

THOMAS, BENJAMIN BOWEN (Ben) (1899 - 1977), adult educator and civil servant

Name: Benjamin Bowen Thomas

Date of birth: 1899

Date of death: 1977

Spouse: Rhiannon Thomas (née Williams)

Spouse: Gweneth Thomas (née Davies)

Child: Ann Thomas

Parent: Jonathan Thomas

Parent: Ann Thomas (née Bowen)

Gender: Male

Occupation: adult educator and civil servant

Area of activity: Education; Public and Social Service, Civil Administration

Author: W. John Morgan

Ben Bowen Thomas was born on 18 May 1899 in Treorchy, Ystrad Rhondda, Glamorgan, the only child of Jonathan Thomas, a miner, and his wife Ann (née Bowen). His mother was sister to the poet **Ben Bowen** (on whom Thomas contributed an article to *The Dictionary of Welsh Biography*). The family were Baptists and Welsh was the language of the home. He was educated at Porth County Grammar School, and after service in the Royal Navy he studied Welsh at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, and later History at Jesus College, Oxford.

After five years as a tutorial class lecturer at University College, Aberystwyth, from 1922, Thomas was appointed Warden of Coleg Harlech, an adult residential college, in 1927. He supported the Labour Party initially but was a member of Mudiad Cymreig in 1924, one of the groups that formed Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru a year later. He is listed on the new party's Executive Committee in 1926. However, he does not seem to have been active in party politics after his appointment to Coleg Harlech. In 1940, he was appointed Director of Extra-Mural Studies, again at University College, Aberystwyth. During the interwar years, Thomas was also a member of the Executive Committee of the Welsh League of Nations Union, an early indication of his support for international cooperation in the cause of peace.

He married Rhiannon Williams in 1930, and they had one daughter, Ann. His first wife died in 1932, and he later married Gweneth Davies (d. 1963).

He was seconded to the Ministry of Labour and National Service in 1941, beginning a civil service career at the late age of 42. These were responsible appointments in the circumstances of the Second World War. Thomas served also on the Board of Education's Advisory Committee on the Training of Teachers and Youth Leaders (1942-1944). He was Permanent Secretary, the Welsh Department, Ministry of Education (1945-1963), and was appointed Knight Bachelor in 1950. Under Thomas's leadership and following the 1944 Education Act that introduced secondary education for all on a tripartite basis (grammar, technical, and modern), public education in Wales made important progress. The Welsh Department, with its Inspectorate, made a significant contribution to Welsh culture, identity and governance in partnership with other national institutions such as the Welsh Joint Education Committee, the National Museum, the National Library, and the University of Wales with its constituent colleges.

Thomas had a parallel career as a cultural diplomat representing the United Kingdom at the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) from 1946 to 1962. He was a member of UNESCO's Executive Board (1954-1962) and was elected its Chair (1958-1960). As such, he was a cultural diplomat promoting the foreign policy objectives of the United Kingdom and its allies during a time of Cold War and post-colonial politics. Again, as UNESCO diversified in membership, so language issues became more sensitive. Thomas contributed to the debate, using the Welsh language as an example. In 1958, he published in *The UNESCO Courier* an optimistic article on '[Bilingualism: How Wales solved this great educational problem](#)'. He also broadcast on 'Education in Welsh' and on 'The Welsh Language' for UNESCO Radio.

After his retirement in 1963, Thomas contributed to public life in ways that continued his lifelong commitments. He wrote occasionally in Welsh on his UNESCO experience, such as in the magazine *Y Genhinen* and the weekly newspaper *Baner ac Amserau Cymru*. Thomas was also known for his valuable contributions to Welsh history and literature, including *Braslun o hanes economaidd Cymru hyd 1914* ('An Outline Economic History of Wales to 1914') (1941), *Baledi Morgannwg* ('Glamorgan Ballads') (1951), and *Drych y Baledwr* ('The Balladeer's Mirror') (1958). Such publications illustrate the multi-faceted nature of his intellectual and cultural interests. This was recognized in his later appointments and awards. He was President respectively of the National Institute of Adult Education, then a UK body, 1964-71; University College, Aberystwyth, 1964-76; the Baptist Union of Wales, 1966-67; and the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, 1969, and awarded its Medal in 1976. He was elected Honorary Fellow, Jesus College, Oxford, 1963, and received an honorary LLD, Wales (1965) and an honorary D. Univ., from the Open University (1977). Importantly from a cultural perspective, he was a member of the Independent Television Authority (1964-70). Perhaps most significant politically, he served on the Royal Commission on the Constitution (1969-73) which gave impetus to devolution in the United Kingdom.

Ben Bowen Thomas was undoubtedly one of the most influential public figures in twentieth-century Wales. He was respected for his clarity of thought and expression, his calmness, authority, and capacity for friendship. A prominent adult educator and later civil servant, Thomas had a profound effect on education policy, recognising its fundamental importance for Welsh national identity within the United Kingdom. Again, Thomas's prominence as a cultural diplomat to UNESCO enabled him to contribute to global intellectual cooperation and development. In both spheres, he drew on Welsh traditions of Christian social commitment and idealist internationalism by which he had been shaped, and to which he added a characteristic pragmatism.

He was influenced by the example of **David Davies**, Lord Davies of Llandinam, the most cogent Welsh supporter of the League of Nations, and through a close co-operation with **Dr Thomas Jones**, the prominent Welsh civil servant and founder of Coleg Harlech. In a Memorial Address at Bethel, Aberystwyth, on 2 November 1977, Sir Goronwy Daniel recalled: 'He never forced his own appreciation of the truth on others but he listened to all and understood them, and then he used his great gifts to secure that

agreement which permitted the greatest possible progress to be made ... It is not surprising that after seeing his contribution as Chairman of UNESCO, Lord Gladwyn Jebb judged him to be one of the best of all the overseas representatives of Britain.'

Ben Bowen Thomas died at his home in Bangor, Gwynedd, on 26 July 1977.

Author

W. John Morgan

Sources

Family information

W. John Morgan, 'Ben Bowen Thomas, Wales, and UNESCO', Lecture to the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, 20th April 2021. An extended version is forthcoming in *The Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*

National Library of Wales Archives: *Sir Ben Bowen Thomas Papers, 1926-1977*, accessed 6 November 2020

UNESCO Archives, Paris, accessed 8 November 2020

Who's Who and Who was Who: *Thomas, Sir Ben Bowen*, accessed 7 November 2020

Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Ben Bowen Thomas](#)

Additional Links

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