

PROTHERO, CLIFFORD (Cliff) (1898-1990), organiser of the Labour Party in Wales

Name: Clifford Prothero

Date of birth: 1898

Date of death: 1990

Gender: Male

Occupation: organiser of the Labour Party in Wales

Area of activity: Politics, Government and Political Movements

Author: D. Ben Rees

Cliff Prothero was born 23 September 1898 at 7 Robert Street, Ynysybwl to a Welsh-speaking family, his father William Prothero was a native of Glasbury, Radnorshire and his mother, Alice, came from Pontllytyn in the Rhymney Valley. Educated at the Tre-Robert Boys' School, Ynysybwl, he left school at 13 years of age to work in the colliery. His father and his brother, William Prothero Jnr, worked 8 hours a day, 6 days a week, in the Lady Windsor Colliery for the sum of two shillings a day. Clifford Prothero went to work at a smaller colliery called Darran Ddu. As a family they attended Zion English Baptist Chapel where he came under the influence of two very able deacons William Watkins and Richard Woosnam. The influence of Welsh Nonconformity was acknowledged by him and was very evident in his thinking and in his behaviour for the rest of his life. At the age of 14 he and his family moved to the village of Glynneath, and his father, brother and he found work in the Aberpergwm Colliery.

He volunteered in 1917 as a soldier in the First World War; he spent some time in Ireland and saw active service in France. When he returned he found work in the colliery and began to be heavily involved in Trade Union affairs. Aberpergwm Colliery had over a thousand miners and within a few years Cliff, as he was affectionately known, had been elected as Vice-Chairman of the Lodge. He took an active role in the General Strike of 1926, while a student at the Central Labour College in London (1925-7), on a scholarship from the South Wales Miners Federation. This was the college where [Aneurin Bevan](#), [Ness Edwards](#), [James Griffiths](#) and other coalfield had leaders studied. In 1936 he was chosen by the South Wales Federation of Miners to visit the Soviet Union coalfield as a member of an important four-man delegation. The three others were Will Arthur, Jim Grant and Tom Andrews from Treharris. They were away for 6 weeks and Tom Andrews, on more than one occasion, spoke briefly in Welsh to the Russian miners, so that they might become aware of differences between England and Wales, and the uniqueness of Wales and its language.

In 1937 he married Violet Elizabeth Thomas, a Welsh-speaker from Pontarddulais, daughter of Llewelyn and Rowenna Thomas. By 1937 he was earning £3 a week as a checkweigher in the colliery of Cwm-rhyd-y-gau in the Vale of Neath. The colliery was closed during the Second World War and in 1939 he was employed as a Social Officer dealing with evacuees from English cities who were being sent to west Wales. By this time he had been elected as a councillor on the Neath Urban District Council as well as acting as unpaid agent to the Labour Member of Parliament for Neath, Sir William Jenkins.

In 1942 he applied for the post of a Labour Party agent for the Eastern District of England, and he was appointed to the job based in their headquarters in Cambridge. Two years later George Morris, the organiser for the Labour Party in Glamorganshire, was killed by a German bomb near his home in Cardiff. Cliff Prothero was persuaded by a number of Welsh MPs to apply for the post, and in 1944 he was appointed the General Secretary of the South Wales Regional Council of Labour. This is how Cliff Prothero became in a short period of time a key figure on the political scene, especially when the Labour Party won the General Election of 1945 with a large majority.

He succeeded in amalgamating in 1947 the North Wales Labour Federation with the South Wales Regional Council of Labour to form the Welsh Regional Council of Labour. He built a good relationship with the Labour leaders in north Wales, in particular [Goronwy O. Roberts](#) and [Huw T. Edwards](#). From now on he was the anchor man for the Labour Party in Wales. He prepared a discussion paper based on a memorandum submitted by [Huw T. Edwards](#) under the title, 'Democratic Devolution in Wales' and submitted it to the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party for further consideration.

Through the leadership of [James Griffiths](#), assisted by [Goronwy O. Roberts](#), the Welsh Labour Party agreed in 1948 to accept the idea of an Advisory Council for Wales, and this was approved by the Labour Government led by Clement Attlee. The purpose of the Advisory Council was to maintain a close relationship between the people of Wales and the central Government. Cliff Prothero was nominated by the Regional Council as the Chairman of the new body, the Council for Wales, but [James Griffiths](#) insisted that [Huw T. Edwards](#) should be the chairman. He never regretted submitting the name of [Huw T. Edwards](#) rather than Cliff Prothero to the Prime Minister.

