

BOWEN, EMRYS GEORGE (1900-1983), geographer

Name: Emrys George Bowen
Date of birth: 1900
Date of death: 1983
Gender: Male
Occupation: geographer
Area of activity: History and Culture; Literature and Writing; Nature and Agriculture; Travel and Exploration
Author: Harold Carter

Emrys Bowen, or EGB as he was widely known, was born on 28 December 1900 at Spilman Street in Carmarthen, the elder child of Thomas and Elizabeth Bowen. His father, a former tinplate worker, was an insurance agent. He was educated at Pentre-poeth Council School and at Queen Elizabeth Grammar School, Carmarthen. After a year as an assistant teacher in the Model and Practising School in Carmarthen, he proceeded to the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth in 1919 where he studied under [Professor H. J. Fleure](#), graduating with a First-Class Honours degree in Geography in 1923. The following year he entered the Education department and obtained a teacher's diploma. Subsequently, and after a year's research at Aberystwyth, he became the first Cecil Prosser Fellow at the Welsh National School of Medicine at Cardiff.

During 1928-9 he was an assistant editor with the 14th edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* before being appointed an assistant lecturer in the department of Geography and Anthropology at Aberystwyth in 1929. There he stayed for the rest of his academic career as lecturer, senior lecturer and ultimately Gregynog Professor in 1946. During the Second World War he remained at Aberystwyth and lectured in meteorology to the Initial Training Wing (ITW) of the RAF which was located there.

There were three areas of his discipline to which Bowen contributed during his academic career. The first was physical anthropology, the physical characteristics of populations. This is reflected in the subject of his MA thesis, awarded with distinction, which was entitled 'South West Wales; a study of physical anthropological characters in correlation with varied distributions'. This was the outcome of his work in what now would be called medical geography where he was especially concerned with the incidence of miner's phthisis in the lead mines of Cardiganshire. A number of publications, including 'The incidence of Phthisis in relation to race type and social environment in South and West Wales' in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* in 1928, and 'The incidence of Phthisis in relation to racial types and social environment in Wales' in the *British Journal of Tuberculosis* in 1929, reflected this early work. However, over time, physical anthropology became much less important in his research and effectively it was abandoned as more sophisticated methods became employed. He did, nevertheless, continue to supervise research in the field.

The second strand in his work was the significance of cultural inheritance in geography where he was much influenced by the work of French geographers with their emphasis on 'genre de vie', or way of life. He was foremost amongst British geographers in stressing the significance of culture in the shaping of landscape. The third strand was the more conventional theme for geographers of his day, the impact of the physical environment on earth patterns. Although a firm believer and an exponent of the role of culture in the framing of the landscape he never detached himself from the dominant contemporary notion of geography as being primarily concerned with the impact of environment on humankind, with the environment narrowly interpreted as the physical world.

These later concerns were reflected in his subsequent publications. Indeed, his first published paper was 'A study of rural settlement in South-West Wales' (*The Geographical Teacher*, 1925-6, 13, 317-326) and it foreshadowed a field which became his specialism and with which he became primarily associated. Amongst the progenitors of the rural settlements of Wales were the cells established by Christian missionaries in the post-Roman period, the so-called Celtic Saints. It was in this area that the major part of Bowen's work was to be concentrated. In 1932 he published an article on 'Early Christianity in the British Isles. A study in historical geography' (*Geography*, 17, 1932, 267-277), and in 1934 *Aberystwyth Studies* included a paper by him on 'The travels of St Samson of Dol' (*Aberystwyth Studies*, 13, 61-7).

From these early bases his research and publications broadened to cover the proto-history of western Britain and its prehistorical antecedents. A wide range of papers followed including two in the journal *Antiquity*: 'The travels of the Celtic Saints' (XVII, 1944, 16-28) and 'The settlements of the Celtic Saints'(XIX, 1945, 175-186). However, the full development of his work is represented by his three books, *The settlements of the Celtic Saints* (1954), *Saint, seaways and settlements* (1969) and *Britain and the western seaways* (1972).

Apart from this specialised field his interests were wide and he wrote on a great range of topics of Welsh interest. Amongst them was his first book, *Wales: a study in geography and history* which was published in 1941. Again, he was for many years a Sunday School teacher at Bethel, a Welsh Baptist Chapel in Aberystwyth and after his retirement he lectured on church history in the United Theological College at Aberystwyth. Amongst his publications are papers which reflect this interest, for example 'Bedyddwyr Cymru tua 1714' in *Trafodion Cymdeithas Hanes Bedyddwyr Cymru* (1957-8, 5-14) and 'Eglwys Bethel a Bedyddwyr Gogledd Ceredigion' (*Llawlyfr Undeb Bedyddwyr Cymru*, Aberystwyth, 1972, 10-19). As a tribute to him and as a representation of the scope of his work two former students published a selection of his writings (H. Carter and W. K. D. Davies, eds, *Geography, Culture and Habitat*, 1975), a book which contains an extended exegesis of his work by the editors and a bibliography to that date. Bowen's commitment to the study of Welsh society was seen in his encouragement of research. He appointed Alwyn D. Rees to his Department and with him initiated a series of studies of Welsh rural communities which became the backbone of community studies in Britain.

Emrys Bowen's contribution to his discipline was widely recognised and acknowledged. He was President of The Institute of British Geographers in 1958, President of section E of the British Association in 1962, President of the Geographical Association in the same year and President of the Cambrian Archaeological Society in 1967. He was awarded the Murchison grant of the Royal Geographical Society in 1958. In 1949 he was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries. He was awarded an honorary LL.D. by the University of Wales and an honorary Doctorate by the Open University. He was an honorary member of the Gorsedd of Bards.

Although his written work is extensive, it was probably as a teacher and a lecturer that he was supreme. His expositions were based on careful structuring and the timing of a consummate actor; it was in the tradition of the cyfarfddwyddiaid, of the story-tellers of early Wales and of the Welsh preachers of later times rather than of the academic disquisition, just as his research was based on intuition rather than on the systematic analysis of data bases. His appearance was short and dark, the epitome of the

conventional Welshman. There is a photographic portrait in the book edited by Carter and Davies, and in 1968, on his retirement, his former students presented him with a portrait by Scott Nisbett which was presented to the National Library of Wales by his sister on death. His physical character enhanced the liveliest of presentations. He was willing to lecture throughout Wales, in the smallest of village halls as well as the largest of lecture theatres. By his devotion to his subject he did much to establish geography as an academic discipline in Wales. But more than that his influence spread much wider to ensure the significance in British geographical studies of historical antecedents and social structures.

Emrys Bowen was unmarried and in his later years lived with his sister, Elizabeth (Betty) Bowen. He died 8 November 1983 in Aberystwyth and was buried in Carmarthen.

Author

Harold Carter

Sources

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David Thomas, 'E.G.B. : an appreciation', *Cambria*, 3 (1976), 169-71

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The Times, 12 November 1983

Personal knowledge

Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: Emrys G. Bowen

Additional Links

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