
PERSONAL ESSAYS

Ghost Towns

Erin Ann Thomas

George Borrow, an English travel writer, descended from the hills one evening in 1854 to report on Merthyr Tydfil, Wales, at that time the busiest iron smelting and coal town in the commonwealth. 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 brilliance to be lava-like material that zigzagged down 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!”

At the time of Borrow’s visit, the Merthyr iron trade was at its peak, and the coal trade was gaining strength over the Northern England market, Welsh coal having been proved superior in trial after trial conducted by steamships. And in this cityscape that represented Welsh industry in its throb and finest, Borrow noted some resemblance to hell. The vast wealth pouring into this area was absorbed into the fortunes of the iron masters 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. Of the people who inhabited this infernal architecture, he related little, only that they were numerous and spoke mostly Welsh. He described *throng[s] of savage looking people talking clamorously* and admitted that he *shrank from addressing any of them*.¹

Merthyr, like many towns built around the iron and coal industries, attracted mostly young men at first, who in turn at-

tracted the establishment of prostitution and public houses. These young men drank a lot of liquor, but given the level of sanitation at the time, that was healthier than drinking water. In 1849, 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.*² The main drag, High Street, was a morass of mud, and sewage pumped into a local river would flood into the homes when it got backed up. During one month in 1849, 1,000 people died of cholera.

This was the home of my great-great-grandparents: Margaret Davis who was six, and Evan Thomas who was seven at the time of Borrow's visit. The people milling about him as he minced his way through the filthy streets of terraced housing and narrow alleys were their neighbors. Details about the early years of Margaret and Evan are scarce. Margaret was the daughter of John Davis, and Evan was the son of Frederick Thomas who was the son of Evan Thomas. On census records each of these men's profession is listed as "collier" or "miner." Neither Margaret nor Evan wrote accounts of their lives. Margaret survives through the voice of her daughter and granddaughter, who wrote short accounts of 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, sketching out only a vague caricature. But these female descendants preserved a fuller portrait of Margaret—that she was strong, and she was kind.

Otherwise for a broader view, I am left with Borrow's perspective, which represents one of few eyewitness accounts of the city my ancestors lived in and the people they lived among. Thirty years later and ten years after Evan and Margaret sailed for America, Wirt Sikes, the U.S. Consul to Wales, provided a more positive observation of the inhabitants of Merthyr: *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.*³

Poetry was not the only thing that distinguished Welshmen, but also putting these lyrics to music. Singing was a way these miners and their families expressed community. As former agriculturalists and grazers gathered from the hills into cities to mine, chapels were built and formed the locus of Welsh social life outside the pubs. Here thick-set and coal-stained men gathered and sang parts. Competitions between the choirs of different cities made big events, and medals were awarded to the winning choir. During strikes and later, during the depression, miners out of work went singing door to door for donations to feed their families. At frequent town festivals, where bakers sold pastries and the locals set aside their daily chores to dance, balladeers sang tunes based on peasant sounds from the countryside.⁴ Merthyr was a dirty and crowded town, but a musical one.

My progenitors were of the grimy class of folk described so condescendingly by Borrow; they were perhaps even socially lower than those Sikes described due to their lack of any education or literacy. Of their poetic spirit, I have no indication except that my great-great-grandfather Evan Thomas was renowned for an eloquent temper, which may have arisen in part from the difficult circumstances of his life.

At age five Evan first entered the mines, 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 did not usually suffice to cover the costs of living, which included rent of 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, 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 boy 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 these carts that Evan loaded, many down tunnels that were so small they had to crawl, dragging the cart behind them with a harness around their waist. The youngest children often would have to sit by the doors in the dark and listen for the sound of horses and trams. They were in charge of opening and closing the doors. Sometimes an exhausted child would fall asleep, rolling into the tracks where he was crushed by oncoming traffic.

