



PROJECT MUSE®

3. The First Loco to Run on Rails

Published by

Thomas, Erin Ann.

Coal in our Veins: A Personal Journey.

1 ed. Utah State University Press, 2012.

Project MUSE. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/15078>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/15078>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
[209.94.60.212] Project MUSE (2025-08-15 10:11 GMT)

3

The First Loco to Run on Rails

According to legend, a Christian princess named Tudful wandered from the northern town of Brecon to Merthyr Tydfil in the fifth century A.D. She was of the house of Prince Brychan of Brycheinoig, a half-Welsh, half-Irish king with a bounteous and educated posterity. Tudful, like a number of Brychan's thirty-six children, became known as a wandering saint for her dedication to evangelism. Now a county borough of roughly seventy square miles in the Valleys of South Wales, Merthyr Tydfil at that time was primarily populated by sheep. Here among Celtic farmers in the Taff River Valley, Tudful lived simply, founding a religious community and nurturing the sick, both man and animal. In 480, while on her way to Aberfan to visit her sister, she was killed by marauding Scottish Picts, on the rampage, apparently, since the Romans left. She fell under the sword as she knelt in prayer, the earth soaking up her martyred blood. Merthyr Tydfil owes both its name and its first mention in written history to this princess, now a Catholic saint.

Merthyr later emerges in the historical record when the English Lord of Gloucester built Morlais Castle on land claimed by the Earl of Hereford, starting a war that was settled by King Edward I in 1290. Just four years later, Morlais was seized by the Welsh rebel Madog Llywelyn, a descendant of the princes of Wales from the ancient House of Cunedda. The castle was never finished, and today all that remains are rock walls nearly over-come with grass.

The names involved in these vague histories are touched with that peculiar Welshness that evokes Arthurian oldness, and I wonder how my ancestors figured into these scattered instances of Merthyr's historical fame.

Our earliest Welsh genealogical records date to the time of Merthyr's final conquerors, not Picts or the Earl of Gloucester, but the lords of four iron companies: Dowlais, Cyfarthfa, Plymouth, and Penydarren. Our earliest knowledge of Thomases begins with the coal used to make coke for smelting iron.

Dowlais Ironworks was founded in 1759, and Cyfarthfa six years later, originally supplying bullets and canons for the British during America's Revolutionary War. Plymouth split from Cyfarthfa, and in 1784 Penydarren was founded by Anthony Bacon. Bacon soon turned over the management of the company to Samuel Homfray, whose wager was the impetus for the world's first steam locomotive.

Horse-drawn wagons initially transported iron through the Valleys to the port at Cardiff. The ironmasters of the four foundries combined interests to build a canal twenty-five miles downhill from Merthyr to Cardiff, fed by the River Taff. Barges loaded with iron floated to the ports on the canal's shallow waters. The primary shareholder was Richard Crawshay, owner of Cyfarthfa Ironworks, born of a Yorkshire farmer. When traffic on the canal increased, Crawshay did what all great industrialists would have done. He demanded preference for his boats.

Samuel Homfray of the Penydarren Works was the son of an English ironmaster. Known to have his way with the ladies, Homfray wasn't about to be beaten by a yeoman. Banding together with the other two ironmasters, he built a tramway to circumvent the canal. Ironmasters had discovered that laying tracks expedited travel. Homfray intended to transport iron by horse-drawn carriages until he had a better idea: steam.

Steam engines had been used in mining since 1712, when inventor Thomas Newcomen introduced the first practical water pump to solve the problem of drainage—the invention that began the relationship between coal mining and mechanization. Richard Trevithick, a Cornish engineer apprenticed as a boy to set up water pumps in mines, first applied steam power to vehicles. With a cousin, he developed the steam carriage, which made rounds through the streets of London. Samuel Homfray wrote Trevithick to see if he could build an engine to run on tracks. Crawshay was skeptical; Homfray swore it could be done. The two posted £500 each on the wager of transporting a shipment of iron from Penydarren to the seacoast by steam power.

