

HUGHES, ROBERT ARTHUR (1910-1996), medical missionary in Shillong, Meghalaya, north-east India, and an influential leader in the Presbyterian Church of Wales

Name: Robert Arthur Hughes

Date of birth: 1910

Date of death: 1996

Gender: Male

Occupation: medical missionary in Shillong, Meghalaya, north-east India, and an influential leader in the Presbyterian Church of Wales

Area of activity: Medicine; Religion

Author: D. Ben Rees

He and his twin brother, John Harris Hughes, were born at Oswestry on 3 December 1910, the sons of the Reverend Howell Harris Hughes, Welsh Presbyterian minister in the town, and his wife Annie Myfanwy Hughes (née Davies), a native of Garth, near Llangollen who served as a headmistress in Rhoslanerchrugog. The family soon moved to Bangor where their father was minister of Tabernacl chapel and both sons received their early education in Garth School. From Bangor the father received a call to Welsh Presbyterian chapel at Waterloo in north Liverpool, and the brothers received their education at Christchurch school and Waterloo Grammar school near Seaforth (1921-1925) and the John Bright grammar school, Llandudno, when their father became minister of Shiloh church, Llandudno.

R. Arthur Hughes had a distinguished period as a medical student in the University of Liverpool from 1928 to 1933, and he was one of the most able students of his generation. Graduating in 1933 he received the Gold Medal for surgery as well as other awards. He was appointed house surgeon under Mr (later Professor) O. Herbert Williams, a Presbyterian church elder, and assistant to Dr (later Professor) Norman Capon at the Royal Southern Hospital. He was invited to be the John Rankin Fellow in Human Anatomy at the University before serving for two years at the David Lewis Northern Hospital as a tutor and surgical registrar. He was elected FRCS in 1937.

He offered his services as a medical missionary with the Presbyterian Church of Wales on the Khasia Hills in north-east India. He was warmly accepted by the Missionary Board of his denomination and he decided to equip himself further by gaining a Diploma in Tropical Medicine and further training at the Radium Institute and Mount Vernon Hospital in London.

At the David Lewis Northern Hospital in Liverpool he met Sister Nancy [Ann Beatrice] Wright of Heswall, who became his wife on 7 January 1939. They sailed on 28 January 1939 from Birkenhead to Calcutta. Arthur Hughes began his life's work on St David's Day 1939 at the Welsh Mission Hospital in Shillong as assistant to Dr H. Gordon Roberts. He took responsibility for all the wards, with Dr H. G. Roberts in charge of the administration until his retirement in 1942. He subsequently became the Senior Medical Officer, the administrator, as well as the finance officer. He gave substantial medical assistance to the wounded on the Kohima to Diampur road - the famous Burma Road - comforting the refugees who were in desperate conditions escaping from the Japanese army. Between 1942 and 1945 he dealt with thousands of soldiers and officers from all over the world, including a number of Welsh soldiers who had to be treated in the Shillong hospitals. Dr R. Arthur Hughes became the public-health liaison medical officer, between the army and the local authorities in the Assam region and between the British Army and the Tea Industries Medical Services.

Under his guidance the Welsh Mission Hospital in Shillong became one of the most important hospitals in the Indian sub-continent with patients flocking there for treatment. Among these patients there were Government Civil Servants, entrepreneurs and their families from the tea plantations of the Assam plains and Cachar, and middle-class people from as far as Calcutta. These patients were the chief source of finance for the hospital, allowing Hughes and the staff to offer high medical and surgical care and opportunities for poor Khasi folk who often would walk on foot 100 miles one-way to receive treatment.

His daily schedule was long, twelve hours a day from Monday and Friday as well as a clinic on Saturday mornings. On Tuesdays and Thursdays he would be involved in the hospital from 7.30 in the morning often until 10.30 at night; surgical operations took up the other weekdays. Although he had surgical assistants from time to time, while he was on the mission field he never had help from a trained medical person in the Presbyterian Church of Wales though he made a number of pleas. He realised that the only answer was to train young Khasi men and women to undertake the work, one of his most important contributions. He was a pioneer in north-east India who achieved remarkable changes in aspects of medical care through his pamphlets on public health and his initiative in tackling diseases such as malaria and typhoid, and also stomach, bone and blood disorders. He began extensive research to the medical condition of inaccessible villages in the Bhoi area, and persuaded the authorities in Delhi to sustain a campaign to conquer malaria under the auspices of the World Health Organisation. Dr Hughes established a travelling pharmaceutical service with a jeep visiting the markets in the towns within reach of Shillong.

A man of deep religious faith, he gave substantial service to the Presbyterian church in Shillong, and on Sundays he and his wife were heavily involved in church life. Elected an elder in 1944 he was involved in religious education. In his work he was extremely caring for the needs of his fellow missionaries when they were ill, as well as missionaries of other nationalities and churches. He was awarded the OBE in 1960.

Missionaries were required to withdraw from India in 1969. A farewell service to him and his wife Nancy was held on 16 May 1969 when the Khasi hill-people came to pay their tribute to one who was known as Schweitzer of Assam. Arthur Hughes returned to Shillong in 1984 to help to resolve difficulties that had arisen there, and again in 1991 to celebrate the 150 years' birthday of the church when he had the opportunity of addressing a crowd reckoned to be 150,000 strong.

Dr R. A. Hughes made his home in 1969 in Liverpool, the city where his father had been born, and where his grandfather and family had lived in the Dingle in the nineteenth century. Appointed as Academic Sub-Dean of the Medical Faculty of the University of Liverpool in 1969, he retired in 1976.

He gave sterling service to the Presbyterian Church of Wales, as an elder at Heathfield Road Chapel, Liverpool in 1971, Moderator of the Liverpool Presbytery, Chairman of the Elders' Meeting of the North Wales Association in 1982-3, and Moderator of the General Assembly in 1992-3. Though suffering from angina, he never missed a committee during his year of office nor an invitation to visit other denominations and churches. He had a weak speaking-voice and he admitted that he was much more fluent speaking publicly in the Khasi language than in Welsh or English, but nevertheless, he was an endearing and deeply respected leader. Like his father before him, he was a convinced absolute pacifist who took an abiding interest in the Peace Movement. He served as a trustee of the North-east India-Wales Trust and his contribution was always positive and useful. He published a number of articles in *Y Goleuad*, *Y Cenhadwr*, *The Treasury*. He was the leader of the Cymry ar wasgar (Overseas Welsh) at the Llandudno National Eisteddfod in 1963.

R. Arthur Hughes died on Saturday morning, 1 June 1996 at the Cardiothoracic Hospital, Broadgreen, Liverpool and the funeral service took place at Bethel Chapel, Heathfield Road, Liverpool on 10 June 1996 and afterwards in Springwood Crematorium. His ashes were scattered near St Tudno's Church on the Great Orme, Llandudno. He was survived by his wife and their only son, John, himself a medical practitioner, ordained an Anglican priest in Cheshire in 2007. A Robert Arthur Hughes Memorial Lecture was arranged by the North-East India-Wales Trust in Liverpool between 1997 and 2007 and six were given by D. Ben Rees, D. Andrew Jones, Elfed ap Nefydd Roberts, Aled Jones, Gwyn A. Evans and Alwyn Roberts. The first three lectures were expanded and published in a volume under the title *The Call and Contribution of Dr Robert Arthur Hughes OBE, FRCS 1910-1996 and some of his predecessors in North East India* (Liverpool 2004).

Author

D. Ben Rees

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Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Robert Arthur Hughes](#)

Additional Links

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