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A Welsh Coal Miner

Coal mining, in my mind, has always gone hand in hand with Welshness, because throughout my childhood I was told that I descended from *Welsh miners*—never just *miners* nor just the *Welsh*, but both integral, as if to say a particular sort of coal miner and a particular sort of Welshman. I knew it was because of our Welshness that my grandfather sang tenor in choirs (though badly) and my father quoted poetry (in contrast, beautifully). I knew that my sister Megan had a Welsh name, but nothing impressed me more about our Welshness than one Christmas when my family sat down to watch *How Green was My Valley*, and both my father and grandfather cried.

This film is based on a novel written by Richard Llewellyn, who visited his grandfather in the Valleys of South Wales as a child. Later he returned and interviewed coal miners in the Valleys, writing a total of four books based on their stories. Llewellyn so identified with these Welsh coal miners and the hills they mined that throughout his literary career he claimed to have been born in Wales himself. It was not discovered until after his death that he was born in London.

“How green was my valley then, and the valley of them that have gone,” runs the last line in Llewellyn’s novel. This chronicle of the Morgan family takes place in Gilfach Goch, where the main character, Huw Morgan, loses his father to the mines and his older brother to the factories. As a young girl, I did not know how closely this novel mirrored the experiences of our Welsh miners—that my grandfather must have felt a kinship with Huw, who leaves coal mining because of promising academic achievement. Huw’s sister, Angarad Morgan, although in love with a preacher, marries a wealthy mine owner who makes her unhappy—Llewellyn’s fictional character forming a perfect literary foil to my great-great-grandmother Margaret who, for love, spurned a rich man’s son to marry a poor miner.

Margaret Davis was born in Wales in 1848 and wed my great-great-grandfather Evan Thomas in 1870. Neither wrote accounts of their lives. Margaret survives through the voices of her daughter and granddaughter, who wrote short life-sketches from their memories of her. Small scraps of detail about Evan are included in the personal histories of his grandsons and the stories of the family that have been passed on. We have no picture of Evan or even of the couple on their wedding day. Only one photograph of Margaret remains, and after searching through the plastic-covered sheets of my purple binder for the details on these two Welsh progenitors, I am left with only a vague caricature of Evan. But these female descendants preserved a fuller portrait of Margaret—that she was strong, and that she was kind. Reading these accounts, I hope there is some of her in me.

Over one hundred years after Margaret and Evan left Wales for America on the steamship *Wyoming*, I came to Wales in search of them. I watched the countryside of England move at a steady 40 mph out the window of the coach bus, each rotation of the tires on the pavement bringing me that much closer. *How green was my valley then, and the valley of them that have gone.* I could not reclaim Evan or Margaret through their own voices or their images, so I had to set foot in Wales and see the hills. I had to reclaim their earth.

Not far from the border of England and Wales we passed a towering white windmill. Modern and streamlined, the turbine looked more foreign in the country landscape than the smokestack by its side—two pillars of possibility. One sliced the air precisely; the other, stained with years of use, sent thick black smoke into the air. They rose from behind trees covering a power plant that was barely visible from the road. It seemed fitting to see a smokestack before crossing into Wales, a land whose history is intertwined with the history of steam power and coal.

The bus approached a mile-long bridge stretched over an expanse of mud scattered with puddles of seawater that rippled in the wind. Ahead a larger patch of water gleamed. It was the mouth of the River Severn that feeds into the Bristol Channel, dividing the coast of England from the coast of Wales. We neared Cardiff, the capitol and one of the major port towns developed in the eighteenth century from shipping iron and coal.

Once over the bridge, the road signs were written in two languages: *Lain Gallad*—Hard Shoulder, *Maes Awyr*—Airport, and *Gwasanaethau*—Services. This is the result of the Welsh Language Act of 1993, stipulating that English and Welsh have equal status, a move precipitated by over two thousand years of struggle for independence. In 1282 after the death of Llywelyn the Last, King Edward I of England finally subdued the Welsh kingdoms, lands known as *Cymry* to its inhabitants, who, despite years of occupation, have maintained a national character peculiar enough

to retain some aloofness. Curiously, even the name *Wales* reflects this. It means “foreigner” in Saxon.

Welsh is one of the oldest languages in Europe. There is a certain excess in the spelling; the lyric antiquity of the consonant and vowel combinations brings me back to Evan and Margaret and those who came before them. They spoke this language with an accent that has been passed down through four generations. Occasionally, I am asked if I am English or Australian by other Americans. In my verbal family, not even the New World has completely stamped out the influence of *Cymraeg*.