In 1842, having heard of the wretched conditions in the mines, 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."⁵ A little girl who worked in the Plymouth mines in Merthyr Tydfil was asleep against a large stone when the inspector came to speak to her. She was a door keeper and 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."⁶ One recurring 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 in the Act of 1842. Many took the news hard. Depression hit the country in 1843, and many families had no way to survive without the extra income from their children. Although many Welsh evaded the law for years, in 1855 when little Evan first piggybacked on his father down the mine shaft, he was one of the few children still working in the mines. He and his father were lowered into the mines before the sun rose and ascended after it had set. They followed this routine six days a week.

My great-great-grandmother Margaret Davis lived in Pontypridd, a town in Merthyr County which, according to Welsh poet John L. Hughes was "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.*⁷

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 miner's wives, must have kept her small household, pinched in a morose terraced row, scrubbed white and raw. Cleaning was the bane of a collier's wife, black dust being tracked in at least once daily. I imagine there were nights that she cried when her husband John came home with trousers that were stiff and thick with sweat and coal dust for her to wash and mend. But then she would settle into a chair and callus 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. Mining incidents involving fewer than four miners were never recorded, such deaths absorbed by a mining town's routine of loss.⁸

Margaret, who was only ten when her father died, worked as a nanny for the wealthy families of the Merthyr to help support her family. While tending the children of a superintendent from one of the local mines, she learned to read and write. "Let me help you with your schoolwork,"⁹ Margaret said when the children came home from school; recognizing her little intrigue, they taught her to read from their schoolbooks. During this time, Margaret was baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a fledgling religion only thirty years in existence in the States. Dan Jones, a Welshman who had joined the Mormons under the leadership of Joseph Smith in Kirtland, Ohio, and stayed with him the night before his martyrdom, had returned to his native land to convert his countrymen to his newfound gospel.

Dan Jones began his proselytizing in an era of religious revival. During the industrial age, new religions spread fast in the densely populated coalfields. Baptists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Methodists were the main sects of Welsh non-conformist religion. Dan Jones 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, it is said: *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—others 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.*¹⁰

“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 in the 1840s and 1850s, converting a total of 5,600.¹¹ 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 a local mine owner named Mr. Lewis. This was a technical task that involved a great deal of skill and precision. Though only the poorest working women were employed by mines, Margaret was pleased to have 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 hymn, she met Evan Thomas. Four years later, they decided to marry. When Margaret informed Mr. Lewis that she was quitting her job, he 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.*¹²

Margaret married her poor LDS miner on February 21, 1870, in the Merthyr Tydfil Parish 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.*”¹³ There is no notice of the wedding in the newspaper, but it is evident from the contents of the paper that since George Borrow’s visit, Merthyr had gentrified. The 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.” 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 an Elias Lewis, a man who owned several small, profitable mines 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. However, the grounds of Genthin Cottages were of modest size. Later, Elias Lewis’s visions of his up-and-coming prosperity materialized as he upgraded to Plymouth House, a large residence with substantial grounds that belonged to one of the former iron masters.¹⁴

One hundred and thirty-five years after Margaret and Evan married in the Merthyr Tydfil Parish Church, I came to Wales in search of them. Merthyr Tydfil contained 40,000 inhabitants in 1840; in 2000 the population totaled 30,000. The filthy hive of industrial activity had taken on a more genteel countenance. From the windows of the train, I saw rows of connected cement houses with tall chimneys clumped into the shallow valley. George Borrow had described them as *low and mean, and built of rough grey stones*,¹⁵ but efforts were under way to improve these old miners’ houses. Window frames and doorways had been painted in accent colors and the cement walls had been overlaid with colored gravel. Potted flowers hung out front, adding a country loveliness to the solemn rows. The hills Borrow described as having *a scorched and blackened look* were no longer black with smut, but there were marks on the natural landscape difficult to ameliorate. The woods with ground covers of brambles and wild berries left off at times to barren landscape measled with small heaps. The

yellow grass on top took on an unnatural hue from the black soil that showed through. These piles of dark earth, loosely packed and eroding in places, are called “tips,” where slag from the mines had been carted out and dumped on the hillsides.

