

RHYS-ROBERTS, THOMAS ESMOR RHYS (1910 - 1975), soldier and barrister

Name: Thomas Esmor Rhys Rhys-roberts
Date of birth: 1910
Date of death: 1975
Spouse: Barbara Ruth Rhys-Roberts (née Eccles)
Child: Timothy Rhys-Roberts
Parent: Arthur Rhys Roberts
Parent: Hannah Dilys Roberts (née Jones)
Gender: Male
Occupation: soldier and barrister
Area of activity: Law
Author: Keith Bush

Thomas Esmor Rhys Roberts (he later adopted 'Rhys-Roberts' as a surname) was born on 22 April 1910 at 23 Albion Road, Hampstead, the son of **Arthur Rhys Roberts**, a solicitor, and his wife Hannah Dilys Roberts (née Jones), a well-known singer. Arthur Rhys Roberts had been a law partner of **David Lloyd George** and still advised him on personal legal matters. One of Thomas's earliest memories was accompanying his father to 10 Downing Street and being placed in a chair at the Cabinet table by Lloyd George, who had just been appointed Prime Minister.

Rhys-Roberts lost his father when he was ten years old. He was sent to Westminster public school. Despite the strength of the family's legal background, Rhys-Roberts chose a career as a professional soldier and went on to Sandhurst Royal Military Academy before being commissioned, in 1930, as an army officer. He served in the Far East and was, in 1935, part of the international military force that oversaw the referendum in the Saarland that led to the reunion of that province with Germany.

Soon after, he left the army in order to qualify as a barrister, being called to the Bar at Gray's Inn in 1936. He married, in June 1939, Barbara Ruth Eccles and they had one son, Timothy, born in 1941. By then Rhys-Roberts had returned to the army, serving in North Africa and Italy, where he was wounded. He was awarded the George Medal for moving a railway wagon that was on fire and in danger of causing the whole train to explode. He left the army at the end of the war as a Lieutenant-Colonel.

On his return to the Bar, Rhys-Roberts moved to the Cardiff area, settling in the Vale of Glamorgan. He built a successful practice in south Wales, mainly in the criminal courts. Despite his Liberal roots, he became a prominent member of the Conservative Party, standing unsuccessfully for that party in the 1950 (Pontypridd) and 1951 (Newport) elections.

'Tommy' Rhys-Roberts was an impressive presence in the courts. His height (well over six feet) and his aptitude with words, enabled him effectively to focus a jury's attention on his arguments. He had a tendency, however, on the political stage as well as in courts of law, to let his eloquence go too far and to expose some prejudiced attitudes. Campaigning for the Conservatives in the Pontypridd constituency, he explained that the function of a Tory government would be to sweep out of the House of Commons 'the cloying stench of socialism'. And when, in 1951, he defended a man of Somali origin from the Cardiff docklands area on a charge of murder, he suggested that he came from a part of the world characterised by 'semi-civilised savagery'.

In the most high-profile case in which Rhys-Roberts was involved, a 1952 murder case against **Mahmood Mattan**, another Somali (the last man to be hanged in Cardiff prison) he returned to the same theme. Mattan's conviction was overturned in 1998 on the grounds that police had concealed evidence suggesting that another man had committed the murder. But another difficulty the defence had was Mattan's very unsatisfactory performance when being cross-examined by the prosecutor, **Herbert Edmund Davies**. Many believe that Rhys-Roberts made matters worse, in his efforts to persuade the jury to ignore the weaknesses of Mattan's evidence, by suggesting that they should remember that, because of his background, he was 'half child of nature, half semi-civilised savage'.

Another important case associated with Rhys-Roberts's name was one at Shrewsbury Crown Court in 1973. He represented one of six construction workers (another of whom - Ricky Tomlinson - subsequently became a well-known actor) from north-east Wales and north-west England. They were charged with conspiring to organise intimidating pickets outside construction sites in the district during an industry strike. The convictions were again quashed, almost half a century later, because it had become clear that the police had destroyed important evidence.

Rhys-Roberts was appointed Queen's Counsel in 1972 and made, in the same year, a part-time judge (Recorder) of the Crown Court. He died of cancer on 6 June 1975, barely three weeks after his last appearance in the courts.

Author

Keith Bush

Sources

The Times Digital Archive

British Newspaper Archive

The London Gazette

The Law List

Chris Phillips, *Hanged for the Word If* (Cardiff 2020)

Additional Links

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