

EDWARDS, HUW THOMAS (1892 - 1970), trade unionist and politician

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Name: Huw Thomas Edwards

Date of birth: 1892

Date of death: 1970

Spouse: Margaret Edwards

Child: Elizabeth Catherine Edwards

Child: Gwynfor Edwards

Parent: Elizabeth Edwards (née Williams)

Parent: Huw Edwards

Gender: Male

Occupation: trade unionist and politician

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

Author: Gwyn Jenkins

Huw T. Edwards was born on 19 November 1892 in a cottage called Pen-y-ffridd, Ro-wen, Caernarfonshire, the youngest son of Huw Edwards, quarryman, and his first wife Elizabeth (née Williams). 'Hugh' was the name registered on his birth certificate but he was known for most of his life by the Welsh spelling 'Huw'. In his public and private life he was commonly referred to as 'Huw T'.

Huw T grew up in a poor and disadvantaged Welsh family and community. His father, who worked in a granite quarry in Penmaen-mawr and earned some extra income from his smallholding, had very strong nonconformist religious beliefs, but, although he attended the chapel for most of his life, these were not inherited by his son. However, nonconformist values relating to social justice, rather than Marxism, played a vital role in shaping Huw T's socialist views, as with many of his generation. He would later claim that the National Health Service established by **Aneurin Bevan** in the 1940s was 'Christianity in action'.

His mother's death in 1901 had a devastating effect on him, perhaps causing the rebellious nature which often resurfaced throughout his life. He left school at the age of fourteen, having received only a basic elementary education, and he went to work in the Penmaen-mawr granite quarries and subsequently as a farm hand. In 1909 he moved to the south Wales valleys where he worked as a miner. He enjoyed the wide range of social activities on offer in that vibrant area, especially boxing. He fought in the boxing booths under the name 'Kid' Edwards.

In his autobiography, he claimed to have been influenced by his involvement in the famous Cambrian Colliery dispute, 1910-11, by hearing Keir Hardie addressing the workers, and by the Senghenydd colliery disaster of 1913, where he acted as a rescuer; nevertheless, he does not appear to have been politically active at that time. In 1911 he joined the Special Army Reserve and in August 1914 was called up on the first day of the First World War, serving as a driver with the Royal Field Artillery. He served in France until March 1918 when he was seriously wounded and transported home. The challenging experiences of war and industry undoubtedly hardened him to the demands of public life in the future.

After the war, he returned to north Wales and married Margaret Owen of Rachub, Bethesda, on 9 March 1920. They had two children, Elizabeth Catherine (Beti) and Gwynfor, who died in 1926 at the age of two. His son's death, which Huw T believed was caused by dampness in the young family's dank cottage in Capelulo, had a profound effect on him and was one of the drivers which led him to become involved in public affairs. By this time he had already become an activist in trade unionism and lost his job at Penmaen-mawr quarries following a dispute over union recognition. He became active in the Labour Party and acted as agent for the party's general election candidates in the Caernarfon Boroughs (1929) and Flintshire (1931) constituencies. He also became secretary of the North Wales Labour Federation which met sporadically during the 1920s. In 1927 he was elected to the Penmaen-mawr District Council and, although unemployed at the time, was elected its chairman in 1932.

In the same year, he was appointed to a post with the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) in Area 13 (north Wales and the Ellesmere Port area) by the union's national leader, Ernest Bevin. Bevin acknowledged Huw T's commitment to the Labour movement, his administrative ability and his appealing personality. The following year he became district secretary. His appointment led him to move with his family from a small, Welsh-speaking community, Dwygyfylchi, near Penmaen-mawr, to Shotton, an Anglicised town on the English border, in the industrial area of Flintshire. He lived in Shotton until the mid-1950s when he moved with his family to a more substantial house, Crud-yr-Awel, Sychdyn, in a more rural part of Flintshire.

The 1930s was a period when trade unions, and in particular the TGWU, rebuilt their power base. Huw T played his part in north Wales, despite the fact that the semi-rural nature of the region made recruiting members and drawing workers together a difficult task. He sought to resolve disputes through negotiation rather than conflict and developed good relations with local employers. He retained Bevin's respect but was not on good terms with **Arthur Deakin** (Bevin's deputy and future successor as general secretary of the TGWU). He remained secretary of the region until his retirement in 1953 and was replaced by his deputy, the Spanish Civil war veteran, **Tom Jones**. Tom Jones was responsible for most of the union's day-to-day activities in the post-war period, while Huw T was involved in countless public duties at a local and national level.

Huw T was politically active in Flintshire from the 1930s onwards, being elected a councillor and later an alderman on the county council. He was one of three local political leaders who dominated the politics of the county for many years - the other two being the Conservative Sir Geoffrey Summers and the Liberal **Thomas Waterhouse**. He was a staunch supporter of Flintshire's Director of Education, **Haydn Williams** and his deputy Moses Jones, particularly in their efforts to develop Welsh-medium education in the county.