Before I left the United States, I had found a picture of Plymouth House on the internet, indicating that the structure still stood. In order to find more information, I had corresponded with Carolyn Jacob, a member of the Glamorgan Historical Society, who worked from the Merthyr Central Library. Shortly after I arrived, I took a bus to the Merthyr Tydfil City proper to meet her. The buildings downtown, like the miners’ houses, had fresh coats of paint. Flowers hung from lamp posts, and the sun moved in and out of white clouds—a very different image than a photograph from 1910 of High Street I had found on a Welsh genealogical site on the internet. In this photograph, the atmospheric effect on the buildings in the distance is significant. A stormy day could have caused this, but the people are hardly blurred, indicating a quick snap of the aperture. It must have been bright, the fuzziness of the buildings resulting from the particulate matter pumped into the air by the smokestacks. Puddles on the street gather, and the tracks of a streetcar narrow into the distance. Men and women dressed in black line the walks next to the storefronts.

From the retail outlet downtown, I turned onto High Street toward the library and walked past St David’s Church. The street seemed deserted, hardly a thoroughfare. Only a group of teenagers slouched in front of the central library where a statue of Henry Seymour Berry, Baron Buckland of Bullich, stood. A rich collier owner, he was granted peerage in 1926 but inconveniently fell from his horse and died two years later without an heir, thus beginning and ending the Lordship of Berry. I walked past this coal-made man to the collections of the library, pursuing the history of the nameless—the dark shapes who might have strolled the sidewalks of High Street one afternoon in 1910.

I found Carolyn Jacob, a short, compact woman who contained as much information as the library itself, on the top floor of the library holding Merthyr’s history. She hardly paused for breath as she recited an elaborate depiction of mid-nineteenth-century Merthyr in response to my questions. When I mentioned

Plymouth House, she pulled out an old map and stretched it the length of a table. She touched points on the map comparing them to a modern map; younger librarians looked over her shoulder offering bits of advice, but she shook her graying head. 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 Merthyr Tydfil's Parish Church, discussing my plight with the Welshmen in line. A small woman with strikingly white hair and a young-looking face 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 entrance of a stone gate 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 own family, headed by a widow, would have been among the poorest. Employment for women was scarce; Ann might have taken in boarders or laundry, but this would have been from other miners and turned in small profits. All the other income of the household 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 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

have begun to sag, erasing the lines under eyes, or rounding her cheeks would not make her a striking woman. At a glance there is nothing that distinguishes her from the myriad of black-and-white images that illustrate the past, but there 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 un-extraordinary 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 no longer 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 a life of ease.

After marrying in Merthyr Tydfil parish 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. In Wales, they raised five children. Then, in 1874, they sailed with Evan's father Frederick to join the growing LDS community in Utah. "Pa bryd y cawn fyned i Seion?"¹⁶—*When may we go to Zion?*—many of the Welsh would ask the missionaries who baptized them. By the end of the nineteenth century, 12,000 Welsh had converted to this new religion, the majority from Merthyr Tydfil, and 5,000 had emigrated to America, many forming the core of the now world-famous Mormon Tabernacle Choir. The history of Welsh migration is traced even in the chromosomes of the Saints—it is estimated that one-fifth of contemporary Utahns are of Welsh descent.¹⁷

I can only imagine the anticipation of Margaret and Evan as they hurried their five children up the plank to board the steamship *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 a mine

shaft again. When the Thomas family docked on the eastern shore of the United States, they continued their journey, traveling west on a railroad that had been first invented in their hometown to transport coal. The iron of the tracks that first canvassed this new world was forged with the coke fired from Welsh coal, coal that had passed through the hands of Thomases for three generations.

With their five children and Evan's father Frederick, they settled in Logan, Utah, a small community north of Salt Lake in the valley of the Rockies below pine-covered mountain slopes, where snowmelt trickled down into the summer months. Here my great-grandfather Zephaniah was born in 1883, the second American to join this poor Welsh immigrant family. Evan and Margaret were determined to make a break from their past in coal, so Evan found work on the railroad, a job that afforded the pleasure of light and air, but was otherwise not a far cry from the back-breaking labor of the mines. One day after working twenty-four hours, Evan was ordered back onto the tracks by his supervisor. Exhibiting the fiery temper he was known for, Evan refused and was fired on the spot.

