

REES, THOMAS IFOR (1890-1977), HM Ambassador

Name: Thomas Ifor Rees
Date of birth: 1890
Date of death: 1977
Gender: Male
Occupation: HM Ambassador
Area of activity: Politics, Government and Political Movements; Public and Social Service, Civil Administration
Author: Morfudd Clarke

Thomas Ifor Rees was born 16 February, 1890 in Bronceiro, a house between Llandre and Bow Street, Ceredigion. He was one of seven children born to **J.T. Rees**, the well-known musician composer and conductor, and his wife Elizabeth (Davies). He received his early education in Rhydyppennau Primary School and afterwards in Ardwyn Grammar School, Aberystwyth, and in the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, where he graduated with Honours in Welsh in 1910. After graduating he joined the Foreign Office in London through the competitive examination and soon afterwards he received his first assignment as Acting Vice-Consul in Marseilles, France (1913-14). In 1914 he was assigned to be Chargé d'Affaires in Caracas, Venezuela, where he arrived to learn that war had been declared between Britain and Germany. His orders were to remain in Venezuela for the duration of the war.

After the war, in 1919, he married Elizabeth Phillips of Trefaes Uchaf, Llangwyrfon, Ceredigion, and between 1920 and 1930 they had four children - Morfudd, Ceredig, Nest and Geraint.

Despite travelling a great deal, his Welshness remained very important to Ifor Rees and he ensured his children were taught Welsh wherever the family happened to be living at the time. In the early years, their aunt, Miss Margaret Phillips, was responsible for this. Later they were sent to boarding schools in Dolgellau and then to various universities.

In 1921 Thomas Ifor Rees was transferred as Consul and then Chargé d'Affaires to Managua, Nicaragua, Central America where two of his children were born. In 1925 he was made Consul-General in Bilbao, Spain where he remained until 1932 when he was transferred to Mexico, then to Havana, Cuba in 1934-1936 and to Milan, Italy in 1937. He spent only one year in Milan before being sent back to Mexico City and put in charge of the Embassy 1938-43, and British interests as British Minister after diplomatic relations with Mexico had been severed due to the petroleum problem. T. Ifor Rees knew that the Mexican Minister for Foreign Affairs, Eduardo Hay, had translated *The Rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyám into Spanish and as he himself had translated the work into Welsh he hoped that the coincidence might help to ease the tension between the two countries, as indeed it did when they met at a mutual friend's party - quiet diplomacy at its best! (see *Yr Enfyfys*, 63, 1964). T. Ifor Rees's translation of *The Rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyám was the first Welsh book to be printed in Mexico. Ifor Rees was a linguist of note. He insisted on learning the language of whatever country he lived in - Spanish for the most part - but also French and Italian during his periods in Marseilles and Milan. But his first love remained his mother-tongue, Welsh.

In 1943 Ifor Rees was assigned to Bolivia as British Minister and then appointed HM Ambassador in 1947-1949, the first to hold that office. In 1946 an uneasy political situation erupted. The Presidential Palace was invaded by an angry mob, President Villaroel was killed and his body was hanged in front of the Cathedral in La Paz. This was a time of great unrest which tested his diplomatic skills to the limit.

Throughout his life he had been very aware of the poverty and inequality that existed in the world, especially so in the countries where he served in Central and South America. During the Second World War he was particularly active in raising considerable sums of money for the Red Cross to alleviate the suffering of troops on the Front Line and further afield. He remained a staunch supporter of the Red Cross and other humanitarian causes throughout his life. Despite spending almost 40 years representing Britain in far-flung countries over two continents, he still managed to find time for his own personal interests. These were many and varied - music, literature, history, translating from Spanish and French into Welsh, walking, mountain-climbing and particularly photography. Mountaineering and photography were a perfect combination. He would often be seen setting off to climb some of the more inhospitable peaks in the Andes, Sierra Madre, volcanoes in Mexico and Bolivia and so on, always with at least one camera, usually two heavy ones, long before the digital age! His love of remote peaks, spectacular scenery and nature in general can be seen in his travel books, noted below. These portray a wonderful world of enchantment. The names themselves convey a sense of magic - Popocatepetel, Lake Titicaca, Iztacihuatl, Machu Pichu (the lost city of the Incas), Illimani, Sajama, to name but a few. It is clear from his words and photographs that he himself was captured by their magic.