In north Wales as a whole, traditional support for the Liberal party remained strong during the interwar period but his activity on behalf of the Labour cause in the area came to fruition later. He also became more widely known in the Labour Party in general, particularly in south Wales, where he was on good terms with prominent politicians such as **Aneurin Bevan** and **James Griffiths**, and by serving on the Welsh Regional Council of Labour.

He was prominent in supporting the war effort during the Second World War, ensuring that there were few labour disputes in north Wales, and served on several planning committees, including the Welsh Board of Industry and the North Wales Industrial Development Council. He was awarded the MBE but returned his medal in protest following Winston Churchill's comment during the 1945 general election campaign comparing the Labour Party to Hitler's Gestapo. Uncomfortable with honours, Huw T declined an offer of a knighthood on at least two occasions in subsequent years.

During his career, many constituencies invited him to stand for the Labour Party in parliamentary elections but he refused, believing he could have a greater impact through other means. However, he helped a number of young politicians to pursue their careers in the party. He was instrumental in securing the nomination of **Eirene Lloyd Jones** (later Eirene White), as a Labour candidate for the Flintshire constituency in 1945, using all his influence and, probably, some devious methods. Despite her defeat, when the constituency was split in two before the 1950 election, she won the nomination for East Flint and won the seat comfortably.

By the end of the Second World War, Huw T's reputation as a prominent figure in Welsh public life was cemented. He had already published an article entitled **What I want for Wales** in the journal *Wales* in 1944 which set out his uncompromising views on the future of Wales. Some of these views were deliberately provocative. He argued, for example, that 75 per cent of Welsh churches and chapels should be demolished or used more productively, but his main message was that Wales should govern itself in all fields except 'defence'.

At this time, some Welsh MPs had been pressing for the establishment of the post of secretary of state for Wales with a seat in the cabinet, but the Labour government, elected in 1945, rejected such proposals. Instead, following suggestions made by the Welsh Regional Council of Labour (on which Edwards served), the deputy prime minister, Herbert Morrison, decided to set up an advisory body called the Council for Wales and Monmouthshire. The government hoped that this council would appeal to public opinion in Wales but it was widely criticized for being a toothless unelected body. It was the minister of national insurance, **James Griffiths**, who suggested that Huw T would be the ideal chairman, as he possessed the ability and personality to lead the new body.

The Council for Wales and Monmouthshire first met in 1949 to a storm of criticism but Huw T's astute leadership ensured its survival, even when the Conservatives held power for most of the 1950s. He was the most prominent figure on the Council and, although the intention was to rotate the chairmanship among the members, he was re-

lected to the post year on year. His influence at this time was such that he became known as the 'unofficial prime minister of Wales'.

The 1950s saw an increase in pressure to recognise Wales's national aspirations. The abortive Parliament for Wales campaign, originally condemned by Edwards before he turned to support it, marked a growing strength in nationalist sentiment among some Welsh people, as well as the ambiguity of Huw T's own views. Many in the Labour Party, especially those in south Wales who espoused internationalism and opposed what they considered to be parochialism, were sceptical of such developments, especially as they were associated with the Welsh nationalist party, Plaid Cymru. In 1956 Liverpool City Council's proposal to submerge the Tryweryn valley in Merionethshire to supply the city with water, thereby destroying the valley's community, was a particularly emotive issue that led to the rise of Welsh nationalism. Huw T became involved in the unsuccessful campaign to save the valley.

In the meantime the Council for Wales and Monmouthshire had produced several useful reports, the most important of which was on government administration in Wales. The 'third memorandum' (1957), as it was called, recommended that the post of secretary of state for Wales should be established, with a Welsh office to support it. When it became clear that the proposals would be rejected by the Conservative government, Huw T travelled to London in December 1957 to meet the prime minister, Harold Macmillan. Government files suggest that Wales was being treated at this time as some form of unruly colony, and Huw T's proposed compromise, whereby a current government minister would be given the additional title of secretary of state for Wales, was rejected. Macmillan considered this to be a 'bogus plan'. Nevertheless, Huw T was determined not to allow the growing momentum on the issue to be ignored and decided to resign as council chairman in protest. The announcement of his resignation on 24 October 1958 was, according to one source, accepted with 'equanimity' by the government, but the impact on Welsh public life was not negligible. Shortly afterwards, in its manifesto for the 1959 general election, the Labour Party committed itself to establish a secretary of state for Wales.

