

## STEPHENS, JOHN OLIVER (1880 - 1957), Independent minister and professor at the Presbyterian College, Carmarthen

**Name:** John Oliver Stephens  
**Date of birth:** 1880  
**Date of death:** 1957  
**Parent:** Martha Stephens  
**Parent:** John Stephens  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** Independent minister and professor at the Presbyterian College, Carmarthen  
**Area of activity:** Education; Religion  
**Author:** Dewi Aled Eirug Davies

Born at Llwyn-yr-hwrdd, Pembrokeshire, 12 May 1880, son of John Stephens, the Independent minister of Llwyn-yr-hwrdd and Bryn-mymach, and Martha his wife. He was educated at Tegryn school, Cardigan county school and the Presbyterian College, Carmarthen (1900-02, 1906-09), University College Cardiff (1902-06), Cheshunt College, Cambridge (1909-12). He had a brilliant career, winning several scholarships and at the beginning of his preparatory course at the Presbyterian College, before he went on to University, one of the external examiners had referred to him as a young man of exceptional abilities. He graduated with a B.A. (with honours in philosophy), B.D. (Wales) and M.A. (Cantab.). At Cambridge he was a student of Sir James George Frazer. In 1912 he was ordained as a minister, without pastoral care of a church, at Llwyn-yr-hwrdd and in the same year he was appointed to the chair of Philosophy at the Presbyterian College. He was also responsible for teaching Christian doctrine, the history of religions and Christian ethics. He was instrumental in persuading the faculty of theology of the University of Wales to establish a course on Christian ethics independent of that on Christian doctrine. For a period of forty-five years as professor and teacher he introduced generations of students to a pattern of scholarship and culture that went far beyond the bounds of the subjects he taught.

He was learned in Welsh, English, German and French literature and as early as 1914 he pleaded for more attention to be given to the fine arts in Wales (see 'Y prydferth yng Nghymru', *Y Geninen*, October 1914). In 1916 he received an invitation to become the minister of the church at Union Street, Carmarthen. He served that church for a period of forty-one years. He was the president of the Union of Welsh Independents, 1942-43 and the Dean of the faculty of theology of the University of Wales, 1955-57. He contributed widely to Welsh periodicals. In *Y Geninen*, apart from the reviews and the portraits of men such as George Essex Evans, **Dewi Emrys**, **Dylan Thomas** and **Dyfnallt**, there is a translation by him of a short story by Guy de Maupassant, 'Le Retour' (January 1921); a warm appreciation of the contribution of Professor Edmund Crosby Quiggin, the Celtic scholar, and a study on the Celts and warfare (Summer 1956 : a translation by D. Eirwyn Morgan of 'Keltic War Gods' that was published in *Religions*, July 1941). Through his regular contributions to *Y Tyst* he presented the thoughts and views of men like Henri Bergson, Nicolas Berdyaev, Karl Barth and Leonhard Ragaz. In the column 'Myfyrgell y Diwinydd' which he began in February 1939, he discussed skilfully a host of subjects such as the early religion of Europe, the earliest European civilisation and the divine meaning of history. In *Y Dysgedydd* (January; August; November 1955; July 1956) he dealt with the contribution of some of the foremost theological philosophers of Russia. One of his most notable contributions, 'The True Quality of Prayer', was published in the journal *Religions* (October 1940). He delivered the Upton Lectures in 1940, choosing as his subject, 'The crisis in social psychology. He also contributed articles dealing with sociology, the principles of Independence (Congregationalism) and with the Welsh of Australia.

In November 1927 he sailed to Australia to try to improve his health. He chronicled the story of his journey in 'A year in Australia' (*Y Dysgedydd*, February 1931-March 1932) and in a travel book that is in the National Library of Wales (**NLW MS 20591C**) - two priceless sources for information about the Welsh connections of that continent. People sought to persuade him to make his home there, but he returned to Carmarthen and to Wales to enrich its life and culture as a professor, theologian and philosopher, and also to adorn it through the force of his enchanting personality. He died on 10 March 1957.

### Author

**Dewi Aled Eirug Davies**, (1922 - 1997)

### Sources

D. L. Trefor Evans in *Athrawon ac Annibynwyr* (1971) (ed. Pennar Davies)

Dewi Eirug Davies, *Hoff Ddysgedig Nyth Cyfraniad Coleg Presbyteraidd Caerfyrddin i fywyd Cymru* (Swansea 1976), 211-5

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**Published date:** 2001

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