

RHŶS, ELIZABETH (Elspeth) (1841 - 1911), teacher, hostess and campaigner for women's rights

Name: Elizabeth Rhŷs
Date of birth: 1841
Date of death: 1911
Spouse: John Rees
Child: Gwladus Rhŷs
Child: Myvanwy Rhŷs
Child: Olwen Rhŷs
Parent: John Davies
Gender: Female
Occupation: teacher, hostess and campaigner for women's rights
Area of activity: Education; Business and Industry; Activism
Author: Ffion Mair Jones

Elspeth Hughes-Davies was born on 26 May 1841 at Tyn yr Aelgerth farmhouse near Llanberis, Caernarfonshire, the daughter of John Davies (Sion Dafydd yr Ali, c.1813-1881). Her father was considered to have exceptional mental powers, although he was a 'simple man' who had received none of the benefits of schooling; her mother's name is unknown. After working as a pupil-teacher in north Wales, Elspeth went on to Borough Road Teacher Training College for Women in London, before her appointment as head of the British Girls' School in Amlwch. There, in 1861, she met **John Rhŷs**, then the young headmaster of Rhos-y-bol school. Later, Elspeth left Anglesey to serve as head of the British School at Broughton, Flintshire; then, encouraged by Rhŷs, she took up a position as an English teacher in Boulogne, France, and traveled further on the Continent. She spent time in Paris, Switzerland, Germany, and Rome, where she studied art at the studio of narrative painter Achille Buzzi, becoming an accomplished portrait painter.

When war broke out between France and Prussia (the Franco-Prussian War; 16 July 1870-28 January 1871), she was a languages student at the Sorbonne University, Paris. To ensure her safety, she moved to Vienna, sending a letter from there, dated **27 September 1870**, to the liberal Welsh Calvinistic Methodist weekly, **Y Goleuad**. This was the first in a series of letters to the paper from the continent, with two subsequent letters, on **4 January** and **25 March 1871**, written from Berlin. Elspeth expressed her distrust of the views of the British press regarding the war, described the Prussia of Otto von Bismark (1815-1898) as 'the Sparta of this age', and offered a 'free translation' of an article from the *Neue freie Presse*, condemning the imprisonment of the left wing Jewish politician, Johann Jacoby (1805-1877), as 'an act of blatant oppression'. The correspondence displayed the sharpness of her views regarding the great powers of Europe, the conflict between Protestantism and Catholicism, and the harmful effects of war.

The response of **John Davies**, editor of *Y Goleuad*, to Elspeth's first letter shows his pride at seeing a young woman 'born and brought up at the foot of Snowdon' writing from abroad in faultless Welsh. He could also have noticed her unmistakable talent as a linguist. Her translations of German texts in her correspondence with the paper were proof that she had completely mastered that language. Her linguistic abilities were further nurtured through her relationship with Rhŷs, who gifted her with a French-German dictionary early on in their relationship, sent her Latin lessons by post during her time in Berlin, and came to visit her there during the winter of 1871. In early summer 1872, Elspeth returned to Wales and, on 6 August of that year, she and Rhŷs were married at Llanberis Parish Church. They settled in Rhyl, where Rhŷs was based as Her Majesty's Inspector for Flintshire and Denbighshire schools. Their first child, Gwladus, was born in May 1873, but died at Llanberis on 10 June 1874, before the birth of the second child, Myvanwy, on 1 August 1874, and a third daughter, Olwen, on 4 March 1876.

