

PHILLIPS, THOMAS BEVAN (1898-1991), minister, missionary and college principal

Name: Thomas Bevan Phillips
Date of birth: 1898
Date of death: 1991
Gender: Male
Occupation: minister, missionary and college principal
Area of activity: Education; Religion
Author: D. Ben Rees

Known to his family and friends as Tommy, T. B. Phillips was the first of seven children born to Daniel and Mary Catherine Phillips at 239 Bridgend Road, Maesteg on 11 April 1898. He was baptised in Libanus Calvinistic Methodist Chapel, Garth, Maesteg by the Reverend H. W. Thomas. Nurtured in the chapel environment of that community for the first five years of his life, he began his schooling at Garth Primary School. In 1903 the family moved from Garth to Coryydd, near Coity where they lived for 3 years before moving back to Maesteg. Then Tommy attended the Davies Oakwood Colliery School in Eweny Road, Maesteg. While living in Coryydd he was exposed to the 1904-5 Religious Revival under the direction of his devout mother. The experience of listening to the miners singing Welsh hymns as they walked to the collieries and on their return home made him ask searching questions. His mother explained to him the phenomenon of the Revival and the work of the Holy Spirit in that mining community and Tommy Phillips went with his parents to a large number of open-air revival meetings and chapel services where he experienced warm fellowship and the influence of four leading revivalists [Evan Roberts](#), [Seth Joshua](#), R. B. Jones and [Joseph Jenkins](#).

At the Davies Colliery School he gained a prize from the hands of the schoolmaster R. J. Jones for an essay on South Africa. The prize was a biography of the missionary David Livingstone, and the story of his African endeavours made a huge impact on him. When he was ten years of age he succeeded in an examination for admission to the Higher National School in Plasnewydd. One of his close friends there was Idris Cox who became a leading member of the British Communist Party. In 1911 T. B. Phillips left school to help the family and began work at the coal face in the Davies Colliery. There he met a large number of miners who were active in the St John's Ambulance Brigade. Other movements which gained his adherence were the 'Good Templars', a temperance movement - he signed the pledge of no alcohol, no smoking and no swearing, a pledge on which he never compromised for the rest of his life - and the Adult Evening Classes at the Davies Colliery school and Plasnewydd. Above all, he was enriched by the Sunday School. The influence of the Anglican Sunday School at Coity, and the Sunday Schools of Libanus and Tabor Chapels were of great importance to him. After attending the evening classes, Tommy Phillips sat the Deputy Fireman Examination at the age of 16 and gained the Certificate, one of the youngest in the whole of the Glamorganshire coalfield to qualify. He also began to be involved in the activities of the local Lodge of the Federation of the South Wales Miners Union and was elected a member of the Llyfni Valley Libraries Committee. He argued energetically for the extension of Garth Library and for the establishment of a new library to serve the community of Cwmdu. Phillips gained the admiration of the local MP [Vernon Hartshorn](#), a miner's leader, who encouraged him to involve himself in the activities of the Labour Party, telling some of his officers in the Ogmere constituency: 'We have a leader of men here.'

At the age of eighteen in 1916 T. B. Phillips volunteered for service with the 14th Welsh Regiment and was on the front line in France for the next two years. He was selected as a Number One Lewis Gunner in the trenches, an acknowledgment of his mastery and skill as a soldier. But he returned to the coalface a staunch pacifist like so many of his Welsh contemporaries, who entered the Nonconformist ministry, such as J. W. Jones, [Tom Nefyn Williams](#), [Lewis Valentine](#) and J. H. Griffiths.

After the war T. B. Phillips returned to the colliery in Cwmdu where he was soon in charge of a heading that became known in the colliery as Tommy Phillips's District. He won the admiration of the colliery officials, some of whom tried to persuade him to accept a managerial position. But he turned down every offer. Eventually the request came from Rees Rees, the chief officer of the North Colliery Company. The response of the miner was simply: 'I have another job which will need my full attention.' A further urgent request came for more details, and T. B. Phillips answered: 'If Mr Rees had been attending the Sunday School he would have known that I was elected superintendent of the Sunday School a short while ago.' He was not pressurised after that to take a administrative job in Cwmdu Colliery.

Phillips attended evening classes under the tutorship of a scholarly Calvinistic Methodist minister at Caerau, the Reverend Williams Edwards. Under his guidance the well regarded miner, brought up in an evangelical Calvinist home, considered the call of the Welsh Presbyterian ministry. In 1924 he left the colliery for the preparatory college at Trefeca. There he sat the Mature Age Matriculation examination in 1925 and began a ten-year period of study that took him to the University College of South Wales, Cardiff where he graduated BA with honours in philosophy in 1931, to the United Theological College at Aberystwyth, where he successfully completed his BD (a postgraduate degree in those days) in 1933, and finally to the Quaker college, Selly Oak, Birmingham, for a diploma in education. At Cardiff he took a leading role in persuading his fellow students not to agree to the call of the Government of the day to maintain public utilities during the 1926 General Strike. He was ordained in 1934, and he sailed soon to the Mission Field of the Presbyterian Church of Wales in Assam in North-East India.

