

HOWELL, JOHN HENRY (1869 - 1944), pioneer of technical education in New Zealand

Name: John Henry Howell
Date of birth: 1869
Date of death: 1944
Spouse: Nellie Howell (née Wheeler)
Parent: Harriet Howell (née Brown)
Parent: William Mendis Howell
Gender: Male
Occupation: pioneer of technical education in New Zealand
Area of activity: Education
Author: Evan David Jones

Born at Frampton Cotterell, near Bristol in 1869, third child of William Mendis Howell (1838 - 1873), minister of the Congl. chapel there, a native of Narberth, Pembrokeshire, and his wife Harriet (née Brown); educated at Lewisham School (Caterham), his name appears twice on the school's roll of honour. At the end of his period at the school he won a scholarship to Cambridge, but it was insufficient to enable him to take advantage of it, and as his widowed mother could not augment it, he took teaching posts in private schools in Ilfracombe, London and Paignton. In October 1889 he sat an examination for the Principal's Scholarship at Aberystwyth. He came second to T.K. Brighthouse, but was offered a second scholarship of £30, £10 less than the Principal's, but he could not afford to stay in Aberystwyth. **Principal Thomas Charles Edwards** offered to lend him the deficiency. However, by taking private pupils and assisting at the Old Bank School in the town he did not have to borrow but he never forgot the principal's generous offer. By the end of the session he had completed the London B.A. course, and took a teaching post in a private school in London. Before the end of a year there he was recalled to Aberystwyth to assist Professor R.W. Genese and to start on a B.Sc. course. He then decided to earn enough to enable him to study physics in Germany, and to that end he went to teach in a private school at Clifton. In October 1893 he entered the University of Strasburg and spent a winter there in great hardship. He accepted a post at a private school under the auspices of King's College in the Strand, attending afternoon classes at University College. He graduated B.Sc. with a first class in the final examination in 1897. In 1898 he arranged to settle in Cambridge to work under J.J. Thomson, but illness forced him to cancel the arrangements, and from October 1898 to April 1899 he was recuperating in St. Moritz and he spent the following summer in scientific research in Zurich. His medical advisers refused to allow him to return to Cambridge, and he again turned to Aberystwyth where he spent two years as science master in the county school, resuming also his earlier activities in the literary life of the town and his social work in Progress Hall.

He decided for reasons of health to emigrate to New Zealand and in the summer of 1901 he accepted a science post in Auckland grammar school. In 1905 he was appointed organiser of a scheme of night classes under the Christchurch Technical Association. He joined the Society of Friends in 1906. He took a special interest in the education of women and in 1911 he established a hostel to train girls in domestic science and child welfare. Sir Ernest Shackleton contributed half the proceeds of a public lecture to create the nucleus of a fund for this work. In 1913 the governors of the Christchurch Technical College (which had developed out of his work with night schools to be the first of the higher technical schools of New Zealand in 1907), decided to send him on a tour of western Europe and America to study higher education, but the outbreak of war in 1914 intervened and he was able only to visit Britain and America. As an uncompromising pacifist the war period was very difficult for him and attempts were made to dismiss him in spite of the outstanding success of the college under his supervision. He had started with 56 students but by 1919 he had charge of over 600 full-time and 1300 part-time students. When attacks on his pacifism in Christchurch were at their peak he was pressed to accept the post of principal of a new technical college in Wellington. He accepted the challenge and within five years the building was completed. By the time of his retirement in 1931 the number of students had reached 1033. He was the designer and builder of the technical colleges of Christchurch and Wellington, and the continuing growth of institutions of technical education in New Zealand was the work of his colleagues and students.

He married in September 1894 Nellie Wheeler, a prominent figure in socialist circles at Bristol, who shared fully his own ideals. They had no children, and when he died on 20 June 1944, he left a third of the residue of his estate to the U.C.W., Aberystwyth in memory of the principal who had befriended him in 1889.

He had two sisters, Esther Mary (Ettie) who was a deaconess in Dudley, 1897-1900, Manchester and Salford, 1900-02, and from 1902 to 1944 in the Whitefield Mission in Tottenham Court Road; and Mary Emma, who was at one time governess in the family of Sir Richard Martin in Llansamlet, a nurse in Swansea hospital for a period from 1895, and in military hospitals in South Africa, India and Egypt; and matron of an infectious diseases hospital under the Egyptian government.

Author

Evan David Jones, (1903 - 1987)

Sources

Information from Esther Mary Howell

Y Dysgedydd, August-September 1956

Further Reading

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