

William John Edwards – Messenger Boy to Church Minister

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Researching on the Internet for information on the Riverstone Post Office I came across the following entry “Guide to the Papers of William John Edwards” which are kept in the National Library of Australia.

William John Edwards was born in Riverstone on the 9th of December 1891. His parents were John, who was a butcher, and Ida (nee Drayton). In 1905, at the age of 14, he was employed at Riverstone Post Office, the first year as a messenger boy, then later as Post Master’s assistant. William attended, and later taught, Sunday School, at St. Paul’s Church of England, Riverstone. In 1907 William transferred to a position at Casino Post Office. At Casino he became Superintendent of the Anglican Church’s Sunday School.

Between 1908 and 1910 William resigned from the Postal Service and returned to Sydney where he enrolled at Fort Street Model School to complete his education, with the intention of entering the ministry. In 1913 he studied at Moore Theological College, Newtown. During this time he preached at a number of Sydney churches. From 1914-1916 he completed a BA Degree at the University of Sydney, graduating in April 1916.

In January of that year he had joined the AIF, being given the rank of Corporal in the Administrative Branch. On 29th of April he married Amy Stephenson. William and Amy had five children, three daughters and two sons. In August William resigned from the AIF and in October he was appointed the YMCA Field Representative to the AIF with the rank of Honorary Lieutenant for front line service in France/Belgium with the AIF 5th Division. He embarked in the next troop convoy.

In June 1918, after being injured in a German mustard gas attack, he was repatriated to England for hospitalisation. Here he resumed his YMCA service in an English army training camp at Salisbury. In 1919, whilst still a YMCA/AIF officer, he attended Cambridge University and completed his Teachers’ Certificate and Divinity Testimonium, both of which were awarded in December of that year.

William returned to Sydney and, in March 1920, was discharged from the YMCA, admitted, on 14th March, into the Holy Order of Deacon and, on 21st December, into the Holy Order of Priests, both by the Archbishop of Sydney in the Cathedral Church of St. Andrew. From 1920-22 he served as Curate on the staff of Holy Trinity College, Dulwich Hill, serving at Hurlstone Park. From 1923-26 he was Rector of the Church of Saint Augustine at Bulli.

In 1926 William was appointed a Priest by the Bishop of Goulburn. Also in that year he became Headmaster of Monaro Grammar School which, three years later, was to become Canberra Grammar School, with William, who had overseen its establishment and construction, as Headmaster, a position he held until 1947.

On 15th July, 1932 The *Windsor and Richmond Gazette* reported on the death of Mrs. Ida Edwards, 62 years, widow of the late John Edwards, and mother of the Reverend W.J. Edwards of Canberra, and Mrs. Tiddeman of Riverstone.

The following are some highlights of William’s life in the ensuing years:-

Member of the Council of the Canberra University College (Chairman in 1935);
Appointed as a Canon by the Bishop of Goulburn on June 4, 1935;
Delegate to the British Commonwealth Relations Conference at Lapstone, NSW in 1938;
Delegate to the 9th International Conference of the Institute of Pacific Relations at Hot Springs, Virginia, following which he took a lecture tour of the USA;
Appointed as Chief of the UNICEF Mission to Greece, Italy and Malta from 1947-1952;
Awarded an Honorary Doctorate from the Philosophy Department of the University of Athens in 1948;
c1952, had a private audience with Pope Pius XII in Rome;
Senior Welfare Supervisor with the Colombo Plan for the Department of the Exterior in Sydney;
Appointed by the Archbishop of Sydney as Rector of St. James, Sydney from 1956-62, where he developed its property to provide a permanent income for the parish.

In 1962 William retired to Canberra where his wife died, on 5th December 1963, following a stroke. On 24th September 1967, after a long illness, William died in Bellevue Hill, Sydney, survived by his three daughters and one of his two sons.

In the Australian Dictionary of Biography author George Garnsey stated:

“His face conveyed strength and authority, emphasized by impressive eyebrows, but his gaze was often kindly and compassionate, and betrayed a keen sense of humour. Edward’s Anglicanism was representative, upholding the best of the church’s traditions while combining progressive thought with action for human welfare and dignity. He kindled faith in many, and restored and strengthened it in others. Possessing a clear vision of what was attainable, once his goals are set he gave of himself unstintingly.”

A fitting epitaph for a man who began his working life at age 14 as a messenger boy in the Post Office of his home town of Riverstone.

Bibliography:

GARNSEY, George, Edwards, William John (1891-1967, Australian Dictionary of Biography Vol. 14, Melbourne University Press, 1996.

Guide to the Papers of William John Edwards, National Library of Australia, 2005.