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Sarah Ann Edwards, (1865–1947): Baptist Social Reformer and Suffragist*

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade there has been renewed interest in women's history in England and Wales. However, while the names of some women as suffragists, poets, athletes, and singers may now be known, only limited attention has been given to Welsh Nonconformist women and their significant contribution both to chapel life and to other social and civic work. This presentation highlights the story of Sarah Ann (Evans) Edwards (1865–1947), a Baptist Social Reformer and Suffragist, who worked tirelessly for the rights of women in England and Wales.

KEYWORDS

Suffrage; temperance movement; Cardiff Women's Liberal Association; Baptist Zenana Mission; Welsh Nonconformity



Writing her book, *Our Mothers' Land: Chapters in Welsh Women's History, 1830–1939*, Angela V. John claimed: 'The history of Welsh people has often been camouflaged in British history yet women have also been rendered inconspicuous within their own Welsh history.'¹ Suggesting that for many years, historians of Wales looked at 'institutional, organisational aspects of modern Welsh history' which

often did not include stories of women, John called for a greater emphasis on the contribution of Welsh women.² In response, over the last decade, some of the stories of Welsh women in education, industry and politics have been told in books and articles, as well as through initiatives sponsored by Women's Archive Wales, an organisation founded in 1997 to 'rescue and

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*I first noted the work of Sarah Ann Edwards as part of a general survey of Baptist women which I wrote twenty years ago. See, K. E. Smith, "Forgotten Sisters: The Contributions of Some Notable but Un-noted British Baptist Women," in *Recycling the Past or Researching History: Studies in Baptist Historiography and Myths*, eds. Philip E. Thompson and Anthony R. Cross (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press 2005). I am grateful to friends in Cardiff Baptist College for giving me the opportunity to expand that study of this remarkable Welsh Baptist woman for the *Rahel o Fôn* lecture in January 2025.

¹John, Angela V., ed., *Our Mothers' Land: Chapters in Welsh Women's History, 1830–1939*, 2nd ed., Gender Studies in Wales (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), 9.

²John, Angela V., *Our Mothers' Land*, 9.

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preserve records of the lives and experience of women in Wales'.³ However, while the names of some Welsh women as suffragists, poets, athletes, and singers may now be known, only limited attention has been given to Welsh Nonconformist women and their contribution both to chapel life and to other social and civic work.

Writing about women in Liberal Politics in Wales between 1880 and 1914, Ursula Masson, noted the importance of Nationalism, Liberal politics and deeply held Nonconformist beliefs, to many women in Wales in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴ Similarly, in his work, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Wales, 1866–1928*, Ryland Wallace notes the support for the Temperance Movement – especially in Welsh chapel life – through the Band of Hope groups. However, the focus of both Masson and Wallace is an exploration of the political activity of women.

The dearth of studies on Welsh Nonconformist women is surprising, especially since by the end of the nineteenth century Wales was considered to be 'a nation of Nonconformists'⁵ and women were, and have remained, active supporters – arguably even the mainstay – of life in Dissenting chapels. Looking specifically at the histories of Baptist life in Wales – both the Baptist Union of Wales and the Baptist Union of Great Britain – a search for references to the contribution of women reveals that very little has been done to explore the lives and work of Welsh Baptist women who not only supported ministry within the local church, but offered leadership more widely as well. This presentation is an attempt to highlight the story of one such Nonconformist woman, Sarah Ann (Evans) Edwards (1865–1947).

The Early Years in Pontlottyn

Sarah Ann Evans was born in 1865 at Pontlottyn (near Bargoed), the daughter of Mary and Evan Evans, who was a local pharmacist. She had four brothers and two sisters. Her parents were active in Zoar Welsh Baptist Church at Pontlottyn where Sarah as a young person was baptised by the pastor, John Penry Williams. Williams, worked actively among young people and supported the development of public elementary education in the Rhymney Valley.⁶ Given her pastor's encouragement of young people, it is not surprising that in her youth Sarah taught a girls' Sunday School class, and was President of a Band of Hope group which claimed a membership of two-hundred young people.⁷

³Women's Archive Wales/Archif Menywod Cymru, <https://www.womensarchivewales.org/en/>.

⁴Ursula Masson, *For Women, for Wales and for Liberalism: Women in Liberal Politics in Wales, 1880–1914* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010).