In Merthyr Tydfil on February 21, 1804, in front of a crowd that likely included Evan Thomas's grandparents, Richard Trevithick showcased his "puffing steel." It was a single-barreled engine that pulled cars loaded with ten tons of iron and seventy passengers. Doubtless to the tune of hearty Welsh cheers, this first mobile steam engine crept down Tramroadside at five miles per hour, completing its ten-mile trek to Abercynon faithfully. Despite this success, Homfray abandoned the scheme. The boiler



Courtesy of Alan George's Old Merthyr Tydfil

Tramroadside north in Merthyr Tydfil, circa 1900

broke on the return journey, and Trevithick had not addressed the issue of friction—the seven ton puffing steel broke cast iron tracks consistently from its weight and from power being applied in sharp pulses. Trevithick's steam locomotive was demoted to running a hammer in the Penydarren Ironworks. Thirty-two years later the Taff Valley Railway was constructed from Merthyr to the coast, using George Stephenson's more workable model of the steam engine and sturdier tracks, increasing both the accessibility and the demand for iron and coal. Even so, this event is still memorialized in Merthyr with this inscription: "Richard Trevithick ... Pioneer of High Pressure Steam. Built the first loco to run on rails."

By the 1830s, Merthyr Tydfil was the iron capital of the world, employing the largest number of workers and dominating trade in the production of tracks. The Welsh developed the technology for using coal to refine metal, and each of these ironworks had their own collieries to provide coke for smelting iron. Otherwise, householders mined coal for their personal cooking and heating needs.

Around the turn of the century, small collieries began to spring up for digging "sale coal." In 1824, Robert Thomas (not a relative) opened a level of coal to sell to the households in Merthyr and Cardiff. After his death, his widow Lucy took over her husband's business and began exporting coal to England, where it began to draw attention because of its nearly smokeless quality while generating large amounts of heat. For her enterprising efforts, Lucy Thomas has been dubbed the Mother of the Welsh Steam Coal Trade. Other mines were opened around Merthyr and throughout the hills of South Wales, eventually producing a total of three hundred million tons of coal from two thousand collieries.

Welsh coal was cut by three methods. In *patching*, the most ancient, coal was quarried from seams (coal deposits layered between other kinds of rock) that cropped up on the surface. Roman soldiers who first burned coal for heat would scavenge it for their fires, and Welsh farmers would later gather it for their stoves. In their collieries, the ironmasters used two methods that were more economical and less injurious to the foliage on the surface: bell pits and levels. A *bell pit* was begun by tunneling straight down to the first seam of coal. Men were lowered by a rope-and-pulley method to work on opposite walls of the pit, causing it to mushroom out on either side. The workers would send baskets of coal to the surface by the pulley system called a *wind drum*, which in some areas of the Welsh coalfields was operated exclusively by women.

Whereas a bell pit was started vertically, a *level* was cut horizontally into the side of a mountain. Miners would tunnel in and branch into corridors that led to *stalls*, or rooms, where miners would chip away at coal seams. Drawing a level was cheaper than digging down due to mining's two basic problems: ventilation and drainage. By the mid-nineteenth century, both bell pits and levels were considered primitive in Northern England's coal mines; Wales was way behind the times, but made efforts to modernize. In 1875, deep mining predominated in Wales. A colliery was initiated by sinking a shaft that became the doorway to an elaborate network of underground tunnels where hundreds of men and horses spent the majority of their lives.

Merthyr Tydfil became such a hub of industrial activity that travel writer George Borrow descended from the hills one evening in 1854 to document its activities. I imagine he used a walking stick, picking his way through the mountain brush of the South Wales hills to a valley of light and a hillside of blazes. On reaching the valley, he identified the source of the brilliance as lava-like material that zigzagged across the hill above him.

"What is all that burning stuff above my friend?" George Borrow asked a Welshman leaning against the front door of his cottage.

"Dross from the iron forges sir!"

In this cityscape that represented the throb of Welsh industry at its finest, Borrow noted some resemblance to hell. This was the home of my great-great-grandparents—Margaret Davis, who was six, and Evan Thomas, who was seven—and the people who milled about Borrow as he minced his way through the filthy streets of terraced housing and narrow alleys were their neighbors.

After navigating through downtown Merthyr Tydfil, Borrow booked lodging in one of the town's main hubs. The Castle Inn was named for Cyfartha Castle on the hills above, a nineteenth-century spectacle built by the Crawshay family, who owned the iron foundry that Borrow visited the next morning.