Evan had heard of the excellent wages paid to experienced colliers by the Pleasant Valley Coal Company that mined in Emery County. By this time, Evan and Margaret had seven children; to feed his family, Evan was forced back into the trade he knew best. In 1886, the Thomas family moved 200 miles south to Winter Quarters, a coal mining camp above the city of Scofield. At the time, Scofield housed 1,800 residents. It was a coal town like the one the Thomases had left behind in Merthyr Tydfil, Wales—the men who exited the mines in the evening continued their comradeship in seventeen busy saloons. The young women whose beaus and husbands spent their days underground looked for every excuse to plan parties. According to a local resident of the time: *People would get out and make their own good times. They had dances in the meetinghouse, for instance. The dances were usually on Fridays because on Saturdays they made them stop at midnight. The next day was Sunday and there was always a squabble about closing up the dance.*¹⁸ Much of the social life surrounded the local chapels—prominent in Winter Quarters was the Latter-day Saint meetinghouse. The many Welshmen employed at the mine expressed their love of music by gathering at the houses of their neighbors who owned instruments to sing in the evenings.

But a piano was rare; most of the residents of Winter Quarters had few possessions, their one-room cabins equipped with a stove, beds, a table, and chairs. Some families had rockers, and occasionally a phonograph. Still, these miners' homes would have been a few paces set off from their neighbors. Americans in their characteristic love of "space" made sure that even coal villages had free-standing houses. They were small and unelaborated, but had their own grounds, a mark of status in Wales where most miners were packed into company-owned blocks of terraced housing. In Scofield and Winter Quarter's most families built their houses with wooden boards cut from a sawmill and placed vertically, topped by a peaked roof. Though privately owned, these houses were built on company land and families paid a monthly land rent.

Margaret would have had a very similar life to that of her mother, Ann, in Wales. Fighting back the dust of the coal mines, she would spend many hours scrubbing her wooden floors white and stirring the clothes of her men in a big copper pot of boiling water, to release the body and earth grime ground into the cloth. Aside from preparing meals, chores like these would occupy her days, wearing her hands as rough as her husband's. Margaret's rejection of Mr. Lewis's son, her voyage across the ocean, and renunciation of her former life would come to mean only one thing: At night the man she loved would emerge from the mine and they would gather with their children to read the Book of Mormon in a community of Saints in hills more commanding, even perhaps more remote, than those she had left behind.

Miners from the British Isles, especially Welshmen, formed one of the largest ethnic groups employed in the Winter Quarters mine. Among the more exotic inhabitants were a sizable number of Finns imported by the company due to a shortage of labor. Regarded by the miners from the British Isles and France as "non-white" because of their perceived foreignness and superstitions, these new immigrants were relegated to rows of houses farther up the canyon, which came to be known as "Finn Town." This sector of town was located right next to the settlement of Greeks who had immigrated previously. It was in Finn Town that a murmur began late in the year of 1899. Miners began to speak in low voices about "bad spirits" near the Winter Quarters mines.

At the turn of the century, Americans in general had great

faith in their frontier and their factories. In the coal industry in particular, miners were paid better than any other working men, and the national market had never been better. The previous year, Utah had not had any accidents and every mine had met regulations. As a result, the fears of the Finnish miners were dismissed by the others as the superstitions of a backward people.

On May 1, 1900, Evan Thomas and his three boys awoke at 5:00 A.M. to put on warm clothing. Even in the spring and summertime, the interior of the mountain was cold and wet. Margaret likely wiped the sleep from her eyes, packed their lunches in tin buckets, kissed them, and sent them off to the mine, glad to have some peace for “Dewey Day” preparations. Two years earlier, General Dewey had defeated the Spanish fleet in the Philippines in five hours without one loss of man or ship. This victory fed into America’s sense of “manifest destiny,” and the repercussions of this were even felt in this small mountain town. Winter Quarters had just received a contract for 2,000 tons of coal a day from the U.S. Navy. Miners were only required to work a half-day, and later that evening they would celebrate with a party, a dance, and “Dewey Cakes” at the church house.