⁵This phrase comes from Henry Richard, *Letters and Essays on Wales*, 2nd ed. (London: James Clarke, 1884 [1886]), 2 as cited in Densil Morgan, "Nonconformity in Wales," in *T&T Clark Companion to Nonconformity*, ed. R. Pope (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 40.

⁶John Penry Williams (1828–1895), "Memoirs of Ministers," *The Baptist Handbook for 1896* (London: Clarke and Company, 1895), 179.

⁷*Pontypool Free Press and Herald of the Hills*, June 26, 1891, 6.

From an early age, Sarah's musical abilities were recognised. At an Eisteddfod held at the Zoar Welsh Baptist chapel on Christmas day in 1876, Sarah, aged 11 eleven, was named 'best singer' in her age group for her rendition of 'By the River'.⁸ As she grew older her reputation as a vocalist who sang 'in style' grew, and she was often invited to sing at various meetings and events.⁹ She went to London to the Royal Academy of Music to further develop her musical gifts, and then on her return to Wales was often asked to sing parts of great oratorios or to contribute 'an inspired rendering' of a hymn to a worship service.¹⁰

Marriage to William Edwards

In 1891, Sarah Ann Evans married William Edwards, who was the Principal of the Baptist College at Pontypool. At the time of their marriage, he was a widower with three children, Marion, Lillian and Austin. His first wife, Mary Ann (James), of Crickhowell had died in 1880, aged 31, after giving birth to their third child, Austin.¹¹ Later that same year, William Edwards had responded to the call to be the Principal of the Baptist College at Pontypool and had moved from the Baptist Academy in Haverfordwest (where he was serving as the tutor in Classics) to Pontypool to take up this new role. His sister, Mary Edwards, came to stay to help with household responsibilities and the duties of running the College. Then, in June 1891, eleven years after the death of his wife, Mary Ann, and the move to Pontypool, he and Sarah Ann Evans were married at a service held at the Baptist chapel in Ponthir; he was 43 and she was 26 years of age.¹²

According to one newspaper account, at the wedding breakfast, a number of speeches were offered, with one well-wisher claiming that the wedding had been rather expected because the 'electric and magnetic currents running between Pontlottyn and Pontypool' had been observed!¹³ The speaker then emphasised the importance of the role of a minister's wife and a Principal's wife and suggested that Sarah would fill those roles well. In response, to the speeches, William Edwards, claimed that he felt his wife would be a helpmeet and friend to him, and suggested that his sister and his wife, would provide

⁸*Western Mail*, December 27, 1876, 6.

⁹*Merthyr Express*, April 25, 1885, 8.

¹⁰L. Eirlys Williams, *Bountiful Harvest: The Story of the Baptist Women's Missionary Auxiliary in Wales, 1906–1956* (Llandysul: Welsh Baptist Women's Missionary Auxiliary, 1956), 78.

¹¹She was the only daughter of R. James of Crickhowell. It is likely that they first met when he went to stay with his brother, Oliver, who was pastor of the church. They married at the Baptist Chapel in Crickhowell on 13th February, 1875. *Tenby Observer*, February 18, 1875, 5. She was buried at the Machpelah burial ground in Haverfordwest. *Carmarthen Journal*, Friday 2nd July, 1880.

¹²*South Wales Daily News*, June 23, 1891, 4.

¹³The wedding breakfast was held at the Pantyreos Farm, the residence of Mr. S. Edwards, William Edwards' brother. *Pontypool Free Press and Herald of the Hills*, June 26, 1891, 6.

the College with a 'Mary and a Martha' who help with the responsibilities of the College home.

