

STEPHEN, ROBERT (1878 - 1966), schoolmaster, historian and poet

Name: Robert Stephen
Date of birth: 1878
Date of death: 1966
Spouse: Mary Elizabeth Stephen (née Thomas)
Spouse: Alice Noel Stephen (née Jones)
Parent: Anne Stephen
Parent: Urias Stephen
Gender: Male
Occupation: schoolmaster, historian and poet
Area of activity: Education; Eisteddfod; History and Culture; Music; Performing Arts; Poetry
Author: Derwyn Jones

Born 30 September 1878, in Penygroes, Caernarfonshire, son of Urias Stephen, railway signalman, and his wife, Anne. Robert received his early education in Penygroes, Clynnog, and the secondary school at Oswestry. He went to Bangor University College in October 1896. He then taught in the elementary school, Cyffylliog, in 1899 and then returned to Bangor, where he graduated in Welsh in 1903. He taught in London from 1903 to 1908. In 1907 he was awarded an M.A. of the University of Wales for a thesis entitled 'The Poetic Works of Bedo Aerddrem, Bedo Brwynllys, and Bedo Phylip Bach'. In 1908 he went as a teacher to a boarding school in Taunton, but left after a year because he was not offered a living-out post. In January 1909, he was appointed a teacher in the grammar school at Pontypool (Jones' West Monmouthshire School), where he stayed until he retired in 1948. He was a very versatile man. He taught Welsh, history, geography, and mathematics. In August 1913 he took a course in geography at the University College in Aberystwyth in order to be able to teach history and geography as a joint course. **Professor H.J. Fleure** said that he had a freshness of attitude only rarely found in teachers who had been out of University for more than ten years. When the chemistry and physics teachers went to the army in World War I he undertook the work of teaching these subjects through the school, taking a special interest in physics.

He was an enthusiastic eisteddfod competitor throughout his life. In the national eisteddfod in Llangollen in 1908, when the adjudicator was **Sir Owen M. Edwards**, he won the first prize for a collection of the work of **Guto'r Glyn**. **Sir Owen** kept the work, intending to publish it, but it never appeared. In the national eisteddfod in Colwyn Bay, 1910, again under the adjudication of **Sir Owen M. Edwards**, Stephen shared the prize with the Reverend D.R. Jones, Cardiff, for the best collection of the unpublished work of any Welsh poet of Tudor times, with a short biography of the bard and critical notes of his work. It is not known what became of this work. In the national eisteddfod of Abergavenny, 1913, he shared the prize with **Peter Williams** (Pedr Hir) for a play in verse on the life and death of **William Herbert** of Raglan Castle, first Earl of Pembroke. He wrote poetry, in both the strict and free metres, and plays, throughout his life. He was also a skilled musician, and came from the same stock as **Edward Jones Stephen** ('Tanymarian') and Robert Stephen ('Moelwyn fardd', 1828 - 1879), who was a police officer in Conwy. He won the prize in the Ystradgynlais national eisteddfod in 1954, for a translation into Welsh of the libretto of Princess Ju Ju. His translation of the Bohemian Girl was performed in Penygroes, his native village, on 11 December 1947. He published, at his own expense, about a dozen to twenty musical compositions. He was the General Secretary of the national *eisteddfod* of Pontypool in 1924, and General Secretary of the first musical festival held in Llandudno, in October 1945, and many times afterwards. He was a member of the Gorsedd, under the bardic name, 'Robin Eryri'.

He was married twice: (1) to Alice Noel Jones, daughter of a sea captain from Borth-y-Gest. They had three children, (2) in Caxton Hall, London, on 8 January 1942, to Mary Elizabeth Owen, widow of Captain Ralph D. Owen, army officer, and daughter of Edmund and Elizabeth Thomas, Gelli Haf, Maesyccwmer. The Gelli Haf family was very famous in Monmouthshire, and connected in some way with the family of **William Thomas** ('Islwyn').

After his second marriage, he began to take interest in the lacquer industry of Pontypool. In 1947 he contributed an article on the industry in the periodical *Apollo*, and another in *Antiques* (New York, 1951). He contributed an article on the **Allgood family** to the *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. His manuscripts on the **Allgood family**, and the lacquer industry, are in the National Museum in Cardiff, and the remainder of his manuscripts are in the library of the University College, Bangor, excepting the manuscript of his collection of the work of the three Bedos, which is in the National Library.

He died in his home in Colwyn Bay on 2 January 1966.

Author

Derwyn Jones

Sources

Personal knowledge

Additional Links

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Wikidata: [Q20821214](#)

Published date: 2001

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