The bus drove through downtown Cardiff, past the castle and the university, dropping me off at the train station a fortunate twenty minutes before the next train—Merthyr Tydfil is not a popular destination, and few trains run on Sundays. In Cardiff, the villages up north are referred to as “the cities of the valley” and are looked down on for their relative lack of sophistication. In South Wales, there are five of these valleys running parallel to each other, divided by ranges of hills. Merthyr Tydfil is the largest of these towns. During the big coal years, it was the most populated industrial settlement in Wales and the setting of many important events in England’s Industrial Revolution, including the introduction of the first steam locomotive.

I had come to Merthyr expecting the “old country”: cottages and wooded hills where mists of Merlin lay low over trees. Instead, from the windows of the train I saw only rows of connected houses with tall chimneys clumped into the shallow valleys. A half hour later, I stepped out of the train at Merthyr Tydfil to a giant Tesco, the largest grocery chain in the United Kingdom.

The wild country of dragon lairs, shepherders, and Druids still exists in parts of northern Wales, but the Industrial Revolution left an indelible mark on the southern region. I learned later that the connected homes are referred to as *terraced* and were built to house the workers who flocked to South Wales from western Wales, Ireland, and England to work the mines. Before the Industrial Revolution, only seven hundred people lived in Merthyr Tydfil, a small rural community that was noted for its “fairytale loveliness.” By contrast, in the 1850s when the population had risen to over fifty thousand, George Borrow, an English travel writer who visited Merthyr at its industrial height, revealed the effects of 150 years of development: “all the hills around the town, some of which are very high, have a scorched and blackened look.” He described the houses as “low and mean, and built of rough grey stones.”

Recently, efforts have been made to improve these old miners’ houses. Window frames and doorways have been painted in accent colors, and the cement walls have been overlaid with colored gravel. Potted flowers hang out front, adding a country charm to the solemn rows. Though the hills



Erin Thomas, 2006

Aberfan viewed from across the field of Merthyr Vale Colliery

are no longer black with smut, there are marks on the natural landscape that are difficult to ameliorate.

The woods, with groundcovers of brambles and wild berries, taper off at times to a similarly bumpy landscape, but in a more measly fashion. Yellow grass on top takes on an unnatural hue from the black soil that shows through. These piles of dark earth, loosely packed and eroding in places, are called *tips*, where slag from the mines has been carted out and dumped on the hillsides. And this slag, still evident on the hills, brought Merthyr County most significantly into public eye 110 years after it was the most important town in Britain during the Industrial Revolution. Like all mining towns, media documentation in Merthyr corresponds with disaster.

On my first day in Wales, I stayed with a small Welsh family with three little girls. They lived in Aberfan, a small village in Merthyr Tydfil County, five miles south of downtown. Aberfan perches on the hills across the valley from Merthyr Vale. A flat field of grass where the first shaft of the Merthyr Vale colliery was sunk in 1869 divides these two villages. Eighty years later, the mine closed and all the buildings were removed, leaving a large yellow-tinted plain of empty space where the trees stop on either side.

My first afternoon in Wales, I set out with Linda Johnson and her three girls—Emily, Naomi, and Leisle, ages three to seven—on a walk to Aberfan



Courtesy of Alan George's Old Merthyr Tydfil

Landslide in Aberfan 1966

Memorial. The day was overcast, and the tops of the hills lightly misted. Once we reached the park, which was surrounded by low stone walls, we followed a cement walk through stretches of lawn and plots of shrubbery. On seeing grass, the girls began to leap, run, and yell; their mother shushed them. She indicated an older couple who circled the park: “Girls, maybe they lost somebody.” Forty years ago this used to be the location of Pantglas Junior School. Now there is a stone plaque that reads *I’r rhai a garwn, ac y galarwn o’u colli*, translated as “To those we love and miss so much.” In 1997, thirty years after the disaster, Queen Elizabeth II planted a tree here; it was still a sapling. I read the marker in front of it, and Emily, the oldest, crawled behind, asking me to take a picture of her. Her long red hair trailed to her knees.

In late October 1966 at 9:15 a.m., the junior school children, many of them Emily’s age, were engaged in their lessons at Pantglas, and the senior school children were arriving to start theirs. A movement started on the hill that many described as sounding like a jet plane overhead. Harold Rees, a senior school student, described it as big wave of muck higher than a house, containing boulders, trees, trams, and bricks, that “was moving fast, as fast as a car goes down town rumbling like an old train going along.” On Merthyr Mountain, moisture from rain and an underground spring had saturated a tip from the Merthyr Vale shaft in the valley below. This liquefied the bottom of the coal waste, which began to move down the hill in “a dark glistening wave.” In moments, this landslide of slag leveled a school wall and began to fill the classrooms, burying the children and teachers that were trying to escape. Harold watched the deluge swallow two of his classmates who were sitting on a stone wall just outside the school, plunge across the street, and knock down eighteen houses. The

barber, Mr. George Williams, on his way to work that morning, was saved by a piece of corrugated sheeting. He later recalled that after the hideous rumble, there was a silence in which “you couldn’t hear a bird or a child.”

