

ROBERTS, EDWYN CYNRIG (1837 - 1893), pioneer in Patagonia

Name: Edwyn Cynrig Roberts
Date of birth: 1837
Date of death: 1893
Spouse: Ann Roberts (née Jones)
Child: Myfanwy Roberts
Child: Ceridwen Roberts
Child: Emyllt Roberts
Child: Cynrig ap Edwyn Roberts
Child: Gwladys Roberts
Child: Nest Cynrig Roberts
Child: Derfel Roberts
Child: Garmon ap Edwyn Roberts
Parent: Mary Kendrick (née Hughes)
Parent: John Kendrick
Gender: Male
Occupation: pioneer in Patagonia
Area of activity: Travel and Exploration
Author: Elvey MacDonald

Edwyn Cynrig Roberts was born on 28 February 1837, the firstborn child of John Kendrick (1809-1839), farmer, and Mary Hughes (1809-1892), on Bryn farm, situated between the villages of Cilcain and Nannerch, Flintshire. The record of his baptism dated 14 March 1837 at Ebeneser Independent Chapel, Rhes-y-cae, parish of Halkyn, shows that he was named Edwin Hughes Kendrick.

Soon after the birth of a second son, John, in January 1839, John Kendrick died. Mary re-married eventually with another local farmer, David Roberts, and his surname was added to the names of her sons. Following the births of Thomas (1842) and Peter (1843), the family emigrated in May 1847 to the USA, settling on a farm some ten miles south-west of the town of Oshkosh in the state of Wisconsin, where Josiah (1849), David (1851) and Annabella (1853) were born.

Edwyn altered the spelling of his given name and took the Welsh form of his surname (Cynric and Cyndrig appear in some writings and publications) as a middle name. No mention was ever made of him using his mother's maiden surname, but her Welshness was the main and most enduring influence on Edwyn.

The **Reverend Michael D. Jones's** patriotic and humanitarian ideas also had a strong influence on Edwyn, when the young preacher visited the United States in 1848 and established the Brythonic Society. A branch was opened in Oshkosh, where Edwyn, together with three of his friends, formed the area's first debating society, which enabled him to develop his talent as an accomplished public speaker. He was inspired to dream of a country where his compatriots could live as a strong Welsh nation under the banner of the Red Dragon, on land belonging to them alone, the equal to all other nations. This became the central theme of his tireless mission.

At eighteen years of age (1855) he joined a group of Welshmen who travelled to the Camptonville gold fields, in north-western California, where a conference was organized with the intention of establishing a Welsh Colonial Society. He maintained himself by working in the gold fields - an experience that would motivate him in later times - and became aware that the generation of wealth was essential to support the proposed settlement until it became self-sufficient. Although many locations were suggested, delegates agreed that Patagonia would be their aim, as no Europeans had settled there and it was far enough from the influence of English, a language seen as a threat to the survival of Welsh. This was the first time ever that the remote region was publicly mentioned in such a context.

On his return to Wisconsin, he threw himself into a proselytising campaign, and by mid-1860 felt confident enough to send a letter to *Y Faner* announcing that a request had been made for land to establish a colony in Patagonia, 'without delay'. A ship was promised, and a significant number of applications - all from the USA - were received for a place on it. But when the day to raise anchor dawned, the vessel was nowhere to be seen, and the contingent disbanded. Edwyn's defiant response was to announce that he would venture 'on his own', and the Welsh people of Oshkosh held a 'farewell meeting for the first Welshman to leave for Patagonia'.

At the office of *Y Drych* in New York, he was persuaded to exchange his ticket for one to Liverpool in order to join the Colonial Society of that city. **Michael D. Jones** invited the 'ruddy beard-less youngster', to address a meeting at Hope Hall, where **Lewis Jones** met him for the first time. Later, he was appointed Peripatetic Secretary and sent to campaign all over the country. Starting in the South, 'he set Glamorgan on fire', according to **Lewis Jones**, before repeating this feat in other counties on his way westwards and back to the north. Thomas Jones, Glan Camwy, recalled the Welsh words sung 'on the streets', which roughly translate as

'Oh Edwin, Oh Edwin, they talk about you
From Pembrokeshire to Anglesey;
your voice is exciting, your speech as fire;
Oppression and tyranny tremble when facing you.'

The fund raising failed, however, and the campaign was abandoned. Forced to look for work, Edwyn maintained himself by working in the Ince Hall colliery, in Wigan, owned by Robert James, a relative of his who became a trustee of the Society. During this period, Edwyn joined the Lancashire Rifle Volunteers 'to learn about military matters for such a time when they may be needed by the Colony'.

Following the Argentine Senate's rejection of the Colonizing Society's request to establish a Welsh Settlement in Patagonia, Dr. Guillermo Rawson, the Home Minister, offered land on which individual farmers could settle. The association confirmed the location of the new settlement, the project was advertised, applicants were invited for a place on the first contingent, and Edwyn re-joined the campaign. In March 1865, he and **Lewis Jones** were sent to Buenos Aires to confirm the arrangements with the Government before proceeding to New Bay to prepare for the arrival of the emigrants. They faced further disappointment when Dr. Rawson confessed that he could not keep his promise of financial assistance as the country was engaged in an expensive war against Paraguay.