In the early 1950s Cliff Prothero and the majority of the members of the Welsh Regional Council of Labour were completely opposed to the campaign for a Welsh Parliament. Prothero argued that the five Labour members of Parliament who took an active part in the campaign, namely [Cledwyn Hughes](#), [Goronwy O. Roberts](#), [T. W. Jones](#), [Tudor Watkins](#) and [S. O. Davies](#), should be reprimanded, but he was overruled by the wisdom of [Huw T. Edwards](#) and [James Griffiths](#) who cautioned toleration. After [James Griffiths](#) was elected Deputy Leader of the Labour Party, the Labour devolutionists had the upper hand over their opponents such as [Iorwerth Thomas](#), [Ness Edwards](#) and [George Thomas](#). When [James Griffiths](#) succeeded in getting [Aneurin Bevan](#) to agree to the policy of devolution in 1959, the call for a Secretary of State for Wales with a seat in the Cabinet was included in the Manifesto for the 1959 General election. Cliff Prothero and the anti-devolution Welsh Labour MPs had to toe the line for the time being. Indeed Prothero in his memoirs admits that 'James Griffiths used all his power as a negotiator in an attempt to persuade other members of this committee of the justice of this cause.' He was very successful.

Cliff Prothero had a successful period as the chief organiser of the Labour Party in Wales. He began to arrange large Labour Party rallies for the whole of Wales. The first was held in Newtown in 1950 and he persuaded Clement Attlee, [James Griffiths](#) and Hugh Gaitskell to address 5,000 supporters who travelled to the rally from all parts of Wales. He succeeded in strengthening the office in Charles Street, Cardiff and gathered around him organisers for the women's branches, the Trade Unions and the Youth movement. The Labour Party succeeded under his guidance to strengthen its presence in Welsh Wales, and by 1957 most of the Welsh heartland had Labour MPs. Labour won Caernarfon in 1945, Merionethshire in 1950; Conwy in 1950, Anglesey and Pembrokeshire in 1951 and Carmarthenshire in 1957. He was the agent for the by-election in Carmarthenshire in 1957 which was won by [Megan Lloyd George](#), who had left the Liberal Party for Labour after her defeat in 1951 in Anglesey. But the most notable victory for which he was responsible was in Cardiganshire in the General Election of 1966 when Labour won with a majority of 523. Prothero was the agent for Elystan Morgan who had fought five times for Plaid Cymru before he became a member of the Labour Party. The victory in 1966 was due to a great number of reasons, but the professionalism of the agent, who had returned from retirement, was one factor.

Prothero retired on 28 February 1965 after an extremely successful period as organiser of the Labour Party in Wales. His retirement was spent in Penarth in a house called Hedd Wyn. He prepared his memoirs in the volume entitled *Recount* in 1982.

He was a personality that one greatly admired, for he began his working life as a miner at the age of thirteen, and in his mature years he knew all the leading politicians of the Labour Party in Britain, corresponding regularly with them, arranging committees, deputations and tours as well as preparing press releases for constituency secretaries and local Labour Party leaders and candidates throughout Wales. He remained a man of the people and it was a privilege to converse with him over a period of 30 years. Though he is regarded by some historians as being anti-Welsh, this was not so. He and his wife supported a Welsh-language Independent chapel in Penarth while he was also tower of strength in the English Congregationalist Chapel and after 1972 with the United Reformed Church. Prothero defended the sanctity of Sunday and was supportive of the Lord's Day Fellowship in Wales. His standpoint on Sunday observance was published in *The Inheritance*, the journal of the Fellowship, in 1981. He played a major role in the devolution debate, but his successor, [Emrys Jones](#) added greatly to his input. Prothero co-operated with [David Thomas](#), a pioneer of the Labour movement in Gwynedd, in the printing of material in the Welsh language for use in the Welsh heartland where Labour did so well during his tenure as General Secretary of the Labour Party in Wales.

Cliff Prothero was a member from its inception of the Welsh Tourist Board, a member of the Welsh Joint Education Committee and the Welsh Broadcasting Council, and he chaired for years the magistrates' Bench at Penarth. His wife was also a magistrate in Penarth. In 1965 he was awarded an OBE for his political and public services. After a long and productive life he died peacefully at his home Hedd Wyn, 2 Church Avenue, Penarth on the 24th of October 1990. His funeral was held on Tuesday afternoon, 30 October 1990 at Bethel Welsh Independent Chapel, Penarth and later at Thornhill Crematorium, Cardiff.

Author

D. Ben Rees

Sources

Cliff Prothero, *Recount* (Ormskirk 1982)

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Duncan Tanner, Chris Williams, Deian Hopkin (editors), *The Labour Party in Wales 1900-2000* (Cardiff 2000)

Personal knowledge

information about his funeral from Dr J. Graham Jones, Aberystwyth

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