Courtesy of Alan George's Old Merthyr Tydfil

Cyfartha blast furnaces, 1894

The Cyfarthfa Ironworks boasted of being the largest in the whole of Britain. Of his experience there, Borrow wrote: “I saw enormous furnaces. I saw streams of molten metal. I saw a long ductile piece of red-hot iron being operated upon. I saw millions of sparks flying about. I saw an immense wheel impelled with frightful velocity by a steam engine of two hundred and forty horse power. I heard all kinds of dreadful sounds. The general effect was stunning.”

At the time of Borrow’s visit, the Merthyr iron trade was at its peak, and the coal trade was gaining strength in the Northern England market, Welsh coal being proven superior in trial after trial conducted by steamships. In Borrow’s words, Merthyr “was till late an inconsiderable village, but is at present the greatest mining place in Britain, and may be called with much propriety the capital of iron and coal.” The vast wealth pouring into this area, however, was absorbed into the fortunes of the ironmasters and collier owners. While they lived in elaborate estates, the common person’s lot was meager, dark, and filthy. Merthyr by day struck Borrow as being as damned as Merthyr by night, only less magnificently hellish. He reported that it had a somewhat singed look and expounded on the satanic character of the buildings. On the people who inhabited this infernal architecture, he reflected little, stating only that they were numerous and spoke mostly Welsh. He described “throngs of savage looking people talking clamorously” and admitted that he “shrank from addressing any of them.”

Merthyr, like many towns built around the iron and coal industries, attracted mostly young men at first, who, in turn, attracted the establishment of prostitution and public houses. The part of town that Borrow focused on in his descriptions was called “China” by the locals, and prostitutes, miners, and orphaned children would bunk down together in small inn rooms where occasionally the dead would go unnoticed for days.

Women would have to keep close watch on their babies, so they wouldn't be gnawed on by the rats. The residents of Merthyr were renowned for their drinking. In 1805, there were over three hundred pubs, a ratio of one to every twenty-four domestic dwellings, and in these taverns, frontier-style violence was not uncommon. Stripped to the waist, men fought duels not with guns, but in hand-to-hand combat.

Given the level of sanitation at the time, drinking alcohol was much healthier than drinking water. In 1849, Inspector T. W. Rammell conducted a public inquiry into the town, concluding: "Merthyr ... sprung up rapidly from a village to a town without any precautions being taken for the removal of the increased masses of filth necessarily produced by an increased population, not even for the escape of surface water ... A rural spot of considerable beauty has been transformed into a crowded and filthy manufacturing town with an amount of mortality higher than any other commercial or manufacturing town in the kingdom." According to historian Carolyn Jacob, during 1850–60, Merthyr decided to become "a proper town" and established building ordinances and water-supply regulations. Prior to this, newcomers built their houses where they pleased. High Street was a morass of mud, and sewage was pumped into a local river that would flood into the homes when it got backed up. During one month in 1849, one thousand people died of cholera.

In Borrow's account, he reports on the type of workingman one would imagine treading through the dark corridors of what George Orwell considered the most wretched job of the working class. Although factory workers performed their labors in dank factories where disease and machinery malfunction were common causes of death, only the underworld of mining threatened its workers with the dangers of cave-ins, explosions, and deadly gases. Farmhands, bent for long hours raising hoes and scythes instead of picks and driving horses along rows of crops instead of in the black halls of mines, worked in the light of day without the constant inhalation of coal dust.

The miserable living conditions of the Welsh coal towns—overcrowded housing, with piles of refuse in alleyways "beset with stinking pools and gutters"—were no worse than those of the London poor, who had open sewage lines and thick, muggy air from the soot of chimneys on side-by-side houses. The miners at least had an opportunity to rent cottages owned by the mining company that were leased at a discount to attract workers. There were advantages to mining that an outsider like Borrow would never suppose. These ranks of *savage-looking people* possessed a degree of autonomy absent from the labor of other workingmen and women.

Miners weren't paid by the hour, but by the quantity of coal they dug. Although a certain amount of weight was subtracted from their daily output on the assumption of "rubbish" being included in the tram, this gave

a collier an opportunity to earn a living according to his brawn. Until the Mines Regulation Act of 1872, miners weren't tied to any particular schedule. Working days varied from eight to fourteen hours, and Welsh miners considered themselves free to come and go when they pleased. When the daily shift was officially set at twelve hours, with a half day on Saturdays, the miners exercised their liberty by taking personal holidays throughout the month—some missing up to a week. In 1868, a Dowlais trustee asserted: "The vice of the collier is to be idle, he will stay away on Monday and Tuesday and then he comes in and makes the most of the remaining four days, and he sends out as much as he can." Although it cut into their small salaries, the men bought their own picks, candles, and powder. In the stall of a mine, there was only a miner and the boy at his side. There was no shadow cast by a supervisor leaning over his shoulder—the darkness and solitude contributed to the independence of a worker and, thus, to his dignity.