His first task was as Headmaster of the Boys' Secondary School in Shillong with pastoral charge of some churches from 1934 to 1936 during the furlough of the Reverend T. E. Pugh (a post he filled for a second time from 1945 to 1948). On the return of T. E. Pugh Phillips moved to the Theological College in Cherrapunji, concentrating on the Teacher Training department. He worked at the Theological College with five Khasi theologians and the Reverend Sidney Evans, one of the leading revivalists of the 1904-5 Revival. T. B. Phillips was the college Principal from 1950 to 1961. He remained in Khasia-Jaintia Synod for the following eight years preparing to transfer the missionary organisation - medical, educational and religious - set up by the Welsh Presbyterians to local church leaders and their General Assembly. Many of these men had been trained by Phillips or had heard of his work over 1942-45 in the Second World War. In 1943 Phillips was called to assist Sir Keith Cantlie, son of Sir James Cantlie (1851-1926), a Scottish physician and pioneer who had written the first book on First Aid, which became useful in the British coalfield where there were so many accidents. Sir Keith Cantlie (a staunch Presbyterian like himself) was one of the commanders of the Assam Civil Porter Corps. He had over a thousand Khasi and Nepalese men under his command in the Chin Hills and the Kabaw Valley in North Burma. They were involved in the Imphal and Kohima campaigns and T. B. Phillips, with Cantlie, organised the relief of the refugees and the wounded soldiers on the 'Burma Road', dispensing advice as well as reminding his flock of the eternal message of the Gospel. Awarded the MBE in 1945 for his courage and leadership his involvement with the St John's Ambulance movement had proved invaluable, as had his efforts to translate the medical handbooks of Sir James Cantlie into the Khasi language. Fluent in Welsh, English, Khasi and with a working knowledge of Hindi, he wrote numerous articles in the first three languages.

After a break at the end of the War, T. B. Phillips became seriously ill with typhoid and cholera. He was treated by [Dr R. Arthur Hughes](#) and his staff in Shillong Welsh Mission Hospital, during which time he came to know and love the Matron, Miss Menna Jones, daughter of the poet [Thomas Jones](#) (1860-1932), author of *Pitar Puw a'i Berthnasau* (1932), who lived in Cerrigellgwm, Ysbyty Ifan, Denbighshire. They were married and they returned for a furlough in 1956. That year his mother Catharine Phillips became seriously ill. She was nursed by her daughter-in-law and a member of Tabor C. M. Chapel, Jennie Evans, over the 5 months of her illness till her death in 1957.

When they returned to India T. B. Phillips prepared the way for the transfer of all the posts in the theological college and responsibility for the missionary structure to the local church leaders and their Synod and General Assembly. He was chosen as the Treasurer of the Missionary Field and oversaw the transfer of responsibility for all properties, churches, schools, hospitals and estate, to the native church. He felt that this was the greatest privilege that he had been granted, a very important task which he completed in 1969 before returning to Wales to live at Eglwysbach in the Vale of Conwy on the denomination's pension of £100 per annum together with the state pension. Unfortunately the church pension unexpectedly came to an end in 1985 and Thomas and Menna Phillips lived on the state pension alone but with the support of neighbours, friends (many from the former mission field) and relatives. T. B. Phillips was an asset to the local Presbytery and the North Wales Association. He preached every Sunday and was in demand for missionary meetings. In 1971 his sterling work was acknowledged when he was elected to be Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Wales, a deserved honour for one of the architects of the Church of Khasia-Jaintia.

Menna Phillips (1905-1988) died from a heart attack in July 1988, and T. B. Phillips suffered a long illness, undergoing two major operations. But he suffered graciously, and his courage, patience, humility and goodness influenced those who ministered to him. He received the company of the Heavenly Dove in the power of the Holy Spirit throughout his last night of physical suffering, and died peacefully on Monday morning, 7 October 1991 at the Miners' Hospital, Caerphilly, not far from the home of his brother Gwyn Phillips, Ystrad Mynach who gave a generous financial gift to start the North East India-Wales Trust. Based in Liverpool where the Welsh Presbyterian Missionary movement began in 1840, the Trust began to research the history of most of the missionaries from all denominations who had ministered in India. The Trust received a part of the Library of T. B. Phillips and his family enabled the Trust to publish three valuable volumes in Welsh and English on the missionary work, a worthy tribute to Thomas Bevan and Menna Phillips.

Author

D. Ben Rees

Sources

D. Ben Rees, ed., 'Thomas Bevan Phillips (1898-1991)' and 'Menna Phillips, (née Jones) (1905-1988)', *Vehicles of grace and hope: Welsh missionaries in India 1800-1970* (Pontardawe 2002), pp. 166-8

Personal knowledge

information on his early life from his brother Gwyn Phillips, Ystrad Mynach

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