

## DAVIES, JOHN (1938 - 2015), historian

**Name:** John Davies  
**Date of birth:** 1938  
**Date of death:** 2015  
**Spouse:** Janet Davies (née Mackenzie)  
**Child:** Anna Davies  
**Child:** Beca Davies  
**Child:** Guto Davies  
**Child:** Ianto Davies  
**Parent:** Daniel Davies  
**Parent:** Mary Davies (née Potter)  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** historian  
**Area of activity:** History and Culture; Scholarship and Languages  
**Author:** Meic Birtwistle

John Davies was born on 25 April 1938 in Llwynypia Hospital, Glamorganshire, the son of Daniel Davies (d. 1950), carpenter, and his wife Mary (née Potter), a teacher, of Dumfries Street, Treorchy. His grandfather William Davies died in the Maerdy Pit Explosion of 1885 and his family relationship to the Rhondda Valleys and its coal industry was absolutely essential to his view of Wales and the world. He was named after his father's brother, John Davies, socialist, trade unionist and noted promoter of working class education. English was the main language of the home for family reasons.

Because of his father's ill-health and a local rule that did not allow the employment of married women teachers, the family moved when John was seven to Bwlch-Ilan in Cardiganshire, his father's native region, where his mother had succeeded in gaining the post of headmistress, and they settled in the schoolhouse. John Davies later became widely known as John Bwlch-Ilan.

John went to primary school in Treorchy and Bwlch-Ilan before winning a place at Tregaron Grammar School. He soon became fluent in Welsh, although the staff of the grammar school were mixed in their attitude towards the language. Whilst in school as well as reading widely, he developed a love of the culture of Wales and particularly its history and literature.

After leaving school he travelled extensively in Britain and Europe for a year, before going in 1956 to study history at University College Cardiff. He graduated with a first class degree in 1959 and won a scholarship which enabled him to study for a doctorate at Trinity College Cambridge. During his period at Cambridge his friendship with students from the north of England strengthened his awareness of his working-class identity. On the other hand, in Cardiff he had been influenced by Welsh nationalist ideas. During his university education he also came into contact with overseas students, especially from India. He gained a doctorate on the subject of 'Cardiff and the Marquesses of Bute' (published as a book in 1981) from the University of Wales in 1968 (his thesis being too long to be accepted under the rules of Cambridge University).

Davies joined Plaid Cymru whilst at university and organised a meeting during the party's conference at Pontarddulais in 1962 that was to lead to the creation of the Welsh Language Society in 1963. He became the Society's first national secretary and remained supportive of the movement for the rest of his life. He played a prominent part in the campaign for Welsh language road signs.

In 1963 he was appointed to his first post in the History Department of University College Swansea lecturing through the medium of Welsh. In 1966 he married Janet Mackenzie, a research student from Bryn-mawr, and they moved to Dryslwyn to live. She also became a successful historian and author. They had four children, Anna, Beca, Guto and Ianto.

John Davies was appointed lecturer in the Welsh History Department at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth in 1973, and was promoted to Senior Lecturer in 1981. He was the first warden of the new Welsh-language hall of residence, Neuadd Pantycelyn, from 1974 until 1992.

He became a frequent media presence as an astute and lively commentator on historical and political issues, even appearing on quiz programmes, bringing freshness and humour to every topic. As a presenter he appeared on series such as *History Hunters*, ITV Wales and *Yr Hen Ogledd* ('The Old North') on S4C and Channel 4. Reading remarkably widely, John was always very keen to share his considerable knowledge. His comments were full of literary references and enlivened by humorous anecdotes, often of a personal nature.

He stated that he and his wife had considered emigrating following the failure of the referendum on devolution and the election of Margaret Thatcher as prime minister in 1979. And indeed, the two of them frequently travelled far and wide, sometimes as an entire family. But also John wandered on his own, particularly when writing some of his most serious works, such as what is arguably his most important book, *Hanes Cymru* (1990, published in English as *A History of Wales* in 1993), the research for which was intensive and involved ten volumes of notes. The author Jan Morris has described holding the 700 page book as having Wales in its entirety in the palm of your hand.

His travelling, in addition to his reading, gave a deep vision to his work as a historian and observer. But it was his early upbringing in bilingual industrial Wales and then in the rural heartland of the Welsh language which supplied him with special perspectives on his homeland. He visited every parish in Wales and his writing clearly showed the close relationship between land and language.

In November 1998, at the time of the scandal relating to Ron Davies's sexuality, John Davies decided, after consultation with Janet, to publically reveal his own bisexuality. This fact itself may also have contributed to his sagacity as an author and social observer. He and Janet had moved to Cardiff in 1992, and even after separating the two lived nearby to each other in Grangetown, remaining close as a couple.

He was the official historian of the British Broadcasting Corporation in Wales, writing the volume *Broadcasting and the BBC in Wales* (1994), whilst also publishing on the history of Plaid Cymru in books and pamphlets. He was one of the editors of *The Welsh Academy Encyclopaedia of Wales*, published in 2008, which contains some 5,000 articles, many of the more substantial entries written by Davies himself. In 2010 he won the Welsh 'Book of the Year' award for *Cymru: Y 100 lle i'w gweld cyn marw* ('Wales: A 100 places to see before you die', 2009), with photographs by Marian Delyth, a splendid guidebook to the land he loved.

In 2013 he was the subject of the raw biographical documentary *Gwirionedd y Galon* ('The Heart's Truth') which won a Welsh BAFTA. And in the following year, a short while before his death, he published his autobiography, humorous and open in its style, *Fy Hanes i* ('A life in history').

John Davies's intention as an author was to create a canon of historical work in order to analyse and celebrate his nation as regards its culture, politics and landscape. He was one of a generation of historians, and maybe the most outstanding amongst them, who fired a renaissance in Welsh historical study. His collection of volumes stand as a testament to his commitment and delight in the task, and as a gift to his people.

John Davies died of cancer in Cardiff on 16 February 2015.

### Author

Meic Birtwistle

### Sources

John Davies, *Fy Hanes i: hunangofiant* (Talybont 2014)

Russell Davies, 'John Davies obituary,' *The Guardian*, 25 February 2015

Meic Stephens, 'John Davies: Academic and broadcaster whose peerless histories of Wales were rich with insight and fascinating detail' *The Independent*, 19 February 2015

Vaughan Hughes, *Barn*, March 2015

Peter Stead, 'The most cosmopolitan of all Welsh historians' Institute of Welsh Affairs, February 2015

## Further reading

Paul O'Leary, 'Obituary: John Davies (1938-2015)', *Welsh History Review*, vol. 28, no. 2 (2017), pp. 549-63

Wikipedia Article: [John Davies \(historian\)](#)

## Additional Links

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