My great-grandfather Zephaniah, or Zeph, as he was known, woke with his older brothers, Frederick and Evan Jr., to work with his father. He had been afforded the chance to graduate from primary school but, after sixth grade, was expected to help earn his keep. In 1900, he was seventeen years old and had been working in the mines for five years. The already sizable Thomas family had expanded by another member since the move to Winter Quarters, and multiple sources of income were doubtless a necessity to feed a family of eleven.

The workday would start with the fireboss who carried a torch by hand through the tunnels to burn the mine clear of flammable gases accumulated overnight. After that, the foreman would assign each miner a room, and all would then turn to the mouth of the mine, walking or taking a mantrip, a line of cars pulled by horses or mules yards or even miles into the mountain to where they would lay down their tools. Their path would be lit by oil-powered lanterns attached to their soft cloth hats. The open flame rose out of an oil lamp shaped like a small tea-pot and extended six to eight inches above the brim, flickering off the

roughly cut black walls of the tunnels. That day, Frederick and Evan Jr. divided off into their assignments in Mine 1, but Evan Sr., feeling he had been given an inferior room, *rose to his full five foot three inches and roundly denounced the foreman, the superintendent and the Pleasant Valley Coal Company generally before taking his youngest working son and heading home.*¹⁹

In Mine 4 at 10:28 o'clock, the exact hour kept on the watch of a dead Finn, miner Bill Boweter overheard two miners in a room adjacent to him say they were going to light some dynamite. They had overestimated the thickness of the wall that divided their room from the next, and the ensuing blast brought the entire wall down. The coal dust exploded into a surge of white flame, which lifted Bill off his feet and threw him against the wall. The cloud of coal dust billowed and burned, orbs of fire rotating in the middle of this onslaught that thundered from room to room igniting miners' powder kegs with bangs and light.²⁰

The town did not react immediately; it was Dewey Day and some thought the boom was fireworks being shot off early. Evan had doubtlessly returned home to repeat his tirade, rising up on his toes and shaking his finger, adding additional color to his denunciations to impress his wife. Margaret shook her head, peered at him knowingly, and hoped they would take him back tomorrow. At the sound of explosions, Evan must have paused in his cursing and Margaret in her pounding of dough—was it fireworks? Or—a sharp intake of the breath and a rush of terror—the mine? Zeph must have perked up from where he sat, safely slumped in the corner with nothing to do now that he had been pulled from both work and school. Both Evan Jr. and Frederick were still in the mine. The family must have run from their home just as the air was beginning to take on the reek of coal dust and a cloud of smoke was rising from the hillside.

Men who outran the explosion went back in for their comrades. Rescue crews had not yet been assembled with protective equipment, so a man would walk as far in as he could until he dropped. Others behind him would put their hats to their mouths, dash forward, grab hold of his feet and drag him out. This is how the poison content of the air was tested out, and progress into the depths of the mine was made in increments. Most of the men recovered from Mine 4 were already dead, the few that

showed signs of life died soon after being brought to the air. All were burnt badly—to a cinder—reported a local school girl.

Later rescue teams were assembled wearing helmets that resembled those of early astronaut suits: two thick tusks emerged from the helmet and connected to an oxygen tank strapped to the front. Once rescuers penetrated through to the far reaches of mine 4, they moved to mine 1, where the afterdamp (carbon monoxide) had filled earlier, making it impossible for rescuers to enter. Moving forward slowly, rescuers followed in line by the back corridor downhill from Mine 4 to Mine 1. In the first room, no larger than the size of a frontier living room, thirty-five men lay dead. They had fallen in positions revealing a scramble toward fresh air.