His book *Sajama*, which is a record of his journeys in Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru and Bolivia, is dedicated to the 'Youth of Wales'. This book, together with *Illimani* and *In and around the Valley of Mexico* are a feast for the eyes and imagination. He was a person able to communicate naturally with everyone, whatever their circumstances or position.

After retiring in 1950, he returned to Bronceiro, his family home. Mountain climbing and photography were still his passions. He climbed just about every peak in Wales, always with his camera, and he travelled to every corner of his own country. He showed the same enthusiasm and devotion to important establishments in his native land. He was an active and instrumental member on the committees of the National Library of Wales, the University in Aberystwyth, and especially the Welsh Folk Museum in St. Fagans. On a more local level, he was equally active in his home village of Bow Street. He served as treasurer and elder in Garn Chapel for many years as well as being an inspirational Sunday School teacher. He was a well-known figure in the village and supported every activity in the community.

T. Ifor Rees was a handsome man, tall of stature and strong in personality and principle. He was made CMG in 1942 and he was awarded an honorary LID (University of Wales) in 1950. He died 11 February 1977 and was buried in the family grave in Garn Cemetery, a field's breadth away from Bronceiro, the family home where he had spent his childhood and retirement years.

Published works: *History of the British Cemetery at Bilbao* (Horace Young), 'The later history 1891-1933', 1933; *Rousille neu y tir yn darfod* (René Bazun), 1933; *Report on economic conditions in Mexico, November 1933*, HMSO, London, 1934; *Rubáiyát Omar Khayyám: trosiad Cymraeg o gyfieithiad adnabyddus Edward FitzGerald*, 1939; *Marwnad a ysgrifennwyd mewn mynwent wledig* (Thomas Gray), 1942; *Taith o amgylch fy ystafell* (Xavier de Maistre), 1944; *La Paz* (photographic album), 1948; *In and around the Valley of Mexico*, 1953; *Y Campwaith Coll a straeon eraill* (Balzac), 1954; *Y Brawd* (Henri Troyat), with Rhiannon Davies, 1959; *Sajama, teithiau ar ddau gyfandir*, 1960; *Platero a minnau* (J.R. Jimenez), with E.T. Griffiths, 1961; *Illimani yn nhroedd y gorllewin*, 1964; *Geiriau diddorol y Beibl*, 1965, 1966; *Y meirw ar y mynydd* (Henri Troyat), gyda Rhiannon Davies, 1965; *Y llyfryn poced gwyrdd a straeon eraill* (Henri Troyat), 1967; *Pan gwmpodd y mynydd* (F. Ramuz), with Gwenda Thompson, 1968; literary articles in various Welsh journals. Also (with E.T. Griffiths) translations of a number of solos for National Eisteddfod competitions.

Author

Morfudd Clarke

Sources

Personal knowledge

Who was who?, 1971-80

Glyn Lewis Jones, *Llyfryddiaeth Ceredigion, 1600-1964* (Aberystwyth 1967)

Glyn Lewis Jones, *A Bibliography of Cardiganshire & 1964-1968 Supplement* (Aberystwyth 1970)

some letters and collections of photographs in the National Library of Wales

Further Reading

Leusa Fflur Llewelyn, *T. Ifor Rees ac ysgrifennu taith yn y Gymraeg*, M.Phil. thesis, Aberystwyth University, 2010

Wikipedia Article: [T. Ifor Rees](#)

Sound and Film

Leusa Fflur: [T. Ifor Rees yn America Ladin](#)

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