The marriage of William to Sallie, as her husband called her, was a happy one; it was later said that in her, William Edwards found his 'real counterpart, one to whom he always submitted his projects and problems, and whose helpful criticisms he invariably relied upon'.¹⁴ Yet, while she fulfilled the expected roles of both a 'minister's wife' and the 'Principal's wife', her contribution to the church and community was not limited to these spheres. In fact, while she was often referred to as 'Mrs Principal' or 'Mrs Dr Edwards', as one friend observed, if William Edwards had been less remarkable, he would have been known as the husband of Sarah Edwards, of Cardiff.¹⁵

The Move to Cardiff

In 1893, two years after their marriage, the College moved from Pontypool to Cardiff. Depicted at the time in a newspaper cartoon – with Edwards carrying the College on his back to Cardiff (encouraged along by the wealthy Cardiff coal magnate, Richard Corey) – the move was not without its critics.¹⁶ While the relocation of the College enabled Baptists to be part of a larger move among Nonconformists to develop education in Wales, at the time, many Welsh Baptists opposed such a move.¹⁷ On a personal level, the decision to move from the purpose-built residential premises in Pontypool to two houses in the centre of Cardiff would have been quite a change for the growing Edwards' family; the bustling city environment would have been very different to Pontypool. However, living in Cardiff brought opportunities, not just to Principal Edwards who became an important contributor to the development of the University, but also to Sarah Edwards who engaged with wider civic and social issues, as well as offering leadership within denominational life.

Involvement in Baptist Life in Cardiff

When they moved to Cardiff, William Edwards joined in membership with the Welsh chapel, Tabernacle in the Hayes, and Sarah was a member of Tredegarville Baptist Church – both were at that time prominent churches in Cardiff. Tabernacle was a Welsh language church associated with the Baptist Union of Wales (BUW) and Tredegarville Baptist Church held services in the English language and was associated with the Baptist Union of Great Britain and

¹⁴W. Tregelles Edwards, "Reminiscences," in *The Life of Principal Edwards*, ed. T. W. Chance (Cardiff: Priory Press, 1934), 217.

¹⁵Irene Myrddin Davies, ed., *Memory An Inspiration* (Cardiff: Priory Press, 1957), 23.

¹⁶Richard Corey was a deacon at Longcross Street Baptist Church when the College moved to Cardiff and he enthusiastically supported the move. T. W. Chance, ed., *The Life of Principal Edwards*, 53.

¹⁷The adoption of a charter by the University of Wales, a Theological Board was formed to arrange for a post-graduate BD to be offered. See Hugh Matthews, *From Abergavenny to Cardiff*, 23–24.

Ireland (BUGBI). Since both Sarah and William Edwards were Welsh-speaking, it might have been generally assumed that they would have both attended Tabernacle. However, since Tredegarville was closer to the College, it may have seemed easier for Sarah to attend there with young children, especially if her husband was often away preaching at other churches on a Sunday.

While the decision to attend the Tredegarville Church may have simply been for practical reasons, it seems likely that the church which had been formed under the evangelical leadership of Alfred Tilly¹⁸ in 1861 (and benefitted from the ongoing financial support of the wealthy coal merchant and suffragist, Richard Cory) provided a supportive context for her and the work she began to do in Cardiff.¹⁹ It should be noted, however, that membership in the Tredegarville Chapel did not prevent her from working with members of Tabernacle Baptist Church, as well as other chapels across Wales. Moreover, while her primary focus was work among Baptists, she also developed links with others in the Free Church tradition, especially through her association with the British Women's Temperance Association (BWTA).

Involvement with BUGBI and BUW

In looking at Sarah's involvement in Baptist life in Wales, it may be noted that both she and her husband were active in both BUGBI and in the Welsh Baptist Union (BUW). William Edwards became a personal member of BUGBI in 1910 and he was elected as president of BUGBI in 1911. (One of the few Welshmen to serve as president of BUGBI and BUW). Like her husband, Sarah, too, served on committees and provided leadership in organisations in BUGBI as well as the BUW. In Wales, she was responsible for encouraging women's support for mission work, both at home and abroad.

Of course, women and men in Wales had been supporting the Baptist Missionary Society (which had been formed in 1792) for many years. However, the BMS did not appoint women missionaries. In 1866, women in England had heeded a call by women missionaries to send women to share the Gospel with India women who lived in 'zenanas' (parts of Hindu dwellings

¹⁸Alfred Tilly (1821–1905) was born in Forton in Hampshire. He trained at Stepney College and then began his ministry at Bridgnorth in 1846. He moved to Cardiff in 1857. J. Austin Jenkins, *The History of Nonconformity in Cardiff* (London: H. R. Allenson, 1901), 140–41. Alfred Tilly and his wife, Sarah (b.1823), were both strong supporters of women's suffrage. They had three unmarried daughters who by 1881 were all working as teachers. See, Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain and Ireland, A Regional Survey* (Oxford: Routledge Press, 2006), 222. Tilly was also a temperance campaigner, and with the financial support of the Cory brothers from Cardiff, he founded and was the first secretary of the Livingstone Inland Mission, which operated from 1878 to 1884 in what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Brian Stanley, *The History of the Baptist Missionary Society* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 116.

