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## 4. Two Miners' Sons

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# 4

## Two Miners' Sons

Although Emylyn Davis was short and wide, he sat thinly, a passive presence in the middle of a sofa in a small, tidy living room with lace curtains and broken-in furniture. His wife, Edna Davis, an entirely practical and talkative person, rested her elbows on the arm of a flowered armchair that contained her neatly, down to the crease in her blue polyester slacks.

They seemed to be somewhere in their seventies; their company and the comfortable tatter of their living room reminded me of visiting my grandparents. In the local LDS congregation that the Davises attended, Edna was known for her genealogical efforts, a highly valued skill in the Mormon church, where a primary focus is placed on our ancestors. Although my family has departed from the tradition of coal established by our Welsh predecessors, we have held to the faith adopted by Margaret and Evan. The Robinsons, a Mormon couple I stayed with for a portion of my trip to Wales, recommended I speak with the Davises because there was some possibility that Emylyn might be related to my great-great-grandmother Margaret.

In Wales, to be a Davis or a Davies is as common as being a Thomas or a Morgan. Children used to take their father's first name for a surname, which—compounded by the geographic and cultural isolation of Wales for so many centuries—resulted in very little nominal diversity. Though it was possible Emylyn and I were of the same Davis, it was equally possible that we were not. There was no indication that any of Margaret's immediate family ever joined the LDS church, and Emylyn came from a long line of active Latter Day Saints.

I knew nothing of the Davises left behind after Margaret emigrated with her husband Evan to America. On what terms, I wondered, did she leave her family? She must have been a sore disappointment to her mother Ann, as the daughter who spurned the family's one opportunity at prosperity.

Was it possible that any of Margaret's siblings eventually became reconciled to the religion that ruined the Davises' financial prospects?

I threw out names and dates. Edna shook her head; she knew of no connections. Preparing to take my leave, I told the Davises the purpose of my research, "I'm writing a book about coal mining."

"Oh, Emylyn's father was a coal miner." Edna looked across at her husband, who had stayed silent for most of the discussion on his pedigree. A stout man in deteriorating health, Emylyn hardly twitched, but the mention of coal mining animated his face. If this man was my relative, his father would have been Margaret's nephew. Her brothers probably never ventured far from the family occupation. His father would have lived the life Evan and Margaret left behind.

At this cue from his wife, Emylyn opened his pale, dry lips and began to spin a monologue: "My father worked a seam of twenty-four inches that ran for miles." In a calm, even cadence and a clear Welsh accent, Emylyn told me about the mines—stories his father must have recited to him that had now been tailored by his own telling. He was a good and steady raconteur, having obviously practiced on his own children and grandchildren: "Boys in their mid-teens would work seams as thin as eighteen inches. My father would lie on his side with a pickax and a mandrill, pulling the coal out with his hands, breathing in coal dust seven to eight hours a day. His only light came from an open flame lantern."

In 1881, a miner from Rhymni, chronicled in a volume assembled by the National Museum of Wales, explained how managers would respond to those who complained about the conditions under which Emylyn's father mined coal: "You chew coal. It does you good. It cures healban. It'll cure chest troubles."

As early as 1830, coal dust was known to cause black lung, or, as it was called in the nineteenth century, *miner's asthma*. It is unlikely that the manager the miner quoted above was unaware of this at that time. Although numerous miners died from cave-ins, according to one estimate this accounted for only 17 percent of all deaths. Others died from mining-related diseases, among them black lung and kidney disease from the rats.

"There was no sanitation," Emylyn continued. "Not to be rough," he nodded in my direction several times, "but the miners would have to relieve themselves in the mines, where the rats scuttled around on the ground. When the miners would cut themselves, because there was no way of cleaning the wounds, they would urinate on themselves. This healed things nicely."