Working in the mines also paid better. A woman who weighed coal at the Graig Colliery chose working at the mines over her former job as kitchen maid, claiming that although her twelve-hour shift was hard, "I prefer this work as it is not so confining and I get more money." This, of course, was during the good years. Mining was a profession particularly subject to market swings. For instance, at a low point in the market in 1859, only a regularly employed miner could depend on twenty-five to twenty-eight pence weekly, whereas after a market boom in 1862, miners could easily earn thirty-five pence a week. This was followed by a crisis four years later, where miners drew salaries below the 1859 average at twenty-four pence. This correlation between coal wages and the economy caused the famous riots of 1831 in Merthyr, where protesters were killed and an infantryman was wounded. Protest became a constant feature of the South Wales coalfields—this tendency to unrest likely added to the Welsh collier's reputation of barbarism among the more polite upper and middle class English.

Thirty years after Borrow visited Merthyr, American writer Wirt Sikes was appointed as the US consul to Wales. In the annals of his travels, he provided a more liberal perspective on the character of these Welshmen: "The Welsh population of Merthyr is gathered in large part from the mountains and wildish valleys hereabouts, and includes some specimens of the race who (as the saying goes) have no English, with a very large number of specimens who have but little and utter it brokenly. Those of the lower class who can read ... are far in advance of Englishmen of the same state in life, who often can read nothing. To hear a poor and grimy Welshman, who looks as if he might not have a thought above bread and beer, talk about the poets and poetry of his native land, ancient and modern, is an experience which, when first encountered, gives the stranger quite a shock of agreeable surprise."

Poetry was not the only thing that distinguished Welshman, but the setting of these lyrics to music. Singing was a way these miners and their families expressed community. As former agriculturalists and herders gathered from the hills into cities to work in the mines, chapels were built and formed the locus of Welsh social life outside the pubs. Here thickset and coal-stained men gathered and sang parts. Competitions among the choirs of different cities became big events, and medals were awarded to the winning choir. During strikes and, later, during the Depression, out-of-work miners went singing from door to door for donations to feed their families. At frequent town festivals, balladeers performed songs based on peasant tunes from the countryside. Merthyr was a dirty and crowded town, but a musical one.

I caught a glimpse of this one day when walking along High Street on a Sunday afternoon. I stepped into St. David's, an Anglican church built in 1847. Religious worship is on the decline in Wales, and the church was empty except for a small cluster of four men and a woman in a corner, singing different parts of a hymn. With five voices, they filled the entire structure.

My progenitors were of the grimy class of folk described so condescendingly by Borrow; they were perhaps even lower socially than those Sikes described due to their lack of any education or literacy. Of their poetic spirit, I have no indication, only that my great-great-grandfather Evan Thomas was renowned for an eloquent temper. He was the son of Frederick Thomas, who was the son of Evan Thomas. On census records the profession of each of these men is listed as "collier" or "miner." When Evan was born in 1849, his family lived on Tramroadside, the route of Trevithick's famous first steam locomotive. Evan first entered the mines at age five, clinging to his father piggyback as they were lowered down into the shaft.

Children often had to work with their fathers to support the family; a collier's wages usually did not suffice to cover the costs of living, which included rent on a miner's cottage and daily rations of bread and cheese—vegetables and bacon were Sabbath-day fare. On the Lord's day, miners were granted a bit of meat and a respite from labor. Children, most of whom were deprived of any other kind of education, could go to Sunday school.

Evan's daily labor was to load the coal his father cut from the seam into a cart, although this was a task usually given to boys much older. His hands would have been barely large enough; his coordination just developing. I can imagine his desire to feel helpful and his fear of the dark without his father close. Other children in Welsh mines would pull carts like the ones that Evan loaded, down tunnels that were so small they had to crawl, dragging the cart behind them with a harness around their waists. The youngest children, in charge of opening and closing the doors, sat in the

dark and listened for the sound of horses and trams. The children were often tired, and some would fall asleep, rolling into the tracks, where they were crushed by oncoming traffic.