¹⁹Tredegarville was a BUGBI church that was formed in 1861 when Alfred Tilly resigned as pastor of Bethany Baptist Church (1857–1861) and moved with 111 members of Bethany in order to establish an open communion church in the growing town. The church was by all accounts very evangelistic under Tilly's leadership began to establish other preaching stations at Mainday, Llanishen, Rumney and Cathays Terrace. They were also instrumental in helping to establish congregations in Cardiff at Grangetown, Longcross Street, Pearl Street, Splott Road and helped to form congregations in Caerphilly and Tondy. See, J. Austin Jenkins, *The History of Nonconformity in Cardiff* (London: H. R. Allenson, 1901), 142.

from which all men outside of the immediate family were excluded), and formed the Ladies Association for the Support of Zenana work and Bible Women in India (later known as the Baptist Zenana Mission [BZM] in 1897). As a Baptist women's organisation, the BZM sent out women to India, and later China, to serve women.

Though it had been formed by English Baptists, there were a number of churches in Wales (affiliated with BUW or BUGBI) who had supported the work of the BZM from the beginning. However, there was no Welsh organisation set up specifically for Welsh churches to support the BZM. When it was formed and led by Sarah Edwards, it was called the Welsh Baptist Union Auxiliary to the Baptist Zenana Mission, and initially it was active among Welsh Baptist churches in South and Mid-Wales.²⁰ Sarah Edwards presided over the growth of this organisation for forty-one years, from its beginning in 1906 to 1947. Given her involvement and leadership for mission work in Wales, in 1907 she was elected a member of Baptist Missionary Society committee and in 1927 she was made a life member of the national executive of BMS. Summarising her contribution to the BZM, it was said:

Outspoken and fearless, with whole-hearted devotion to the cause, the first President was a good leader ... The minutes of various auxiliaries reveal the extent of her travels in her effort to spread enthusiasm and win the loyal support of the churches. On the London Committee, her counsel and shrewd opinions were invaluable for over forty years. Her motherly kindness to candidates and missionaries was in itself a great contribution to the cause. The frequency with which Cardiff was chosen for convening the Welsh executive Committee was sometimes discussed adversely. Few realised the generosity with which Mrs Edwards acted as host to the members assembled there. She could not have done elsewhere what she did in her home city but her kind hospitality revealed how she realised that attendance for many involved sacrifice.²¹

As a member of a BUGBI church, Sarah Edwards was aware of the formation of the Baptist Women's Home Auxiliary in 1908 (renamed as the Baptist Women's League [BWL] in 1910). Realising that while women associated with BUGBI might relate to the Baptist Women's League, many Welsh Baptist women in BUW churches would not identify with this organisation, Sarah worked to raise awareness of 'home' mission needs among churches in Wales. She was duly recognised by the BWL as the Honorary organiser for BWL in Wales. Given the two very different Baptist Unions in Wales, naturally, she did not try to establish BWL groups in Welsh Union churches. However, recognising the strength of women working together, she was able to garner support for various projects considered to be 'home mission' from women across Welsh and English churches. For instance, serving as an honorary Vice-President of the BWL from 1911, she helped raise funds for a hostel for business girls in

²⁰L. Eirlys Williams, *Bountiful Harvest*, 26.

²¹*Ibid.*, 78–79.