"In those days, they lowered the men into the mine in cages. They called it entering 'the bowels of the earth,'" explained Emylyn. Sometimes the men would be crushed by the machinery. Once below, there were other dangers. The two methods of deep mining in Emylyn's father's generation

would have been room and pillar and longwall, both of which are still used currently. In the room and pillar method, rooms were mined, leaving pillars of coal in between to support the roof. A lot of coal was lost in these pillars. After a whole area was mined out, miners would *retreat mine*, taking out the pillars and leaving the roof to collapse behind them. Longwall mining was less common in Wales; it involved working a whole coal face, propping up the roof behind with piles of rubbish as progress was made forward on the seam.

Wood and metal props were used to brace roofs every morning before mining, but cave-ins were a daily occurrence. Other hazards included flooding and the more insidious danger from gases: choke damp, white damp, fire damp (carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, and methane), as the Welsh miners classified them, each according to their menace. White damp—odorless, tasteless, and colorless—was the most feared.

“The men would bring canaries into the mines, and when the canaries fell from their roosts, they would pull each other out, but they would leave the horses. When the air was clear, they would clean out the dead, cutting the horses into pieces to send them up out of the mine.”

“Sometimes the men would be afraid. They would sing Welsh hymns, ‘Nearer My God to Thee’—ten to twelve in harmony.” Emylyn focused his eyes in the distance when he said this.

I was relieved to know that fear was something the miners could admit to each other—one man striking out into the dark with a note. Although they couldn’t see each other, their voices joined together and echoed through the dark tunnels. There between carbon walls made of creatures a million years dead, these voices signaled that there were living men. My father sings with the deep, rich voice of a Welshman; there is strength in this sort of music.

“My father came home all black and would wash in a wooden tub,” Emylyn told me. These tubs were in the middle of living rooms and made from beer barrels sawed in half. “A miner would strip to the half and wash the top part of his body. Then he would cover and strip to the other half, washing the lower part of his body”—preserving a semblance of modesty in a family thoroughfare. “Don’t wash my back,” Emylyn’s father would say to his wife. “The men believed it would weaken them,” Emylyn explained.

I imagined Emylyn’s father and the Davises before them relying on the strength of their backs for the meager living it provided for their families. This must have been quite a weight pressing down on a man heading into the mines, pickax in hand, always toward the possibility of death.

“You could always tell a miner because they had black marks on their face[s],” Emylyn said, touching his own lightly. The scratches would turn blue because the coal dust became imbedded in their skin, the coal never quite scrubbing off. A coal miner was marked for life.

"When we had a son, Alan, we decided he would never go underneath," Edna commented from the easy chair beside me.

Emylyn nodded. Edna suddenly straightened her back, seeing something through the white lace of her living room curtains. "There's Malcolm going by," she said to Emylyn and then stood up, walking swiftly across the room down the short entranceway to the front door.

"Hullo there, Malcolm, we've got a girl here from America!" I heard Edna call from outside. A fit man, looking to be in his sixties, entered the room and sat gamely on the couch.

Returning to her armchair, Edna explained, "Malcolm was a miner." When the Davises began to exchange greetings with Malcolm, I realized that they had been using "foreigner" English with me. The variety tossed quite loosely and joyfully between them seemed to be a compromise between the Queen's English and *Cymraeg*. I could make out almost half of what Edna said, but Emylyn and Malcolm's communication reached my ears as a jumble of cheerful gibberish.

Pausing, Edna looked over at me as if she had just remembered, consumed momentarily by Welsh pleasantries, "If you don't understand us, just say." And Malcolm slapped his hands on his knees, and said, "So?" to indicate he was ready to answer questions.

Malcolm was perhaps the most robust-looking elderly man I had ever seen. His face was remarkably unlined for his age, and certainly not in blue. There were no visible signs of a life lived for a good portion underground. Malcolm sat erect, and I wondered if perhaps a black back was the secret to his posture, years of dust and sweat rubbed into a polish, fortifying and holding up the old sinews.

"You were a coal miner?"

"Yes, worked in South Wales, rode the train 1,800 feet in; we worked six miles underground."