Within minutes, a road repair crew and miners working above the tip were at the scene. Men from the local pubs, senior school students, and mothers joined them, until there were hundreds digging through the mud and slag to save the children. Miners from the Vale Mine organized the digging, but none were recovered alive. The rescuers passed their small corpses from person to person, laying them beyond the debris and dross. The landslide killed a total of 144 people, 116 of them children.

“They say that the school collapsed first at one end,” Linda says in almost a whisper, “so the children and the teachers ran to the windows at the other side. And that is how they found them, with their faces pressed against the window.”

After we left the park, we took the road up to the cemetery. Leisle was tired, so I picked her up. Emily climbed and swung on rocks and railings, calling to me to come and take her picture. Naomi followed, grimacing at her shorter legs. Trees surrounded the cemetery, which rose above the city on a hill on the east side of the valley. The graves were amassed in uneven rows of monuments and tombstones. The gray light softened the edges of things and intensified the greens; the air was moist and cool. Halfway between more somber and worn-looking markers, two rows of white arches cut a straight line across the graveyard.

Under these arches were headstones that I read as I walked by—some shaped as hearts, some with statues of angels praying with their hands clasped together. “Stay off the graves,” Linda called to Emily and Naomi. “People are buried under there!” The three girls had just lost their grandpa and were beginning to understand death. Leisle held my hand as we walked past the first row of arches where many of the Pantglas children were buried. Most inscriptions indicated ages between seven and ten. Biblical verses and original epitaphs were carved into many of the headstones. That of Edwin Davies Evans, age six, read: “Jesus in his bosom wears the flower that once was ours.” One arch framed the stone for Robert Garfield Jones (age nine) and his grandmother Lavetie A. Jones (age sixty-one), who were buried side by side. Mrs. Jones must have been a teacher. I imagined how she must have scrambled to protect her pupils and her grandchild.

“To the memory of Dwynwen. Cherish her O Lord as we did during her short life. We miss her so.” Emily swung upside down on the stair railing. Naomi cried because she had scratched her knee stumbling after her sister. Leisle’s thick lower lip twitched as she whimpered, toddling by my side. A silence in which *you couldn’t hear a bird or a child*—how empty Aberfan must have seemed for years afterward. Even forty years later, there must have



Erin Thomas, 2006

White arches for children killed in the Aberfan disaster.

been a reminder, a gap between those in their mid-forties and early fifties. This village had lost an entire generation. I paused at the first of the white arches and read the headstone once more: “In memory of Richard who loved light, freedom, and animals.” Linda picked up Leisle, who leaned her head against her mother’s chest and began to sing the theme song from *Annie*, mumbling and improvising the parts she couldn’t remember.

The American photographer I. C. Rapoport arrived in Aberfan eight days after the disaster. In his New York apartment, his newborn son had lain nearby as he witnessed footage from the incident—the collapsed school, the bodies of the children, mourners dressed in the common clothing of the day. Like my experience in O’Hare Airport, a world event had taken on something personal. Rapoport arranged a contract with *Life* magazine to live in the village to document how “survivors survive.” In the gray tones of his photographs, he captures the landscape of the hills, the long rows of housing, and the graveyard, but each photograph always contains a figure. In one, a woman stands with an umbrella in the distance. Flowers are strewn over a long band of newly turned earth where the double row of arches stands now. Other photographs reverberate with Welsh life in a coal mining town that had probably not changed much for 130 years—rotating around the pub, the church, and the tunnel from which the men emerged at the end of day with blackened faces.

After visiting Aberfan Memorial and the graveyard with Emily, Naomi, and Leisle, I realized that my search to understand what it meant to be a *Welsh coal miner* had much to do with these children of mining families. Though certainly one of the most devastating, Aberfan was not the first coal mining accident that involved boys and girls. Poor records were kept of the South Wales fatalities from 1788 to 1871. On one list 5,650 mining deaths are documented, but it is far from complete. South Wales was known for its treacherous mine roofs, and accidents were a weekly occurrence. Only mining incidents in which more than five men were killed on company grounds were counted, and before 1850 no systematic records were kept at all. In 1851, a mine inspector was assigned to the South Wales and Monmouthshire mines, and from this date to 1855, his tally reached 738. Boys between the ages of ten to fifteen numbered one in nine of the miners employed in these mines, but they accounted for one-fifth of the dead.

In these tunnels miles below the surface, children mined along with their parents because salaries were barely sufficient to support families. My history of Welsh coal miners is the history of one of these mining children. My great-great-grandfather, Evan Thomas, was six when he left play for the pit. In the winter months, he never saw daylight, much of his childhood submerged in the night of the mines.