London.²² The hostel was overseen by a 'Sister Kate' (Kate E. Piper) and provided accommodation for twenty-seven residents, as well as two beds for emergency cases.²³ Later, as a serving Vice-President of the BWL of Great Britain in 1916–1917, she helped to raise £15,000 in Wales alone for the work of Protestant churches which had suffered in France during the Great War.²⁴

As president of the BWL, in 1917, she raised the plight of young Welsh women who were going to London on the promise of a good job in service, and ended up the victims of what she described as 'white slavery'.²⁵ In 1920, she travelled to Leicestershire to appeal for funds for the Baptist Women's Training College and Sisterhood, claiming that the education of women was needed and that the organisation would be a tremendous asset to the denomination.²⁶

Working with Other Nonconformists

Sarah Edwards' work for, and with, women was not limited to Baptist circles. She was the founder and President of the Cardiff and South Wales sisterhood on three occasions 1918–20, 1926 and 1938. This was a gathering of women's groups from all the Free Churches and it was claimed that, largely under her leadership, the membership grew to twenty-thousand members. Among their practical activities, they endowed fourteen beds at what was then the Cardiff Royal Infirmary.²⁷ To honour her, in 1936, the Cardiff and District sisterhood dedicated a bed at the Cardiff Royal Infirmary to her.²⁸

As a member of Liberal party for many years, she served as vice-president and president of Cardiff Women's Liberal Association. Additionally, she was involved in civic life. In 1926, she was named as a magistrate of the city of Cardiff.²⁹ She also served as an official visitor, appointed by the Home Office, to the women at Cardiff prison, and reportedly rarely missed her weekly visit there. She served as a member of the board of management for the Royal Infirmary, as well as a member of the visiting committee to the Institution for the Mentally Defective (as it was then called) and a member of the local National Insurance Committee (the first woman to be appointed). She also served as the Government representative on the unemployment tribunal board for Cardiff and the Rhondda Valley and she was a referee under the old age pensions act. She was also an honorary member of the Gorsedd of the National Eisteddfod of Wales. Noting her many

²²The hostel was first located at No 25, Mecklenburgh Square and later in Green Lane, London.

²³"The Girls' Hostel," in *Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland Report of the Council year ending 1912*.

²⁴Irene Myrddin Davies, ed., *Memory An Inspiration*, 30.

²⁵*The Suffragette*, December 27, 1912, 11.

²⁶*Leicestershire Evening Mail*, Thursday 29 January 1920, 1.

²⁷The sisterhoods of the Free Churches have accomplished their first desire and completed the gift (spread over a number of years) of one thousand guineas to name a bed.' See, "Report of the Royal Infirmary Cardiff," *The Cardiff Year Book* (Glamorgan record Office, 1927), 276.

²⁸*Western Mail*, May 22, 1936, 15.

²⁹*The Cardiff Year Book* (Glamorgan Record Office, 1926), 24.

achievements, in a series called 'Representative Women in South Wales', in 1931, the *Western Mail* printed a large photo of her and claimed she was 'one of the most beloved women in South Wales', and significantly pointed out her care for women by stating that among her many achievements, she had been the founder of a holiday home in Porthcawl for poor women.³⁰

Temperance

Having served as president of the Band of Hope in her home church in the Rhymney Valley, it is perhaps not surprising that throughout her life she maintained membership in the BWTA and served in leadership roles locally, regionally and nationally. In that respect, she was President of the Cardiff and District Union of the British Women's Temperance Association for many years. She was also President of the Glamorgan Union of the British Women's Temperance Association, and representative for Wales on the National Executive of the British Women's Temperance Association.

An able and engaging speaker, who (as was often reported in newspapers) spoke 'forcefully', Sarah attended many rallies and meetings in order to encourage women, men and young people to support the cause of temperance. By all accounts, Sarah Edwards had an engaging way of captivating her audience. One friend claimed, that when she spoke Sarah was 'just herself all the time' and always spoke eloquently without notes 'in a personal way as a friend to friend'. She was well-received and became much in demand as both a stimulating and an influential public speaker.

Commenting on Sarah Edwards' work, T. W. Chance claimed that it was during the Revival movement of 1904 that she began to develop her gift for public speaking. While William Edwards attended nightly prayer meetings held in Tabernacle, Sarah was instrumental in establishing a 'Midnight Mission' which, according to one newspaper account, had aimed to reclaim 'fallen womanhood.' With a group of enthusiastic workers, she would scour the city looking for women who were on the streets, and then seek to encourage them to come to the Tabernacle chapel vestry where it was said that 'a bright fire, warm refreshment music and fellowship helped in the work of regeneration'.³¹ Chance claimed:

It was during these months that Mrs Edwards developed gifts that had been lying dormant and which have been used since to the glory of God in the emancipation and elevation of womanhood, not only in Cardiff but in all parts of the country. To her wonderful gift of song she now added a gift of speech of rare charm and sweetness by which she has moved and melted the hearts of tens of thousands of her sex.³²

³⁰*Western Mail*, July 16, 1931, 4.

