

ELLIS, EDWARD LEWIS (1922-2008), historian and biographer

Name: Edward Lewis Ellis
Date of birth: 1922
Date of death: 2008
Gender: Male
Occupation: historian and biographer
Area of activity: History and Culture; Literature and Writing
Author: John Graham Jones

Ellis was born at Aberystwyth on 21 March 1922, one of the three children and only son of Griffith Thomas Ellis and his wife Elizabeth (née Lloyd), Cambrian Street, and the nephew of a well known local politician, Alderman R. J. Ellis (1888-1976). He was educated at Alexandra Road Primary School and Ardwyn Grammar School where he became head boy in 1940-41. He entered the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, in October 1941 primarily to study history, but was called up to serve in the royal navy from 1942 until the end of the war. Here he served as a gunnery officer and attained the rank of lieutenant. In 1945 he returned to Aberystwyth to continue his undergraduate studies and graduated with an exceptionally good First Class Honours degree in history in 1947. In the same year Ellis married Eirlys Thomas, also a native of Aberystwyth. He also excelled as a footballer of extraordinary ability, chosen to play for the Aberystwyth Town First XI as a schoolboy aged just sixteen, and he later played regularly for the Aberystwyth Town team, becoming their top scorer in four consecutive seasons from 1947 until 1951. He was even asked to turn professional and play for Arsenal in 1948.

In 1947 Ellis had been awarded an university studentship to pursue postgraduate research work under the supervision of S. H. F. (Fergus) Johnston on the Whig Party during the reign of Queen Anne, for which he was to be awarded the MA (Wales) degree in 1950. In 1949 he had taken up the position of tutor in history at Ruskin College, Oxford, where he was to remain for the next thirteen years and attain the rank of senior tutor. Their two daughters Susan and Linden were both born at Oxford. In addition, Ellis undertook part-time doctoral research at University College, Oxford (under the supervision of David Ogg) for a thesis on 'The Whig Junto in relation to the Development of Party Politics and Party Organisation from its Inception to 1714', a task which he eventually completed in 1961.

In 1962 Ted Ellis (as he was generally to become known in academic circles) made the decision to return to Aberystwyth, initially to take up the position of full-time warden of the prestigious Pantycelyn Hall, built in three stages in 1951, 1955 and 1959. In addition, Dr Ellis concurrently fulfilled the role of part-time lecturer in the university's History Department, specialising mainly in modern British history. In 1968 Ellis agreed to teach full-time in the History Department, and in 1969 he was promoted to the rank of senior lecturer. By this time, too, he had accepted the invitation of the college authorities to research and write a history of the institution in readiness for the celebration of its centenary in 1972. The resulting volume was most highly applauded on all sides, universally regarded as a real breakthrough in the writing of an institutional history. Dr Ellis remained at Pantycelyn until September 1974, tending to rue somewhat the move towards a mixed Welsh medium hall of residence.

In 1975 Ellis began research work on a biography of Lord Davies, Llandinam (1880-1944), but quickly became disillusioned with the generally poor quality of the surviving papers. Then in January 1978 came an informal approach from the Baroness White of Rhymney and her brother Tristan Jones that Dr Ellis should prepare a full-length biography of their father Dr Thomas Jones CH (1870-1955), the former deputy secretary to the Cabinet from 1916 until 1930. After some hesitation and discussion, he accepted the alluring offer. Then in 1986 he found himself obliged to draft and edit a booklet on the ninety-year history of the college's celebrated Alexandra Hall at the far end of the promenade which the authorities had decided to close. In September 1988 Dr Ellis agreed to take early retirement from the college, but continued to teach in a part-time capacity for one further academic session. At long last, the Thomas Jones biography was completed by the summer of 1990, but took a further two full years to go through the press. It was launched at a grandiose reception at the House of Commons on 2 June 1992. The massive biography, which ran to 553 pages, was exceptionally well-received. An illustrated booklet on the history of Pantycelyn Hall also appeared in 2001.

Ted Ellis had also made a remarkable contribution as a committed, inspiring university teacher. All his courses were popular and appealed to a large numbers of undergraduates, attracted by the unflinching lucidity of his lectures, and his appealing style as a teacher. In his last years, he suffered from a particularly distressing and progressive lung condition which saw him become increasingly dependent upon the devoted care and support of his second wife Pamela Maureen (Evans) whom he married 30 October 1998 after the death of his first wife. Following a very long illness, Dr E. L. Ellis died at Bronglais Hospital, Aberystwyth, on 2 March 2008. His funeral was at Llanbadarn church 7 March followed by cremation at Aberystwyth; the ashes were buried at Cefnllan cemetery, Aberystwyth.

Author

Dr John Graham Jones

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