

LEVI, THOMAS ARTHUR (1874 - 1954), professor of law

Name: Thomas Arthur Levi
Date of birth: 1874
Date of death: 1954
Parent: Margaret Levi (née Jones)
Parent: Thomas Levi
Gender: Male
Occupation: professor of law
Area of activity: Education; Law
Author: Emrys Owain Roberts

Born in Swansea, 18 December 1874, son of **Thomas Levi** and his second wife Margaret (née Jones). When he was two the family moved to Aberystwyth when his father became minister of Tabernacl (Presb.) chapel. Educated at Ardwyn grammar school he entered University College of Wales Aberystwyth in 1891 graduating B.A. (Lond.). He entered Lincoln College Oxford in 1893 where he won the Carrington Prize for Law in 1897 and graduated with first-class Honours in Law. He took the B.C.L. postgraduate degree in 1900 and in the same year he was first in First Class in the Bar Final, with the Certificate of Honour. He was a member of the Inner Temple.

When the Law Faculty was opened at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, in 1901, he applied for the Chair of Law, despite the advice of the Vinerian Professor of English Law at Oxford, A. V. Dicey, that he should not throw away his brilliant gifts in such a remote and insignificant place (Levi had succeeded F. E. Smith (later Lord Birkenhead) as one of Dicey's star students). Nevertheless, Dicey supported him and he was appointed Professor of English Law at Aberystwyth. W. Jethro Brown was appointed Professor of Constitutional and Comparative Law but left in 1906 for his native land, Australia, where he became a Chief Justice. Levi headed the Law Department thenceforward until his retirement in 1940.

Under his care the department became nationally known, both in universities and in legal circles. He set himself three objectives. First, to establish the small and financially fragile department in public acceptance in Wales and especially to win the goodwill of lawyers. He travelled widely in Wales, with joyous enthusiasm, lecturing to solicitors' articulated clerks and winning financial and moral support from important societies. Secondly, he was eager to convince the University, its teachers and authorities of the value of law as a discipline which any self-respecting university must teach. He persuaded internationally known lawyers, academic and practising, to deliver public lectures at Aberystwyth, and attracted first-rate lecturers, many of whom headed Law Departments at larger universities later. Thirdly, in his own words, he was always concerned that university teaching of law was more than 'breeding pettifogging solicitors to work up vexatious litigation'. The Department had a 'duty to teach students the principles of public service, to train them to take part in communal life and inspire them with a high ideal of citizenship'. To some extent, he had to compromise. Roman Law was not part of the syllabus, despite its importance in the legal systems of many countries, nor was a great deal of the history of the Common Law taught, but Constitutional and International Law were taught, though perhaps too much time was spent in fields better taught in professional law schools, in order to make a good impression on practitioners.

Research and publications were not his world. He was rarely to be seen in the library (though he kept abreast of legal publications). He had in 1896 published an edition of Welsh poems (begun by his father), and various articles, one noteworthy one being on the Welsh Laws of **Hywel Dda**. But his college task, far above all else, was teaching. As a university teacher, he was unique and shining, in his delivery, voice and style. Law was never a dull topic in Levi's lecture room, students from other disciplines came to hear him and be entranced. The taking of notes was sternly discouraged, vivid examples cited to illuminate the most abstract legal doctrines and at the end he dictated a brief note of essential points - with never a note himself in any part of the lecture. He tended to deprecate the value of examinations but had a delightful talk on how to score marks in any legal paper. His power of holding an audience was also special. At Cambridge, Lord McNair, later President of the International Court of Justice, spoke of Levi's incredible talent to hold spellbound a most learned and sceptical audience of university teachers of law. A popular lecturer everywhere, a formidable debater in a debating society, his ability lay in his skill to produce almost uproarious laughter at the expense of his opponent's points and then drive home the deadly shaft. His deafness ruled out questions at lectures and debarred him from many wide contacts in the college life. He arrived each morning with his driver, immaculate in his well-pressed navy blue suit, his hearing aid clipped to his head. He wore the barrister's gown, never academic robes. A bachelor, alleged to like and be liked by members of the other sex, there was, however, never a whiff of scandal.

A staunch Liberal all his life, modestly boasting that no General Election was fought adequately without his intensive participation - but in the lecture room, never a hint of party propaganda, though he was ready to parade his Liberalism in evening college talks where he was always a strong opponent of capital punishment and defects in the law. He was invited to stand as Liberal candidate for Cardiganshire and a number of constituencies in south Wales but he refused. He was an elder (from 1908) at Tabernacl Church.

His students knew him as 'Tommy' Levi but there was never a hint of disrespect in his presence, friendly though his demeanour always was. His great feat was to raise the University's Law Department to wide public esteem and broaden the outlook of the thousands of students who came to it from all parts of Wales and other countries, so that this Department stood as high in the regard of the academic world as any department in the University. He was not given any public honour to mark his contribution but his memory evokes a special kind of affectionate respect from his former students scattered throughout the world in many spheres of life.

He died at Aberystwyth on 24 January 1954 and was buried in the public cemetery.

Among his publications are: *Casgliad o ganeuon Cymru* (1896); *The opportunity of a new Faculty of Law* (inaugural lecture) (1901); *Apêl at ddirwestwyr* (1916); *Legal education in Wales* (1916); 'The laws of Hywel Dda in the light of Roman and Early English law', *Aberystwyth Studies* (1928); 'The law department University College of Wales', in **Iwan Morgan**, ed., *The College by the Sea* (1928); *The Story of Public Administration and Social Service. Suggestions for the formation of a school of public administration and social service, in connection with the University of Wales*.

Author

Emrys Owain Roberts, (1910 - 1990)

Sources

Iwan Morgan (ed.), *The College by the Sea* (1928) (1928)

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Published date: 2001

PDF Print Cite

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APA Citation



Roberts, E. O., (2001). LEVI, THOMAS ARTHUR (1874 - 1954), professor of law. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Retrieved 13 Nov 2024, from <https://biography.wales/article/s2-LEVI-ART-1874>

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