³¹Irene Myrddin Davies, ed., *Memory An Inspiration*, 26.

³²T. W. Chance, *The Life of Principal Edwards*, 73.

While Sarah's efforts to reach out to women in need may have gained impetus through the revival movement, her work with the disadvantaged did not stop when the revival fires ceased to glow. In fact, as one friend claimed, over the years Sarah opened the rooms of the College, and personally welcomed 'scores of lonely dejected and depressed and meals were prepared day and night'. She was also instrumental in establishing what was known as a 'rescue' home in Cardiff for young women. Speaking at a meeting of the BWTA in Swansea, Sarah emphasised the need to work among the 'fallen women' [prostitutes] in all of the towns of Wales. She exclaimed that women have long been doing the 'drawing room and parlour work' and it was time to take up some 'scullery work' and who better to do rescue work but British women.³³

Sought after as a speaker, she was often a platform speaker in afternoon and evening meetings, making her appeal to men and women.³⁴ She also led a deputation from Wales to Lord Asquith, as Prime Minister, to ask for legislation condemning drinking clubs.

In 1908, she organised a women's demonstration in Cardiff in support of the licensing bill that was to be introduced in Parliament. The account of the event in the newspaper gives an indication of the influence of Sarah Edwards as it was reported that hundreds of women packed Wood Street Church in Cardiff, while hundreds more could not get a seat and had to go to an overflow meeting in Tabernacle. In organising the event, she also used the social and political connections which her own status in society would have afforded her at that time to invite speakers noted for their work for social reform. The *South Wales Daily News* reported that on the platform, speakers included: Lady Wimborne [Cornelia Guest], Mrs [Margaret] Lloyd-George, Mrs [Laura] Ormiston Chant, and Mrs [Sarah Catherine] Viriamu Jones.³⁵

Millicent MacKenzie, one of the first women professors at the University, attended the meeting and described the gathering as 'a great and inspiring women's meeting.'³⁶ Apparently, a temperance song was sung to the tune: 'tramp, tramp, tramp the boys are marching' as women shouted from the gallery 'Hallelujah' and 'we fight to save the young!' At the event, Sarah, as organiser, gave a short speech – interrupted by applause – which included the challenge 'It is time when each of us should be a woman the Lord can trust'. 'Now women, out of your shells, and off with your gloves.'³⁷

Not all people were appreciative of Sarah Edwards' direct style and approach and some occasionally took offence at her description of certain areas of some towns. Speaking at a meeting in 1909, she referred to 'darkest Cardiff' and

³³'The Fallen Sisterhood,' *Herald of Wales* Saturday 20 April 1907, 8.

³⁴*Pontypridd Observer*, May 13, 1911, 4.

³⁵*South Wales Daily News*, May 1, 1908, 5.

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷*Ibid.*

claimed the owners of some businesses should be held to account for the behaviour of their employees. She also said that her husband had been told that Pontypool was one of the worst places in Wales. A letter to the editor in a newspaper published the next day objected to her assessment, though the Baptist minister at Crane Street Baptist Church in Pontypool wrote to the paper in support of her assessment of the town!³⁸

The controversy rumbled on for several months with newspaper reports suggesting that a firm in the city might bring legal proceedings against her for mentioning their workers. One citizen wrote in support of Edwards claiming that if legal proceedings were brought against her, a collection should be taken for a defence fund for her. Another article pointed out that she had not mentioned the name of any firm (though obviously everyone was aware of the area she was referring to as 'darkest Cardiff'). There were even personal testimonies printed in the paper from women who had been helped by the 'midnight mission'. Sarah Edwards, however, does not seem to have been deterred by the very public criticism of her work, but continued to raise awareness of issues surrounding intemperance, particularly the destruction to home life, and threats to the welfare of women and children.