In 1842, having heard of the wretched conditions, two government inspectors journeyed to South Wales to interview the children. David Harris, a little boy of eight who worked in the Llancaiach mine, told the inspectors: "I have been below for two months and I don't like it. I used to go to school and I liked that best. The pit is very cold sometimes and I don't like the dark." A little girl who worked in the Plymouth mines in Merthyr Tydfil as a doorkeeper was napping against a large stone when the inspector came to speak to her. She explained that she had fallen asleep because her "lamp had gone out for want of oil. I was frightened for someone had stolen my bread and cheese. I think it was the rats." One reoccurring response among the children was that "they hadn't been hurt yet," as if this idea weighed on their minds with a sense of fear and even expectation.

After the government inspectors returned with their reports, Great Britain outlawed the employment of women and children in the mines by the Act of 1842. Depression hit the country in 1843, and many families had no way to survive without the extra income from their children. One elderly man with a large family of only daughters claimed if his three oldest were pulled from work in the mines, they would all have to be inmates of the union workhouse, a nineteenth-century institution designed to obliterate poverty. Assistance was offered, but only on condition of living and working in an establishment run like a prison. For years miners and mine owners evaded the child-labor legislation, but the practice nearly died off by the mid-fifties and sixties, when pressure came from the miners themselves to exclude boys under the age of twelve from working in the mines. Despite this historical development toward the protection of youth, it was 1855 when little Evan, either due to the poverty or ignorance of his parents, first piggybacked on his father down the mine shaft. They were lowered into the mines before the sun rose and ascended after it had set. They followed this routine seven days a week.

The lot of all Welsh children wasn't so dismal. Other boys watched flocks of sheep. Churches ran schools for poor children, and in 1870 the Education Act was passed, legislating free schooling for children between the ages of five and thirteen. William Paget, a man born in the Valleys in this year, recalls catching wild ponies in the hills, commandeering abandoned trams, swimming in the river, and going whimberry picking before he entered the mines legally at the age of twelve.

My great-great-grandmother Margaret Davis, later to become Margaret Thomas, was also a miner's daughter and lived in Pontypridd, a town, according to Welsh poet John L. Hughes, that is "nothing special": "Even

the name of this place is forgettable. Pontypridd. A shamble of mystic Welshness. Pontypridd. Something to do with a bridge (there is a bridge). Pontypridd. Something to do with the earth (black stuff) ... There being nothing special much around this town. Nothing at all except perhaps the river ... Swilling down from Merthyr same as some kind of whip. Dirty candle-coloured by day down through Aberdare of torrents. Grunting sucking lashing whirlpools blackened through by mining trash and coal no man could burn." In this middling coal village during the age when the River Taff had just begun to take on its blackness, Margaret's mother Ann, like most coal miners' wives, must have kept her small household, pinched in a morose terraced row, scrubbed white and raw. Despite the filth of "China," many of the domestic dwellings around Merthyr were well kept. One visitor in 1869 reported seeing "tidy living rooms [with] a warm fully-furnished look. Every cottage door stands wide open and the visitor sees good coal fires, eight day clocks, sometimes, a good sofa, and a table set with glass and crockery"—in short, homes "where dirt is coined into gold." Cleaning was the bane of a collier's wife, black dust being tracked in at least once daily. I imagine there were nights that Ann cried when her husband John came home with trousers to mend and wash that were stiff and thick with sweat and coal dust. But then she would settle into a chair and callous her thumbs pushing a needle through the begrimed fabric to stitch up holes in the knees and backside. In 1858, Margaret's father died in a cave-in, most likely in a coal mine associated with the Plymouth Ironworks. I can find no record of the accident. John's passing must have been accompanied by the fatalities of fewer than four of his comrades, and thus, not been recorded—a death absorbed by a mining town's routine of loss.

Margaret, who was only ten when her father died, worked as a nanny for the wealthy households of Merthyr to help support her family. She learned to read and write while tending the children of a superintendent from one of the local mines. "Let me help you with your schoolwork," Margaret said when the children came home from school. Understanding her meaning, the children taught her to read from their schoolbooks. During this time, Margaret was baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS church), a young and fledgling religion only thirty years old in the United States. Dan Jones, a Welshman who had joined the Mormons under the leadership of Joseph Smith, Jr. in Kirtland, Ohio, and stayed with him the night before Smith's murder, had returned to his native land to convert his countrymen to this new gospel.