Edwyn and Lewis were now faced with a series of troubles which would hinder their efforts, creating painful divisions within the leadership in the Colony's early days. Unbeknown to them, the *Halton Castle's* owners had broken their agreement, forcing M. D. Jones and his committee to postpone the voyage for a month whilst searching for a replacement. The disastrous result of this inevitable decision was that the settlers could not arrive in time for the sowing season, and that the promised supplies would not suffice to sustain them through the extended period. No-one foresaw that this, in turn, would condemn the contingent to poverty and hunger for at least a year, creating a conflict between it and its leaders.

After arriving in Patagones (the southernmost Argentine settlement at the time) on 24 May 1865, the two Welshmen had to wait for two weeks to obtain all their provisions. Then, along with eight men employed in the town - including their leader, Frank (Jerry) Ames, a man of Irish and Asian extraction - they headed for the New Bay, reaching their destination on 14 June. As far as they knew, they had only about two weeks to get the camp ready for the emigrants. Rudimentary pens were built to enclose the animals and only Edwyn was left on the shore to guard them overnight.

Lewis Jones returned to Patagones on 5 July to collect more timber to complete the cabins, and took four of the men with him. Edwyn was now facing a very busy (and sometimes nightmarish) three weeks, when he had to lead the work by himself with a reduced workforce. After sending Jerry to search for water, he began to drill a well assisted by the three remaining hands. As soon as he had dug deep enough, they lifted the ropes and left him at the bottom as a protest for being overworked. Fortunately, Jerry returned in time to rescue him. Later, the men were tasked with the job of clearing a road from the bay to the river.

Lewis Jones arrived back on the bay on 24 July, with the news that the ship carrying the contingent was the *Mimosa*. When the clipper's anchor was dropped three days later, just before sundown, Edwyn and the hired hands stood on the peninsula's hilltop flying the Red Dragon to welcome the contingent.

On 1 August Edwyn led the first group of youths to venture across the stony and dry Patagonian desert towards an old fortress built about a decade earlier on the shores of the Camwy (through an interesting coincidence, by the Welsh businessman Henry Libanus Jones). As well as opening a path through the tall thorny bushes for the cohorts

of shepherds and builders that would follow, their main responsibility was to cut trees for 'house' building. The boys collapsed one by one and only completed the journey when rescued by Edwyn late on the third night. The following day, they surrounded the fortress with the intention of capturing it but it was found to be empty. To celebrate, Edwyn named it Caer Antur (The Adventure Fortress). **R. J. Berwyn** believed that the contingent's success in surviving later food shortages was due to the 'training of skilled shooters' conducted by Edwyn's defence force.

On 19 April 1866, Edwyn married Ann Jones, formerly of Mountain Ash, and settled on his farm, Plas Heddwch (later Plas Hedd), before selling it to **Lewis Jones**. Letters from **Cadfan** and others refer to Edwyn's success in growing crops. He also joined with some of the many young and inexperienced settlers in small co-operative farms, in order to help and train them. There are reports also of his support for others less fortunate, even when he himself was starving. 'God alone knows how much Edwyn Roberts suffered at that time' wrote **Lewis Jones** 'not only because of his own empty stomach, but also due to the distress felt in the colony. He damaged his own constitution by quietly suffering whilst pretending in public that he was "fine". This suffering became his second nature, and hiding it a part of his religion'.

In 1871, Edwyn rode with two assistants into an area known as Kel-Kein (later the Valley of the Martyrs) in search of gold. During this unsuccessful journey he discovered that avoiding the river's winding and rocky shores by crossing forty-five miles of a wild and waterless steppe, reduced the journey by a fortnight. This part of the road between the valley and the Andes is known to this day as Edwyn's Long Trek.

After his visit to Wales (and then on to the USA to meet for the last time with his mother and brothers) in 1875 'he continued to farm on a large scale, filling his pocket many times. But he was by nature a gentleman and whilst he had, nobody else would go without', remembered Berwyn.

In 1891, he was persuaded to make a second attempt to find gold - this time on a mountain in the Andes which has since carried his name, 'Mynydd Edwyn'. For some time this seemed a promising initiative, creating a lot of excitement and raising hopes among the residents of the Chubut Valley. To promote it and to attract investors, he travelled again to Wales. He took his family with him, seeing it as a good opportunity for the children to learn about the land of their fathers and to allow them the benefit of a higher standard of education. The family settled in Bethesda, Caernarfonshire.

He also took advantage of his visit to publish the first of his planned series of fifteen volumes on the history of the Welsh Settlement. Although it was a rushed project, as evidenced by its lack of planning and almost non-existing editing, it is the first ever account of a much earlier ambitious proposal by **Morgan John Rhys** to establish a self-governing Welsh language state in the USA (1798). Sadly, no further volumes were published as Edwyn died suddenly of a heart attack on 17 September 1893. The funeral service was held two days later at St Anne's Church, Bethesda, and his remains were laid to rest in the church's graveyard, on the slope of Mynydd Llandygái.

'He died as he lived, in the midst of his hopes and projects' said **Abraham Matthews**. 'He would augur good things to come when everyone else saw only disadvantages and obstacles and, as a rule, all his predictions would be realised... He would always be cheerful in public and extremely positive. He was of a peaceful spirit and hated all contention and agitation... He would have his own way of saying things in a manner that people found attractive, and which many would often adopt as their own... His own expression to respond to the greeting "How are you today, Edwyn Roberts?" was "Campus i'r byd mawr" ("Splendid to the great world"), placing a strong emphasis on the "campus". That phrase became almost universally used, especially the word "campus".' And 'campus' is perhaps the adjective best suited to describe Edwyn's contribution to the process of building the colony of his dreams.

Author

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