Over the years, those who have written on the temperance movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century have sometimes labelled events like Edwards' 'midnight mission' as an example of a 'purity campaign' or a 'morality crusade' which was intended to address issues around women and prostitution. While judgment was often passed on the morals of women, there were those who argued – Sarah among them – that men, too, should be held responsible for their behaviour. In fact, the double standards that were applied to men and women had become very apparent in the late nineteenth century when under the Contagious Diseases Act (1864, 1866, 1869) women could be forcibly incarcerated and subjected to physical examinations while men were allowed to go free.³⁹ The injustice of the laws which favoured men, brought to the fore the whole legal question of the status of women. Thus, while at one level the issue over women on the streets may be evaluated in the context of a Victorian obsession with family values, there can be little doubt that this involvement in temperance movement led many people to take a stand on suffrage for women.⁴⁰

Temperance work certainly gave Sarah Edwards a public platform and, as she began to give attention to some of the social ills related to alcoholism, she began to work for changes in the law that would address social needs. The

³⁸*South Wales Daily News*, January 26, 1909, 5.

³⁹Opposition to the act was led by Josephine Butler who garnered support from many women, including her cousin and a Baptist, Emily Medley. The Act was finally repealed in 1886. See, K. E. Smith, "'Toward a Wider Sphere of Usefulness': Women in British Baptist Life, 1873–1911," in *Baptist Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (October 2024): 184–185.

⁴⁰Ella Phillips, *The Victorian Social Purity Movement: A Noble Pursuit or 'Morality Crusade'?* <https://blog.bham.ac.uk/legalherstory/2018/03/20/the-victorian-social-purity-movement-a-noble-pursuit-or-morality-crusade/>

legal changes, of course, required public support and a majority of votes in Parliament and in relation to this, Sarah did not hesitate to take a stand for suffrage for women. Like many other temperance workers, her desire to see change in legislation may have brought into sharper focus the wider issue of women's voting rights. Moreover, her temperance work brought her into contact with other women's groups which were agitating for equal voting rights for women. While neither she nor her husband condoned the militant actions of radical suffragettes, they were clearly suffragists, supporters of the right of women to vote.

Suffrage

Sarah attended meetings of the Cardiff Women Citizen's Association when they were demanding equal franchise for women. (At that time men had the vote at age 21 and women had to wait until they were 30 years of age.) In 1911, she was part of group of women from Wales who went to see the Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd George, seeking his support for the conciliation bill which was coming up for a second reading.⁴¹ Conciliation bills which were put to Parliament in 1910 and 1911 were intended to extend voting rights to women who were wealthy and property-owning. They all failed with some members of Parliament refusing to support the move because they felt it should not be limited to women who owned property. Others felt that it would benefit the opposing party, while some simply believed that women should not be given the right to vote under any circumstances.

An indication of Sarah's influence is evident from the fact that newspapers dedicated to the suffrage cause commented on her support. For instance, the *Common Cause* and *Votes For Women* both reported in 1910 that at a Welsh National Suffrage Conference of Liberal Women, held at Corey Hall in Cardiff, a resolution was made suggesting that while Welsh Disestablishment should be reaffirmed, there should be truce among the parties which would allow freedom for members of all parties to support a bill in favour of the suffrage for women. Speaking in favour of the resolution, Sarah Edwards claimed: 'The law needed to be humanised, but that would not come until it was womanised.'⁴²

As well as taking the request for suffrage to London as a member of the last deputation to go to the government prior to the granting of the franchise to women, she continued to speak out within the church. In 1918, the 'Representation of the People Act' was passed by Parliament. This bill, gave the right to vote to men over twenty-one, whether or not they owned property, and to women over thirty who resided in a constituency or occupied land or premises

⁴¹*Merthyr Express*, Saturday 29 April 1911, 4.

⁴²*Common Cause*, November 6, 1910, 6. and *Votes for Women*, November 11, 1910.

with a rateable value over £5 (or whose husband did). It was considered by many as a first step toward equal franchise which would come ten years later, in 1928. However, it was a small victory to be celebrated, and at a meeting of the Women's Free Church Council in Central Baptist Church, London, it was reported that Sarah Edwards thanked Mrs Lloyd George (who was in the chair) from the women of Wales 'for the splendid loyalty you showed to the cause women's suffrage right up to its success'.⁴³