Dan Jones began his proselytizing in an era of religious revival. During the Industrial Age, new religions spread fast in the densely populated coal-fields. Baptists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Methodists were the main sects of Welsh nonconformist religion. Dan Jones's was only the most radical—instead of reformation, he claimed to preach restoration

of the first century church established by Christ's apostles. Of the preachers who drew crowds to these houses of worship, Marie Trevelyan wrote: "All these great Nonconformist preachers of Wales, in person, manner and peculiarities differed from their English brethren of the pulpit, as the rugged and awe-inspiring mountains differ from smooth and undulating uplands. Their talents were many, and highly varied. Some were mightier reasoners and profound expositors—others were strong voiced thunderers, whose overwhelming appeals moved congregations to deep reflection and contrition—other possessed the pathetic power to melt and subdue, while many were gifted with brilliant imagination and vivid imagery that gave effect to apt and telling illustrations."

"Captain" Dan Jones, as they called him, enthralled audiences for three hours at a time, bringing them alternately to tears and laughter. He is reputed to have converted an entire Protestant congregation with one sermon. He led missionary efforts in Wales between the 1840s and 1850s, converting a total of 5,600. My great-great-grandmother joined later in 1861 at the age of thirteen—to the dismay of her mother and relatives, who like most Welsh, regarded the religion with suspicion.

When Margaret was sixteen, she was offered a job weighing and selling coal by Mr. Lewis, a local mine owner. This was a technical task that involved a great deal of skill and precision. Although only the poorest working women were employed in the mines, Margaret was excited by this job because it showed that Mr. Lewis trusted her. While working there, she remained active in her new religion and attended worship meetings that were held in the houses of members. At one of these cottage meetings, where religious feeling was high and Welsh voices lilted in the deep beauty of hymns, she met Evan Thomas. Four years later, they decided to marry. When Margaret informed Mr. Lewis that she was quitting her job, he reputedly told her: "My son is very fond of you. He was thinking of asking for your hand in marriage. If you will give up this silly religion and that young man you are planning to marry, I will fill your apron full with gold. My son will someday own this mine and you will never want for anything. Your life will be a success, and your home the envy of every girl in Glamorganshire."

Margaret instead married her poor LDS miner on February 21, 1870 in Saint Tydfil's Church. According to the *Merthyr Express*, the hills and rooftops were covered with snow that day and "Poor Tom the Cabby" was trampled by his horse and killed after "having passed successfully though more than one ordeal." There is no notice of the wedding, but it is evident from the contents of the paper that since George Borrow's visit, Merthyr had gentrified.

Newspaper advertisements include "Kernick's Vegetable Pills," "Artificial Teeth from H. W. Griffiths, Surgeon Dentist," and the "newest styles in Gentlemen's hats, caps, ties, collars etc. from M. Samuel." Under Local



Erin Thomas, 2008

Saint Tydfil's Church

Intelligence it mentioned that “on Wednesday evening Rock Matthews and Company gave a miscellaneous concert at the Temperance Hall, but were poorly patronized.” The Mutual Improvement Class offered readings and music. These product and cultural event advertisements are evidence of a leisure class. There was even some indication that blue collar conditions had liberalized: at Bargood Coke Works, the employees were treated to a New Year’s meal by their employers. Other “intelligence” revealed that the gritty aspect of Merthyr still thrived. At the Dowlais Company, five men were killed in the mine cage when the rope broke. An article entitled “Battle of the Bucket” indicated that Henry Pearce used this implement to batter his neighbor, Anna Edwards. More gruesome, the *Merthyr Express* reported that Dai Richards murdered Susannah Richards outside a public house.

Merthyr Tydfil in 1870 had plenty to offer the nouveau riche, but it is difficult to determine what actually awaited Margaret had she accepted Mr. Lewis’s “golden” proposal. In the annals of the South Wales mining industry, there are many Mr. Lewises. The most likely candidate for the Mr. Lewis of Margaret’s story is Elias Lewis, a man who owned several small, profitable levels in the Pentrebach area and had a son named Jenkin Lewis who was eight years older than Margaret. At that time the Elias Lewis family lived in Genthin Cottages, a property with its own grounds, which was significant, because most mining families of the day

lived in terraced housing. The grounds of Genthin Cottages, however, were of modest size. Elias Lewis's visions of his up-and-coming prosperity later materialized as he upgraded to Plymouth House, a large residence with substantial grounds that belonged to one of the former ironmasters.

