the position of Welsh. Her next role as a lecturer at Barry Training College between 1923 and 1938 brought her much more happiness. Under the leadership of **Ellen Evans** (1891-1953), the inspirational head of the girls only College, she was given free rein to experiment and pioneer in the methods of training teachers in order to increase their knowledge and understanding of Welsh culture, and more significantly, perhaps, their awareness of its importance. She did this through organising regular courses for the students to learn more about the local area's history, in addition to the three levels of Welsh courses which she developed. Furthermore, she succeeded in one of her main objectives, which was to root the students firmly in the region and its culture, through forming a reciting party which gained considerable popularity while performing regularly at local halls. She made use of her growing influence in 1938 to introduce a competition for reciting parties to the programme of the National Eisteddfod when it came to Cardiff. Her party of students were beaten in this competition by a party from Tregaron trained by her sister Nelli, who was a very talented organiser and entertainer.

Her appointment in 1938 as inspector of schools for the Education Ministry was another sign of her growing influence. Leaving Barry was difficult at the beginning, but she went on to experience twenty extremely busy and purposeful years travelling around Wales as an inspector. She became familiar with the characteristics of the entire nation through her work as she lived at different times in East Glamorgan, Montgomeryshire, Pembrokeshire, Meirionethshire, Rhondda and West Glamorgan. Her aim from the beginning was to establish a worthy place for the Welsh language within the education system, and to transform this system in the process. It should be remembered that Welsh did not feature on the teaching programme in many counties in her first years as an inspector, including Pembrokeshire, Radnorshire, Montgomeryshire, Breconshire and Flintshire. Raising the status of Welsh within such a context was a difficult and thankless struggle, but she threw herself into the fight with boundless energy.

She compiled important reports offering clear recommendations on how the educational system could be reorganised to give the Welsh language adequate status, and also contributed articles regularly on the same subject for Plaid Cymru's paper, *Y Ddraig Goch*, and journals such as *Tir Newydd* and *Heddiw* which shared her infectious enthusiasm. She wrote in a particularly lucid and unambiguous style - another reflection of the firmness and integrity of her character. A valuable outline of her vision for a Welsh educational system was provided as early as 1929 in a report on behalf of the Welsh Teachers Union, a movement which she supported strongly. Her Memorandum on Welsh emphasises the damaging psychological effects which a wholly English education, divorced entirely from the life and language of the community, had on Welsh people, particularly in rural areas. In order to overcome the feelings of inferiority and lack of confidence which characterised them, she insisted that Welsh should not be treated as the subject of one or two lessons only within a school. Welsh should, she believed, be the medium of school life in its entirety, not merely a subject isolated from the rest of that activity.

She understood early in her career that through making lessons in every subject - be it history or mathematics - relevant to the life of the local community and its culture Welsh could be rooted solidly within a school. She was unquestionably a pioneer in her development and encouragement of regional studies whilst a lecturer and an

inspector. The courses which she began organising in Barry in order to improve prospective teachers' understanding of the area of their schools became a regular feature of their training across Wales. As well as arranging these courses - featuring a range of prominent guest speakers from among her friends, such as **Saunders Lewis** - she was very active in the social life of the various areas in which she lived. She had, in her own words, 'a relentless urge to try to create entertainment in Welsh within society'. This was a mission, as well as a challenge, and it was an equally important part of her attempt to preserve the dignity of Welsh culture in the face of depopulation and governmental apathy as her everyday work within education. Drawing non-Welsh speakers into this culture was very important to her, and she ensured that a part of the concerts and evenings which she organised in areas such as Pembrokeshire and Rhondda was in English as a way of doing so. She attempted throughout her life to showcase the wealth and beauty of Welsh culture not only to ground Welsh speakers themselves more deeply within it but also in order to attract and include those who did not speak Welsh.

The rapidity of her speech is noted frequently in contemporary portrayals; another sign of her overflowing energy. This is referred to in a description of her most characteristic features in *Y Faner* in 1957: 'Of medium height, with auburn hair... she speaks quickly and firmly, and indeed a little severely at times, which can initially alarm those unfamiliar with her.' However, the portrait also emphasizes that her rapid manner of speech was merely a 'cloak' over her natural kindness.

She lived in Aberystwyth for a period after her retirement in 1959, before moving to Tregaron in the early 1960s to be closer to her brothers and sisters. After caring for them tenderly, she lost two brothers and two sisters within five years, and was left on her own when Neli died in 1971. Her talents as a storyteller were used in this period on popular radio shows such as *Penigamp*, and she was frequently invited to give talks and lectures throughout Wales. She continued to attend services at Blaencaron chapel regularly and to play an active role in the area's cultural activities during her old age. She was delighted by **Gwynfor Evans**'s electoral success in 1966, having been one of his great supporters since formally introducing him to Plaid Cymru in Barry in 1934. She offered her strong backing to the Welsh Language Society (Cymdeithas yr Iaith) and Merched y Wawr, two movements born out of a period of awakening and excitement in the 1960s which echoed her youth in the 1920s.

Her autobiography was published in 1973, a book which mirrors not only Welsh rural life in the twentieth century but also the mixture of intensity, seriousness and humour which characterised her. That seriousness and intensity arose partly from seeing the culture which produced the humour being undermined and gradually engulfed during her lifetime. Her nationalism, as in the case of many of her contemporaries in the early days of Plaid Cymru, was a reasonable, practical response to this process, as well as a stance against the British imperialism which the First World War had reinforced so cruelly.

However characteristic her life may have been of the experiences of Welsh people during this period, it was wholly singular at the same time, above all in her dedication to the national cause and in her unswerving determination to encourage and drive it forward. Because of the extent to which she succeeded, within the educational sphere in particular, she has an important place within the history of this period. Her autobiography warns that education can 'kill the language and culture of a nation', but emphasises, with her characteristically realistic optimism, that it can also 'enliven and restore a language and create a living connection with our past'. The message remains painfully relevant in the twenty-first century.

Cassie Davies died on 17 April 1988. Her funeral was held on 21 April at Bwlchgwyn Chapel, Tregaron, where she was buried. She showed her patriotism and love for her region to the end through bequeathing over one hundred thousand pounds to Plaid Cymru and various local causes.

Author

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Sources

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Sound and Film

National Museum Wales: [Folk Tales: Cassie Davies \(1898-1988\)](#)

Additional Links

NLW Archives: [Papurau Cassie Davies](#)

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