In all that she did, Sarah had the support of her husband, Principal Edwards, who was also in favour of women's suffrage. In an address entitled 'Our Inspirations', which he gave to Triennial Conference at Swansea of the Three English Baptist Associations in South Wales and Monmouthshire, June 18th, 1925, he spoke of developments in the world which were a 'source of encouragement, messengers of Hope, and a stimulus to courage and incentives to change.' Among the changes he noted was the development of what he called 'the service of consecrated womanhood'. Noting the work of women in government and as members of various boards he spoke of their work in the temperance movement and in the local church, suggesting that during the Great War 'many a little Bethel would have been closed; but amid their anxiety and their tears with unperishable devotion they kept them open'. He concluded:

Woman, like man was a special creation of God, capable of rendering great service in the sphere in which she should be placed; yet her place in public life is a great evolution. Although loved and revered as she should be, yet throughout the ages she was unaccountably ignored, and here many gifts were not called into requisition; but even confining ourselves to the last sixty or seventy years, what transformation has taken place! Mere man has been obstinate in giving her rightful position but she has fairly won it, and we maintain she will take care to keep it... They have covered the land with a network of agency and as British women—their zeal, energy and spirit of self-sacrifice know no bound.⁴⁴

While affirmed by her husband and family, Sarah Edwards would have been well aware that some men and women in the churches, and in society as a whole, continued to believe that women should continue to find their primary place of service in the home. Apparently, some ministers would not allow women to use the pulpit, and warned them against having too many meetings by saying: 'It is feared that increasing the number of meetings will make [the women] neglect their homes, and a woman's chief work is to look after her home.'⁴⁵ Humorously, a woman recalled that on one occasion a deacon in one of the churches came up and said to her and to Sarah Edwards, 'If you two ladies continue to speak on public platforms let me warn you will lose

⁴³*Daily News* (London), March 6, 1918, 4.

⁴⁴William Edwards, 'Our Inspirations', *An Address delivered at the Triennial Conference at Swansea of the Three English Baptist Associations in South Wales and Monmouthshire, June 18, 1925*, p. 7.

⁴⁵Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, "From Temperance to Suffrage," in *Our Mothers' Land*, ed. Angela V. John, 147.

your femininity and charm'. When he was out of earshot, the woman said that she and Sarah Edwards turned to one another and laughingly agreed that 'they would risk it!'⁴⁶

While such comments might have been passed off with humour at times, it was clear that a more direct approach was needed to remind people that the place of women had, indeed, evolved and changed. When William Edwards died in 1929, the account of the funeral in the *Western Mail* listed the significant men who attended the funeral, though apparently none of the women who were present representing various organisations were named. The newspaper apparently was asked to print an apology, because it was duly noted a few days later that in addition to the names of men published 'there were a large number of ladies representing various religious, social, and temperance organisations with which Mrs Edwards associated and in which Dr Edwards took a keen interest'.⁴⁷

A formidable person, her work was always for women. Her efforts, of course, were not simply taking a stand for women – her motivation was not simply the cause of women. Rather, her desire to address social need brought to the fore issues of injustice toward women. She cared deeply for children, young people, and the elderly who might otherwise have been placed at a disadvantage in society. Typically, when she died in July 1947, her request was that in lieu of flowers, donations should be made to the Sisterhood Eventide Home.⁴⁸ This was a home sponsored by the Women's Council of the West Wales Federation of Evangelical Free Churches for elderly women who could not afford to stay in their current premises.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Sarah Ann (Evans) Edwards was a remarkable Baptist woman. As a voice for change, she spoke out against the plight of women who were often disadvantaged in a patriarchal, male-dominated culture. While she did not condone the violence of radical suffragettes, she was in fact a firm suffragist, and through her leadership in denominational, as well as wider Nonconformist groups (English and Welsh), she worked for change. While her forthright and direct manner might not have resonated with everyone, she worked tirelessly to help create a fairer and more equitable society for all. Sarah Edwards' story, and numerous stories of so many other Welsh women, have often remained hidden in the annals of history. Yet, her work is a testimony to the fact that, in addition to the contribution of many men who have served the churches in Wales, there

⁴⁶Irene Myrddin Davies, ed., *Memory An Inspiration*, 23.

⁴⁷*Western Mail*, March 7, 1929, 7.

⁴⁸*Western Mail*, Wednesday 30 July 1947, 3.

⁴⁹*South Wales Daily Post*, Wednesday 28 November 1945, 3.

have also been women who have valiantly played their part in church life and in the wider society, too.

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