

EDMUND-DAVIES, HERBERT EDMUND, Baron Edmund-Davies of Aberpennar (1906 - 1992), lawyer and judge

Name: Herbert Edmund Edmund-davies

Date of birth: 1906

Date of death: 1992

Gender: Male

Occupation: lawyer and judge

Area of activity: Law

Author: Łukasz Jan Korporowicz

Herbert Edmund Davies was born on 15 July 1906 in Mountain Ash (Aberpennar), Glamorganshire, the third son of Morgan John Davies, a coal miner, and his wife Elizabeth Maud (née Edmunds). Known as Edmund Davies, he changed his name to Herbert Edmund Edmund-Davies in 1974 when he was given a life peerage. His mother died when he was eight, and in the following years he was partly brought up by his aunt. Welsh was the language of the home, and the family worshipped at Rhos Baptist Chapel in Mountain Ash. Edmund's Christian faith remained vital to him throughout his life.

Thanks to a scholarship he was able to attend Mountain Ash Grammar School. He was planning to become a teacher, but his two uncles who were solicitors convinced him to study law, which he did at King's College, London, gaining an LLB with first-class honours in 1926, a postgraduate research scholarship and finally the LLD in 1928. In the meantime, he moved to the University of Oxford (1927) where he read for the Bachelor of Civil Law at Exeter College. His choice of college was influenced by Geoffrey Cheshire's presence there. Cheshire, once a law lecturer at Aberystwyth and one of the leading British legal scholars of his generation, soon became a mentor for the young law student from Wales, and later referred to him as his 'most brilliant student'.

In 1929 he graduated from Oxford, was elected Vinerian Scholar and was called to the bar by Gray's Inn. In the early years of his career he was torn between the practice of law and the world of academia. In the early 1930s, he was briefly associated with the London School of Economics where he taught contract law and conflict of laws. In 1931, his book *Law of Distress for Rent and Rates* was published. Eventually, however, he decided to focus on the practice of law. He returned to Wales, joining the South Wales Circuit and settling in Swansea, where he established his position as a barrister. In 1935 he married Eurwen Williams-James. They had three daughters, Ann, Lisa and Shan.

On the outbreak of the Second World War, he was commissioned into the Royal Welsh Fusiliers in December 1940. Later, however, he was transferred to the Judge Advocate General's Department. Despite the disruption of wartime, Edmund-Davies did not lose contact with non-military legal practice. In 1942 he was appointed to the recordership of Merthyr Tydfil, and in 1944 he was appointed to the same function for Swansea. He remained in that post until 1953. In the meantime, in 1943, he took silk and in 1948 became a bencher of his Inn. Finally, in 1953, he became Recorder of Cardiff. His position as a well-known counsel for the defence in criminal cases was established shortly after the war, when he was involved in several famous murder trials that gained some media publicity.

In 1958 he was knighted and appointed to his first full-time judgeship, becoming a judge of the High Court of Justice, Queen's Bench Division. After eight years of working as a trial judge, in 1966, he was elevated to the rank of Lord Justice of Appeal. Shortly after the nomination, he was entrusted with the duty of chairing the Tribunal of Inquiry into the tragedy of Aberfan. Significantly, Aberfan is located just a few miles away from his hometown of Mountain Ash. His report was harshly critical of the National Coal Board. His most famous as well as his most controversial decision was made when he presided at the trial of those accused of the Great Train Robbery in 1964. The robbers were convicted and sentenced to terms of 20, 25 and 30 years imprisonment. These sentences were considered very harsh, but they reflected Edmund-Davies's consistent view that serious crime must be met with severe punishment.

In 1974 he was created Baron Edmund-Davies of Aberpennar when he became a Lord of Appeal in Ordinary. At the time, not many law lords had earlier distinguished experience in criminal law, and Edmund-Davies' experience raised the quality of the House's decisions in criminal cases. He has been described as 'one of the best-read judges of his generation' as well as one of the three outstanding Welsh judges of the 20th century along with [Lord Atkin](#) and [Lord Morris](#).

During his time in the House of Lords, Edmund-Davies was once again involved in out-of-court business. From August 1977, at the request of the Labour government of [James Callaghan](#), Lord Edmund-Davies chaired the committee of inquiry into the negotiating machinery for police pay and conditions (the so-called Police Inquiry). His report, published in July 1978, recommended a substantial increase in pay for police officers, and its recommendations were eventually fully implemented by the new Conservative government in 1979.

Edmund-Davies also did important work relating to the Welsh language in the judicial system. In 1936 he represented [D. J. Williams](#) in the Penyborth case in Caernarfon, insisting on the right of the three defendants to be tried before a jury of Welsh-speakers. In 1973 he was commissioned by the Lord Chancellor to report on the use of the Welsh language in courts in Wales, and recommended the introduction of simultaneous translation facilities. He regularly attended the National Eisteddfod and was a member of the Gorsedd of Bards.

Although he abandoned an academic career, Edmund-Davies was closely associated with the academic world throughout his entire life. In 1959 he was awarded an honorary LLD by the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth. From 1965 to 1975 he was the president of University College, Swansea and from 1974 to 1985 he was a Pro-Chancellor of the University of Wales. He became a life governor and fellow of King's College, London as well as honorary fellow of Exeter College, Oxford. In addition, he presided over the *Cambrian Law Review* from 1970 until his death and he was a member and a president (1976-1977) of the Holdsworth Club. His intellectual interests were not confined to jurisprudence, and he took a keen interest in medicine. He was a life fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine and author of at least two scholarly pieces devoted to medical law problems (transplantations and patients' rights).

After several years in the House of Lords and due to the heavy workload, he decided to retire in 1981. Lord and Lady Edmund-Davies continued to live in an apartment at Gray's Inn until the gradual deterioration of his health from the mid-1980s eventually forced him to move to a home near one of his daughters. Lord Edmund-Davies died on 26 December 1992. He was buried at Maes-yr-Arian Cemetery in Mountain Ash.

Despite his working-class background, Edmund-Davies gained remarkable success, becoming a leading figure in the judiciary of England and Wales. His academic abilities were recognised early, and most of his education was financed by scholarships. In Edmund-Davies's obituary, Lord Roskill wrote that his 'advantages lay only in a strong Welsh Nonconformist family background coupled with remarkable intellectual ability, great industry and a wholly legitimate ambition.' His achievements in his chosen field are still acknowledged today. In March 2013, the Lord Edmund Davies Legal Education Trust was established with the aim of supporting young and ambitious Welsh students interested in law as well as to convince people that a legal career is not 'only available to a select few'. In addition, one of the Bar Professional Training Course scholarships offered by Gray's Inn bears Lord Edmund-Davies's name.

Author

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Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Edmund Davies, Baron Edmund-Davies](#)

Images

Margaret Virginia Foreman, *The Right Honourable Lord Edmund-Davies of Aberpennar, Pro-Chancellor (1975-1984)* Art UK website (accessed June 2021)

findagrave.com: [Picture of the grave](#)

Additional Links

NLW Archives: [Lord Edmund-Davies Papers](#)

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