Before my trip to Merthyr Tydfil, I found a picture of Plymouth House online, indicating that the structure still stood, but by the time I arrived in Wales this image had vanished from the internet. At the Merthyr Central Library, Carolyn Jacob, a dedicated Welsh historian, poured over an old map, comparing it with the new. She determined the location of Plymouth House after an hour and scribbled the cross streets in my notebook.

By the time I left the library, dusk hung over the city, and I had little hope of finding Mr. Lewis's mansion. I stopped at a small convenience store across from St. Tydfil's Church, discussing my plight with the Welshmen in line. A small woman with incredibly white hair and a youthful countenance glanced at the address and calmly told me she would take me there. As it neared dark, I hurried to keep up with her rapid stride, cutting up and across a hill through neighborhoods of terraced housing from various time periods. The higher we climbed, the more I realized that I never would have found Plymouth House on my own. I asked questions, and she answered simply: unemployed, had never left Wales, lived with her parents. She left me at the stone-gated entrance to a structure that was significantly larger than the surrounding homes—too extravagant, in fact, for a single family in contemporary Wales. It had been divided into two homes, marked by differing architectural details and paint colors that met midway between two wings. "Go Grandma," I whispered, my breath freezing in the cool air.

To marry into such a family would have been a rare offer to a working woman like Margaret. Her family, headed by a widow, would have been among the poorest. Employment for women was scarce; Ann Davis might have taken in boarders or laundry, but this would have been from other miners and returned small profits. All the family's other income would have been provided by hiring out the children: the girls as household servants, the boys in the mines. I can imagine that Ann, who did not approve of Margaret's religion, put considerable pressure on her daughter to accept Mr. Lewis's proposal. Not only would it have saved Margaret from future labor, but it would also have assured her family stability and a place in society.

In the one portrait we have of Margaret, she appears to be in her forties. Her hair is pulled back tightly from a square face with broadly cut features. Even lifting the corners of her mouth that had begun to sag, erasing the lines under her eyes, or rounding her cheeks would not make her a striking woman. At a glance there is nothing that distinguishes her from the myriad black and white images that illustrate the past, but there



Plymouth House

is a softness in her eyes that suffuses her whole expression. The only physical description that survives in our records is that these eyes were intensely blue. There must have been something behind this ordinary face that was remarkable: unique enough to draw the admiration of a rich young man, and courageous enough to turn him down for a religion and a poor miner that she loved better.

Margaret's daughter Mary Jane wrote the history of her mother, and it is through her that the story of Mr. Lewis has been passed down. In a life sketch of no more than a page, Mary Jane has included this episode in detail. Margaret must have repeated it to her children often. Margaret's family always struggled financially; perhaps she retold it to remind herself and her children that love was more valuable than comfort.

After marrying in the Saint Tydfil's Church, Margaret and Evan moved to Pentrebach, where Evan continued to work in the mines. Margaret taught Evan to read from a Book of Mormon given to them by missionaries. They raised five children in Wales, and in 1874 they sailed with Evan's father Frederick to join the growing LDS community in Utah. *Pa bryd y cawn fyned i Seion?*—"When may we go to Zion?"—many of the Welsh would ask the missionaries who baptized them. By the end of the nineteenth century, twelve thousand Welsh had converted to this new religion, the majority



Margaret Thomas, circa 1900-1910

from Merthyr Tydfil, and five thousand had immigrated to America, many forming the core of the now world famous Mormon Tabernacle Choir. This Welsh influx represents an estimated 20 percent of the gene pool of Utah, according to the website “Welsh Mormon History”.

I can only imagine the anticipation of Margaret and Evan as they hurried their five children up the plank to board the *SS Wyoming*. They would have had few belongings to carry with them to the New World: the clothes on their backs, a dish or two from their terraced house in Merthyr, and leather-bound scriptures wrapped in a rag. After leaving the fiery furnaces and charred hills of Merthyr, they hoped to find a better life with the Saints. Evan, on leaving Wales, meant never to descend down that mine shaft again.