

THOMAS, SIR JAMES WILLIAM TUDOR (1893-1976), ophthalmic surgeon

Name: James William Tudor Thomas

Date of birth: 1893

Date of death: 1976

Gender: Male

Occupation: ophthalmic surgeon

Area of activity: Medicine

Author: Alun Roberts

Born 23 May 1893 at Ystradgynlais, Breconshire, the only child of Thomas Thomas, headmaster of Ynyscedwyn County School where Tudor himself began his education, and his wife. He completed his schooling at Ystradgynlais County School and after passing the Senior Central Welsh Board examination impressively in 1909 in nine subjects (English, Welsh, Latin, French, history, geometry, algebra, arithmetic and physics) he proceeded to the University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire to study Medicine. In those days only the first three premedical and preclinical years could be spent at the Cardiff Medical School but here too he did well, winning the Alfred Sheen prize in 1912 for the best performance in the preclinical examinations in that year. In the following year he obtained the BSc degree of the University of Wales and proceeded to the Middlesex Hospital, London to pursue his clinical training, obtaining the MRCS LRCP qualification in 1915. In the following year, not only did he take, and pass, the London MB BS degree examination but he also applied to take the MB BS final examinations of the University of Wales.

This request initially caused the authorities of the Cardiff Medical School and the University of Wales some anxiety, for although the University of Wales had secured degree-awarding powers in Medicine in 1906 clinical training facilities for Cardiff students would not become available in the city until 1921, and the last thing the University authorities wished to do in the middle of the war was to spend money unnecessarily on arranging, for the first time, a special final examination for Thomas and another student as external candidates. 'On the other hand' observed the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Wales, 'it would have a bad effect if the University, at this stage in the history of the Medical School, declined to hold an examination; in fact I think we might possibly expose ourselves to legal proceedings'. **John Lynn Thomas**, the eminent Cardiff surgeon, at the time junior deputy chancellor of the University and a well-connected man, persuaded three distinguished London-based clinicians to act as external examiners for the University of Wales free of charge. Although the other candidate failed all of the subjects in the specially-arranged final examinations J. W. T. Thomas passed with flying colours thereby becoming the first person to obtain the MB BCh degree of the University of Wales in 1916.

After house appointments at Swansea he undertook war service with the RAMC in Africa, encountering young men blinded in action, and resolved, on his return to civilian life, to address this distressing condition in his clinical practice. Following short appointments in London in 1921 he became assistant ophthalmic surgeon at the King Edward VII Hospital, Cardiff (to be renamed the Cardiff Royal Infirmary in 1923), where he combined clinical duties with pioneering research in the field of corneal transplantation. Despite the sometimes difficult relations between the academics in the Welsh National School of Medicine and the clinicians at the Infirmary during the 1920s, the School's Department of Physiology provided laboratory facilities, particularly access to its animal house, which enabled Thomas to experiment, with the use of hundreds of rabbits, on the grafting of healthy corneal tissue on the eye to replace tissue that had become opaque through disease or accident. As the annual report of the Medical Research Council - which was contributing to the costs of the research - observed in 1931 'the experiments give hope of a radical cure by surgical means of blindness due to the opacity of the cornea'.

By this time Thomas had become (after Daniel - later **Sir Daniel Davies**), in 1929, the second person to obtain the MD of the University of Wales, and in 1931 would become a DSc of the same university and the holder of a Hunterian Professorship of the Royal College of Surgeons of England in acknowledgement of his research prowess. His clinical work took place not only at the Cardiff Royal Infirmary but also in London and it was in that city, at Guy's Hospital in 1930 and subsequently at the Central London Ophthalmic Hospital and the Moorfields Eye Hospital during the early 1930s that he carried out a series of corneal transplant operations which caused doctors from all over the world to descend on London to marvel at Thomas's achievement. In 1933 his pioneering work in the science of Keratoplasty (corneal grafting) was recognised when he was invited to give the prestigious Middlemore Lecture at the Birmingham Eye Hospital. For the rest of his clinical career which continued until his retirement in 1958, while fully retaining his commitment to the people of south Wales, he continued to share his expertise more widely. In charge of the corneoplastic department at the Central London Ophthalmic Hospital between 1935 and 1940 he promoted the concept of a registration bureau for the collection and use of donor material, which laid the foundations for the eventual establishment of the celebrated Eye Bank at the Queen Victoria Hospital, East Grinstead, in 1950.

His eminence within the field of Medicine, as well as his long-standing involvement with the British Medical Association (he had been elected to its Council in 1949) made him the unarguable choice for the presidency of that body in 1953/4 when it met at Cardiff, where, by common consent he gave a masterly inaugural lecture, 'With Head, and Heart, and Hand'. Other honours followed in quick succession. He was awarded the honorary degree of LLD by the University of Glasgow in recognition of his pioneering work as an ophthalmologist, and in 1955 he gave the Doyne Memorial Lecture at the Oxford Ophthalmological Congress. In the following year a knighthood was conferred upon him and in 1960 he was presented with the Gold Medal in therapeutics by the Worshipful Company of Apothecaries, adding his name to such distinguished previous recipients as Sir Alexander Fleming, the discoverer of penicillin, Sir Henry Dale, the Nobel Prizewinner and Sir Russell Brock, one of the pioneers of open heart surgery. Among presidential positions that came his way during his later years were those of the British Medical Students' Association (1957/8), the Cardiff Medical Old Students' Association (he became inaugural president in 1958 and presented the society with a fine badge of office) and, in 1967/8 of the Ophthalmological Society of the United Kingdom.

Despite his international eminence, as a Welsh-speaking Welshman he retained a strong love for his native land throughout his life. In 1954, when the National Eisteddfod of Wales was held at Ystradgynlais, his birthplace, he was admitted to the Gorsedd as an honorary member in recognition of his services to surgery. In 1960 he became High Sheriff of Breconshire, an appointment which gave him, greatly supported by his wife, much pleasure. During moments of relaxation from other duties he was a keen fisherman and golfer.

In 1938 he married Bronwen Vaughan Pugh, a nurse, and they had two sons, one a solicitor, the other a doctor. After Sir Tudor's death, on 23 January 1976, he was buried in Cathays Cemetery, Allensbank Road, Cardiff where he was reunited with his wife, affectionately known as Bronnie, seven years later.

Author

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Sources

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Published date: 2012-11-26

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APA Citation



Roberts, A., (2012). THOMAS, SIR JAMES WILLIAM TUDOR (1893-1976), ophthalmic surgeon. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Retrieved 11 Nov 2024, from <https://biography.wales/article/s8-THOM-TUD-1893>

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