

WILLIAMS, ROBERT ROLFE (1870 - 1948), a pioneer of Welsh-medium education

Name: Robert Rolfe Williams
Date of birth: 1870
Date of death: 1948
Spouse: Rachel Anne Williams (née Jones)
Spouse: Esther Williams (née John)
Parent: Mary Williams
Parent: Thomas Williams
Gender: Male
Occupation: a pioneer of Welsh-medium education
Area of activity: Education
Author: David Jenkins

Born in 1870 in Llwyn-teg, Llan-non, Carmarthenshire, son of Thomas Williams, minister (Congl.), and his wife Mary. He was educated at Bryndu Elementary School, and the Copper Works School, Llanelli. In 1880 his father accepted the pastorate of Soar Chapel, Clydach Vale, Rhondda, and Robert became a pupil-teacher with Thomas Williams ('Glynfab'), at the local school. He went to the University College, Cardiff (1892-94), before joining the staff of Ferndale Secondary School. He returned to Clydach Vale in 1896 as headmaster of his old school. He was widely acclaimed for his heroic leadership on 11 March 1910, when he was largely responsible for rescuing all but five of the pupils caught in the school yard when it was flooded by water from a disused coal-level at the head of the valley. He was awarded the Albert Medal for his bravery. Later that year he was appointed headmaster of Llwynypia School before being promoted Inspector of Schools. His flair for administration was greatly appreciated when he effectively re-organised the Authority's evening schools which catered for 20,000 students. In 1915 he became Assistant Director of Education for the Rhondda, and after World War I he increasingly concerned himself with the development of Welsh-medium education. In 1921, on his advice, five primary schools were designated bilingual schools. The Education Committee published his *Report ... on the teaching of Welsh in the bilingual schools of the Authority* (1925) and recommended that Welsh be the medium of instruction in these infant schools; that all the senior departments be conducted on the bilingual plan; that Welsh be included in the curriculum of the Secondary Schools as a subject of instruction, and as a medium of instruction in some other subjects. In 1926 a scheme was published to cover the needs both of pupils and of non-Welsh speaking staff. That the Education Committee was fully supportive of this revolutionary language policy was manifested in 1927 when it appointed its author to be Director of Education. Unfortunately his strength was heavily taxed; he suffered a severe breakdown in 1931 and had to retire before his plans were fulfilled. By the mid-1930s the Education Committee's enthusiasm for the Welsh language policy had waned and the scheme was dropped. The Council forfeited a unique opportunity to secure the rightful inheritance of the Welsh pupils attending the Valley's schools, and also of leading the country in the field of bilingual education. Consequently, there developed during the 1930s a clear break in the linguistic pattern of Welsh-speaking families with the younger generation increasingly losing the mother-tongue. Some of those children, fifty years on, became the most fervid supporters of the Welsh-medium Schools Movement.

R.R. Williams was a Fellow of the Geological Society, was made an O.B.E. (1932), and awarded an honorary M.A. degree by the University of Wales (1933). He was an active and valuable officer of many of the county's cultural societies. He married (1) at Cardiff, 7 December 1892, Esther John of Marian Street, Clydach, daughter of Benjamin John, collier; they had a son and two daughters. After their divorce he married (2) Rachel Anne Jones, Tonpentre (died 27 July 1970). He retired to Llwyn-teg, Llan-non. He died 26 July 1948 and was buried in Llwyn-teg (Congl.) cemetery.

Author

Dr David Jenkins, (1912 - 2002)

Sources

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