During this time, and especially after his move to Sychdyn, Edwards became friendly with many Welsh nationalists who greatly influenced him. He wrote Welsh poetry under the tutelage of the prominent poets Gwilym R. Jones and Mathonwy Hughes. Both of these worked for the old and highly-respected Welsh language newspaper *Y Ffener* which had run into serious financial difficulties during the 1950s. Huw T was mainly responsible for saving the paper. He was courted by Plaid Cymru leaders in the late 1950s and, despite his long association with the Labour Party, announced on 6 August 1959 at the Caernarfon National Eisteddfod that he was leaving Labour and later he formally joined Plaid Cymru.

This decision, and his resignation from the Council of Wales and Monmouth, effectively ended his political career. In the words of Labour's **Gwilym Prys Davies** he was no longer 'a force in the land.' Huw T felt obliged to resign from Flintshire County Council and lost contact with influential members of the Labour movement. His rebellion had little effect on Labour's dominance of Welsh politics, and he did not become a prominent figure in Plaid Cymru, where the leadership saw him as a volatile figure during a particularly difficult time for the party. Huw T argued that the party should not stand in parliamentary elections but should become a Fabian-like organization, rather than a political party. This was anathema to the Plaid Cymru leader, **Gwynfor Evans**, whose unequivocal approach towards Welsh independence was in contrast with Huw T's fluctuating views. In the autumn of 1964 a Labour government was elected under the leadership of Harold Wilson (whom Huw T believed to have good left-wing qualifications). A Welsh Office was established under **James Griffiths** who became the first holder of the post of secretary of state for Wales. At the same time some Welsh devolutionists, such as **Cledwyn Hughes** and **Goronwy Roberts**, were promoted to positions in the new government. As a result of these developments, Huw T rejoined the Labour Party; however, he had lost most of his influence by that time.

During the 1950s and 1960s he served on many committees, including the BBC National Broadcasting Council, the Wales Gas Board and the North Wales Hospital Board advisory committee. He chaired the Wales Tourist Board from 1952 to 1965, and visited North America and parts of Europe to encourage tourism and to learn about the experiences of other countries in the field. He became a director of the independent television company Television Wales and the West (TWW), and successfully made the case for more Welsh language programmes on the channel. He published two volumes of autobiography, *Tros y tresi* (1956) and *Troi'r Drol* (1963), a book of his Welsh poems, and a volume on the history of trade union developments in north Wales.

Huw T. Edwards died at Abergele Hospital on 8 November 1970, of arterio-sclerosis, bronchitis and emphysema. He was cremated at Pentrebychan crematorium and his ashes were scattered close to where he was born on the slopes of Tal-y-fan. Through the efforts of his family and his biographer, Gwyn Jenkins, and with the aid of the local community council and the Wales Tourist Board, a memorial stone was unveiled to him in the village of Ro-wen in November 1992, one hundred years after his birth.

'Hewn from the Rock' was the title of the English version of his autobiographical works, a fitting description of one who was short in stature, but unyielding in commitment. He had a strong and attractive personality and was a fierce fighter for the needs and rights of ordinary people and for Welsh causes. He had a warm touch, tinged with romanticism, and was unfailingly generous to his friends. Although a persuasive public speaker, he was at his most effective in committee; often from the chair he would say 'we are all agreed then', when, in fact, there was no unanimity. He was a pragmatic rather than a doctrinaire socialist, and his tendency to change his mind led to accusations of inconsistency. He was a patriotic Welshman, with a romantic love for his language and culture, but also one who came to believe that Wales should govern itself. However, he lived at a time when the most important decisions about Wales were made in London and, although he could influence events, he was rarely in a position to make any far-reaching decisions himself.

Author

Gwyn Jenkins

Sources

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Huw T. Edwards, *Tros Fysgwydd* (Dinbych 1959)

Huw T. Edwards, *Troi'r drol* (Gwasg y March Gwyn 1963)

Huw T. Edwards, *Hewn from the rock: the autobiography of Huw T. Edwards* (Cardiff 1967)

Huw T. Edwards, with Gwilym R. Jones, Mathonwy Hughes and Rhydwen Williams, *Ar y cyd* (Bala 1962)

Gwynfor Evans, *Seiri cenedl y Cymry* (Llandysul 1986)

Personal knowledge and taped interviews with Huw T. Edwards's contemporaries

Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Huw T. Edwards](#)

Images

Kyffin Williams, [Huw T Edwards](#)

Sound and Film

ITV Cymru/Wales Archive: Welsh interview with Huw T. Edwards on the death of Aneurin Bevan (1960)

ITV Cymru/Wales Archive: film on Huw T. Edwards's childhood for the programme 'Dan Sylw' (c. 1965)

Additional Links

NLW Archives: [Huw T. Edwards Papers](#)

VIAF: [31513226](#)

Wikidata: [Q5951303](#)

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