When Rhŷs was appointed the first Professor of Celtic at the University of Oxford in 1877, the family moved to Gwynfa, 35 Banbury Road, Oxford, dividing their time between that and the official residence of 'The Lodgings' from 1895 onwards, when Rhŷs was appointed head of Jesus College. They had spent summers in Llanberis with Elspeth's parents since the girls were babies, and the routine of visiting Wales annually in the summer continued after the family moved to Oxford, with a week at the National Eisteddfod incorporated into their stay. At a meeting under the auspices of Cymdeithas y Cymmrodorion at the Denbigh eisteddfod in August 1882, Elspeth made what was dubbed a 'clever' speech in favour of female education, arguing that restricting this right was harmful not only to women but also to men, who were thereby driven into the cynical world of the club, thus damaging family life. The same year, Elspeth chaired the first discussion in Wales on women's education. Both her own and her husband's sense of the importance of education was reflected in the care given to the development of their two daughters. The mother delighted in their ability in arithmetic as young children, and their mastery of foreign languages and culture was promoted by employing a French tutor to live with the family and by visits such as the one in the spring of 1881, when Myvanwy, aged six, was sent to St Cloud convent school to deepen her knowledge of French. This attention was later repaid by the notable successes of both daughters as students at Oxford High School for Girls; Myvanwy at the University College of North Wales, Bangor, and Newnham College, Cambridge (with her degree in Classics awarded by Trinity College, Dublin, in 1905); and Olwen at the University of Oxford, where she gained a first class degree in Modern Languages in 1901 courtesy of the Association for the Higher Education of Women (a degree that was not recognized by the University until 1920).

The injustices which befell her daughters at the great British universities followed years of commitment by Elspeth and the rest of the family to Liberal causes and women's suffrage. In 1888, Elspeth was invited to join the General Committee of the National Society for Women's Suffrage by its founder, the amateur scientist Lydia Becker (1827-1890). In the same year, she proposed establishing a branch of the Women's Liberal Association in Oxford; she became vice-president of this branch, and president of the Mid-Oxfordshire office branch in 1892. Her involvement with Liberalism was deepened through her role as hostess at the family's 'open house': as well as students and scholars from Wales, Britain, and beyond, she welcomed **David Lloyd George**, his wife **Margaret** and their children, to lodge and dine at the Rhŷs home, and the two families became close friends. Elspeth's correspondence shows that she was involved with a number of other Liberal politicians in the British parliament, together with prominent individuals within the nationalist cause in both Wales and Ireland. Furthermore, it confirms the closeness of her relationship with scholars in many fields, a notable proportion of whom were French. Among them, she could number the folklore collector Henri Gaidoz (1842-1932) and the philologist Paul Meyer (1840-1917); the Assyriologist Archibald Henry Sayce (1845-1933); the theologian Edwin Hatch (1835-1889); and progressive women such as Welsh doctor **Frances Hoggan** (1843-1927); the Patagonian author **Eluned Morgan** (1870-1938); and Eleanor Mildred Sidgwick (1845-1936), principal of Newnham College, Cambridge, from 1892.

Throughout her busy life as the wife of a figure influential in Oxford as a teacher and then as a college head, Elspeth suffered frequent bouts of ill health. Her death on 29 April 1911 was quite unexpected, nonetheless. She was remembered with admiration among those who knew her in Oxford as well as neighbours from her youth in Llanberis, with **Alice Gray Jones**, the editor of *Y Gymraes*, fondly reminiscing that 'Miss Hughes Davies was the ideal of every girl in the place, and to be like her was our ambition'. She was buried at St Cross cemetery, Holywell, Oxford, with her husband laid to rest in the same grave following his death in December 1915. An impressive terracotta monument was placed on the grave showing two heads with their eyes closed facing each other and a plaque below listing the honours awarded to John Rhŷs and noting his wife's name and dates.

Author

Ffion Mair Jones

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Archives

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NLW Archives: Sir John Rhys papers: B1/2: Notes and papers, 1862-1911

NLW Archives: Sir John Rhys papers: B3/4: Diaries of Elizabeth Hughes, 1896-1909, 1912-1914

NLW Archives: Thomas Edward Ellis Papers, 1876-1929: Letters to T. E. Ellis from Rhys, E[lsbeth], [1895]

Additional Links

Find a Grave: s.n. [Elsbeth Rhys](#)

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