Malcolm, unlike Emylyn, was straightforward—his story weaving lacked the renowned Welsh poetic streak.

"I was a coal-face fitter, a mechanic."

Like my Welsh predecessors, Malcolm was from a line of coal miners, but his father insisted that his sons not follow him: "My father came out in 1947. 'I'm the last one to go down that,' he said. I became a miner, my son did too."

"Your son is a miner?"

"Yes, been there since he was seventeen, left school."

"He works in the Tower Colliery," piped up Edna.

The Tower Colliery is located near Merthyr and has a compelling history. In the early 1980s, Margaret Thatcher began to make threats of closing British mines since cheaper coal could be purchased from Spain. The National Union of Miners called for a strike in 1984, when the shutdown

of twenty mines was announced. After a year of political wrangling and violence, the strike ended and mines began to close rapidly, putting two hundred thousand men out of work. Although there were varying levels of involvement in other parts of the United Kingdom, 96 percent of the South Wales miners went on strike, and 93 percent held out until the end. Throughout the conflict, Thatcher characterized the striking miners as “the enemy within.”

The Tower Colliery was one of the last mines to be closed, ceasing to operate in 1994. A year later, the miners pooled their severance pay, buying the mine from the government for £2,000,000. Although a small victory for an industry that was all but obsolete, I appreciated the symbolic heroism of their act. For most of Welsh mining history, miners had been at the mercy of powerful ironmasters and collier owners. After 1947, when the mines were nationalized, they were at the mercy of a government that antagonized them for fighting to keep their jobs. In the Tower Colliery, each miner owned a portion of the mine, and the money from the coal each miner dug went directly to his own pocket.

“It’s got two years left, and then they’ll have to close it up.” Malcolm reported cheerfully.

“What will your son do?”

“Don’t know; he is forty-seven. Don’t you want to know how much I made?” Malcolm burst out, as if this was the question he’d been longing to answer the whole time.

“Sure.”

“In 1958, I had two children. I made nine pounds a week. In 1987, I made fifty pounds a week.” According to the current exchange rate, this equals approximately eighteen dollars and ninety-nine dollars, respectively.

He said this with a rush of blood to his cheeks. Proud of this fact, he sat up more erectly on the couch. I couldn’t tell if it was due to the increase in his pay or the meagerness with which he was able to support a family.

“We would get eight loads of coal a year as concession. They brought it in front of your house, right outside. We’d save the residue—bedlam coal—all the little bits. Sell it. And each year we’d go to the seaside.”

There was no bitterness in Malcolm’s evaluation of his life, a life my predecessors did not choose and were always looking for a way out of. Although his father had different plans for him, Malcolm went down the mine shaft. Perhaps for similar reasons to the one a thirteen-year-old boy from Garndiffaith expressed in 1908: “I had plenty of opportunities to stay on in school, but all I wanted to do was go in the pits because my buddies were there.” Or, like my grandfather Bob Thomas, perhaps Malcolm had shown an aptitude and interest for coal mining in his youth, but unlike my grandfather had decided it would suit him better than another career.

"There is sadness everywhere," Malcolm remarked, as if he could tell what was on my mind.

"Yes," I nodded back to him. Mining was dangerous, but so was living. Malcolm's cheerfulness was evidence that there was also satisfaction in his choice—each life path offering its occasional stipends of bedlam. I turned this idea over in my head while Malcolm slapped his knees and exited as abruptly as he had entered. Emylyn sent farewells after him in the low, musical tones of a hollow reed. Two miners' sons had told me different stories of coal. Despite the disparity in their health, likely they were no more than five years apart. From his account, Malcolm couldn't have been any younger than seventy. One had left the profession; the other had followed his father and had been followed by his son in turn. One related the story of accidents, sicknesses, and burdens, the story of coal I was familiar with—the story of the Davises and Thomases as it had been handed down to me. The other, like an honest workman, had reported the details of his trade. One filled the room with the loveliness of his voice, and the other with his marvelous vigor.