

ETHÉ, CARL HERMANN (1844 - 1917), scholar

Name: Carl Hermann Ethé
Date of birth: 1844
Date of death: 1917
Spouse: Harriet Dora Ethé (née Phillips)
Parent: Mathilde Ethé (née Lappe)
Parent: Franz Ethé
Gender: Male
Occupation: scholar
Area of activity: Scholarship and Languages
Author: Marion Löffler

Hermann Ethé was born on 13 February 1844 in Stralsund, northern Germany, the son of Franz Ethé and his wife Mathilde (née Lappe). From 1863, he studied Philology at Leipzig, gaining his doctorate in 'Oriental Languages' in 1865. He was employed by Munich University as Lecturer in Oriental Languages from 1865 to 1871. He knew a substantial number of mid-Asian languages, teaching Hebrew, Arabic, Persian, Syriac or Ethiopic, and Sanskrit, as well as modern languages, such as German, French and Italian.

According to his biographers, he left for the United Kingdom to escape the persecution of political radicals following the unification of Germany under Bismarck in 1871. Having received an Honorary MA from Oxford University, Ethé moved to the Bodleian Library in 1871, where he assembled catalogues on its Persian, Turkish, Hindustani and Pashto, as well as its Arabic manuscripts. In 1872 he was commissioned to catalogue the Persian manuscripts in the India Office Library, publishing a first volume in 1903. The fruits of his scholarship are still apparent in the *Encyclopædia Iranica*. In 1875, Ethé became Professor of German and Oriental Languages at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, where he was also Professor of French Language and Literature until 1894. He married British national Harriet Dora Phillips in 1899. His seventieth birthday in February 1914 was honoured with an article in *The Times*.

At the outbreak of war in September 1914, Hermann Ethé and his wife were on holiday in Munich, returning to the United Kingdom with the assistance of the American Consul in Dresden and through the intervention of the Home Office. Ethé was to continue in his post at Aberystwyth, and also to work for the Foreign Office. The couple reached Aberystwyth on 13 October 1914, but a day after their return, printed leaflets urged the town's inhabitants to assemble at the Tabernacle Chapel and besiege the professor's house in Caradog Road. The call was answered by a mob of over 2,000 people, who threw stones and threatened the life of Ethé and his wife, forcing the couple to leave Aberystwyth in the early hours of 15 October. They found initially refuge with relatives in Reading, moving to Bristol in spring 1916. Ethé then succeeded in having some of his books sent from Aberystwyth.

Between 1914 and 1915, the refusal of Aberystwyth University College to dismiss Ethé officially was met with public town meetings and letters threatening legal and direct action, which led to the College Council urging the professor's resignation, to which he agreed in early autumn 1915, and voting him an early pension. Hermann Ethé died on 7 June 1917 in Bristol and was buried at Canford Cemetery. His application for British naturalisation had been unsuccessful; his widow's application for re-admission to British citizenship was granted on 20 August 1917.

Until the 1970s, the language employed to persecute the couple and threaten Aberystwyth University College, as well as the discourse about Ethé's person, were marked by intolerance and xenophobia. Eminent historian [Sir Owen M. Edwards](#) was criticised for defending this 'German' and 'running down Aberystwyth town'. [Llais Llafur](#), the only newspaper which defended Ethé, did so by claiming that he was not German, but 'French Huguenot, whose ancestors fled to Germany during the prosecution of the Huguenots'. English colleague Charles Herfort called him 'strikingly abnormal', admitting that he was a 'versatile man of genius' yet was almost offended by his 'Homeric laughter'. The recollections of one of Ethé's former students, Welsh historian [R. T. Jenkins](#) (written in 1944-5, but not published until 1968), contain an offensive description of Ethé's accent as 'indescribably funny' and a phonetic reproduction of the way he spoke English which suggests the xenophobia of a man at the heart of Welsh intellectual life. Nevertheless, Jenkins expresses the highest respect for Ethé as a scholar and contempt for the hypocritical bigotry of those who condemned his open enjoyment of alcohol. He quotes the opinion of the College Principal, [T. F. Roberts](#) about the persecution of Ethé: 'It was not the hooligans; it was the responsible leaders of the town who did this.'

A plaque commemorating the work of Hermann Ethé was commissioned in 1974, but for many years it was attached to the inside wall of the University's Hugh Owen Building, hidden under a bench. It was only on the centenary of the persecution of Ethé that Aberystwyth town and the Christian Morlan Centre on the site of the old Tabernacle chapel took steps to publicly remember the events. A commemorative plaque - the first to draw attention to mob violence during the Great War and the only trilingual memorial plaque in the British Isles - now has a prominent place in front of the Morlan Centre. Aberystwyth University staged an exhibition, some of which is still available online, and independent Welsh producer 'Tonnau' created *'Bravo Aberystwyth'*, a programme for Radio Cymru which analysed the events of October 1914.

Author

Marion Löffler

Sources

The Cambrian News and Merionethshire Standard, 16 October 1914

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Y Cymro, 23 December 1914

'Hermann Ethé (1844-1917)', Read the Plaque

'Professor Hermann Ethé', Aber Special Collections, Aberystwyth University

Geraint H. Jenkins, *The University of Wales* (Cardiff 1993), p. 37

Further reading

'Bravo Aberystwyth', Celtic Media Festival

'Bravo Aberystwyth', Radio Cymru

'Aberystwyth plaque marks town's 'shameful' episode', BBC News 7 June 2017

E. L. Ellis, *The University College of Wales Aberystwyth 1872-1972* (Cardiff 1972)

'Ethé, Carl Herrmann', in Encyclopædia Iranica

'Hermann Ethé Memorial', War memorials online

Wikipedia Article: Carl Hermann Ethé

Additional Links

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