

EDWARDS, WILLIAM THOMAS (1821-1915), physician and prime mover in the establishment of the Cardiff Medical School

Name: William Thomas Edwards
Date of birth: 1821
Date of death: 1915
Gender: Male
Occupation: physician and prime mover in the establishment of the Cardiff Medical School
Area of activity: Education; Medicine
Author: Alun Roberts

William Edwards was born 6 December 1821 at Caerphilly, one of five children of Evan Edwards, a family doctor in Caerphilly, and his wife Caroline Morgan. William was the great-grandson of **William Edwards**, the celebrated pastor of the historic Groes-wen chapel, Caerphilly and architect, in 1756, of the bridge crossing the river Taff at Pontypridd which had, at that time, the longest single span in Europe. After experiencing the rudiments of healing as an apprentice to his father, William proceeded to University College, London for his formal medical education, there being no opportunity in the early Victorian period for Welsh boys to train in their own country to be medical practitioners. In the course of an interview given by Edwards in the *South Wales Daily News* on the occasion of his eighty-ninth birthday he recalled how long and hard had been the journey from home to London during the early decades of the nineteenth century. 'Some seventy years ago, when I set out for London, the journey took me two days; I can do it now almost in as many hours! I had to go to Newport on foot, then by packet to Bristol; from there to London by coach'. A gifted student, Edwards became a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons of England in 1842 and a Licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries in the following year. In 1844 he graduated MB London with distinction, gaining gold medals in anatomy, physiology, materia medica and midwifery.

In that year Edwards returned to Wales and, after briefly practising in Llanfabon near to his family home, he moved to Cardiff, setting up in practice at 75 Crockherbtown in the centre of what was then still a small town. Having obtained the MD of the University of London in 1850 he joined the staff of what was then called the Glamorganshire and Monmouthshire Infirmary as honorary surgeon in 1851, a position he held until 1862 when he became the hospital's second physician. He continued to serve as honorary physician to the Infirmary until his retirement in 1886, at which point he was elevated to the ranks of the consulting physicians and surgeons, the elder statesmen of the profession who had left active clinical practice. He continued to be involved in the administration of the hospital in various capacities for the rest of his life, serving as chairman of its management committee during the 1890s. He was one of the instigators in establishing the Cardiff Medical Society, formed in 1870 to provide a local forum for the discussion of medical matters, and, by then the senior physician at the Infirmary, he was elected successively the first vice-president and second president of the Society.

Despite his heavy medical commitments Edwards took an extremely active part in the social and political life of what was, during the second half of the nineteenth century, an increasingly prosperous and self-confident town. A devoted Congregationalist who regularly attended Charles Street Congregationalist Chapel right up to the time of his death, he was a leading supporter of the Liberation Society, pledged to bring about the disestablishment of the Church of England. He was also a prominent member of the local Liberal Association, acting for some years as its vice-president. Indeed, for many years Edwards was a close associate of **John Batchelor**, mayor of Cardiff in 1853 and the town's leading radical in the mid-Victorian period, hated and loved in equal measure by the local people. Edwards served as a magistrate for the borough of Cardiff and the county of Glamorgan, and for some years as a town councillor until the pressure of competing commitments forced him to stand down, 'much to the regret of the townspeople', as the *Western Mail* observed, 'for they recognised in him a man who could rise above party considerations whenever the interests of the municipality had to be considered'.

Outside medicine, the cause dearest to William Edwards' heart was the advancement of education, at all levels. Involved in the development of non-sectarian primary education in Cardiff via the British School movement from the late 1840s, Edwards became an active member of the Cardiff School Board during the 1880s and 1890s, serving as its vice-chairman from 1890 until the Board's dissolution in 1904. His commitment to the promotion of higher education was, if anything, stronger. He was an early supporter of the creation of a university college in Cardiff and, immediately following the establishment of the University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire (taking over what had previously been the Infirmary building) in 1883, in addition to donating £500 to the College's development fund, Edwards became a life governor of the College and a member of its governing Council, a position he would retain until 1897. Thereafter he would serve as one of the College's vice-presidents until his death.

From the outset Edwards was determined that the College should have a medical school, not at that stage a full medical school - apart from any other consideration the clinical facilities in Cardiff were totally inadequate - but somewhere for aspiring doctors in Wales to train during the early years when they were most vulnerable. In the course of the newspaper interview referred to above Edwards explained his motivation. 'You were the pioneer of the Medical School, Dr Edwards? The doctor closed his eyes. I wanted every Welsh boy to get the fullest opportunity to study Medicine at home'. He secured the perfect platform to advance his aim when, in July 1885, the fifty-third annual meeting of the British Medical Association met in Cardiff. As the most prominent medical man in south Wales he was elected president and, during a wide-ranging address to the delegates, touching on advances in medical science since the previous visit of the Association to Wales (to Swansea in 1853), and landmarks in the recent social, economic and cultural history of Cardiff, he took the opportunity of referring to his aspiration for a medical school in Cardiff: 'We hope at no distant time to see a medical school connected with our College, as there is at present not one in Wales, though it supplies a large number of medical students to the Irish, Scotch and London universities'. He then publicly pledged £1,000 towards the establishment of the school. Other doctors, particularly members of the Cardiff Medical Society, and local businessmen, fell in behind Edwards and, by the spring of 1893 he was chairing the meeting of the College Council which appointed the medical school's foundation professors of anatomy and physiology in time for a 4th October start. On 14 February 1894 the Cardiff Medical School was officially opened by Sir Richard Quain, president of the General Medical Council, who congratulated 'gallant little Wales' on its achievement, the proceedings chaired quite fittingly by William Edwards. In 1911 the University of Wales conferred upon him the honorary degree of Doctor in Legibus in recognition of his great services to education. Edwards lived long enough to see the school prosper and take great strides towards the acquisition of new buildings worthy of Wales's medical school. Sadly, however, he died, on 11 April 1915 aged 93, a few weeks before the foundation stone was laid for a new state-of-the-art Institute of Physiology on Newport Road, funded by the great Welsh coalowner and philanthropist, **Sir William James Thomas**.

In 1845 William Edwards married Mary Elizabeth Paine, who died in 1892. In the following year, at the age of 72, he married Edith Evangeline Batchelor, one of the daughters of his old friend **John Batchelor**. She would outlive him by four years. There were no children by either marriage. Revered as a father figure among his colleagues 'the old doctor', as he was affectionately known, was laid to rest in the Edwards family vault in St Martin's churchyard, Caerphilly, on 15 April 1915, having undoubtedly fulfilled his philosophy of life, 'to seek to leave the world better than you found it'.

Author

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Sources

Alun Roberts, *The Welsh National School of Medicine, 1893-1931: The Cardiff Years* (2008)

P. H. Thomas, 'Medical Men of Glamorgan: William Thomas Edwards (1821-1915)', 2 parts, *The Glamorgan Historian*, 7 (1971), and 8 (1972)

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