Frederick and Evan Jr. were working in Mine 1. Evan Jr. was working near the entrance and could have joined the miners escaping to safety, but he turned back into the mine to find his younger brother. The rescuers found the two dead hand in hand. Evan Jr. was twenty-five and Frederick was nineteen. Forty years later, Zephaniah could still barely speak of the incident. Fred was just two years older than he and was his idol.

During rescue efforts it had begun to drizzle and hundreds of women and children gathered around the mouth of the mine, moaning and crying, trying to catch glimpses of the bodies carried out in burlap sacks and piled in the mantrip. The rescuers carried the dead miners to a storeroom, and then to a boarding house where Clarence Nix, the company store manager, a quiet and shy man of twenty-three, tagged each, identifying the men he had sold gunpowder, tools, and canned goods to every day over the past months. Then, to spare the feelings of the women, these rough men carefully removed the battered and burned clothing from their friends. With sponges soaked up in tubs, they washed their mutilated bodies of soot and blood, finally rolling them in old quilts. Ready for burial, the dead miners were carried to the schoolhouse or meetinghouse, where they would be taken by their families.

The Winter Quarters mine explosion topped the charts as the most devastating mining accident of its time and still ranks as the fourth deadliest in U.S. history. On May 2, 1900, the *Salt Lake Tribune* ran the title: MOST APPALLING MINE HORROR: Greatest Calamity in the History of Mining in the West. EXPLOSION AT

SCOFIELD KILLS 250.²¹ This original estimate is closest to the 246 counted by the men carrying the bodies out of the mine, but 200 is the number settled on by the company. Even after the final count, the Finns maintained that fifteen of their men were never found. Since many of the Finns were single men distanced from their families by thousands of miles, there is no way to confirm or reject this assertion. These men were so unassimilated to their new environment that it was possible that some still lay buried in the Winter Quarters mine, unaccounted for by the company or their co-workers.

There wasn't a family in town without a personal connection to the tragedy. An eighteen-year-old bride of not many months lost her father, her two brothers, and her husband. The Hunter family lost ten men, all the male members in the family except two. The Louma family's story is particularly terrible. Seven sons had left Finland to make their fortunes in America, finally settling deep in the Wasatch Range to mine coal at Winter Quarters. They sent for their elderly parents, writing that they could earn enough money in America so that Abe Louma and his wife would never have to work again. Three months before the tragedy, the Loumas arrived in Scofield and began to adjust to life in a new country surrounded by their children and grandchildren in the small miner's house in Finn town. Six of their sons and three of their grandsons were killed in the explosion. After burying his posterity, Abe Louma told his wife: *If I don't live longer than a cat, I am not dying in America.*²² The Loumas rode the train back through the mountain pass in the Rockies escorted by their only living son. From California, they returned to Finland by ship, repeating in despair a journey they had undertaken months earlier with anticipation.

Four days after the explosion, the day of burial was overcast with scattered rain and a stiff wind. A photograph shows two Finns in shiny black caskets lined in shimmery white cloth scattered with bouquets of flowers. The face of one is half covered, and one arm, doubtless scarred, is wrapped in linen. The man in the casket beside him appears unmarred. His eyes close over a short nose and an enormous black handlebar mustache. His arms cross his chest; the hands displayed in handsome white gloves. In death, he appears to have had a much more genteel occupation in life than wielding a miner's pick.

Fifty volunteer grave-diggers from Provo were hard at work preparing the graves, some as little as three feet apart to accommodate the numerous burials. As the wagons carried the caskets to the graveyard, flowers were handed out from the railroad cars, bunches placed on the coffins and handed to the children and women. Reverend A. Granholm, a Finnish Lutheran minister from Wyoming, honored the sixty-two Finnish miners who died in the accident with a service conducted in their native tongue. An interfaith funeral was led by three Mormon apostles. An image from the later interments shows a large crowd of mostly men just removing their hats. Piles of earth are stacked up in between the grave markers—cut out of boards by the local sawmill operator and labeled with the names of the dead written in lead pencil. In the foreground a boy leans against a heap of dirt, looking for a clear view of the man being lowered into the ground. I think of Zeph watching his brothers buried in soil turned from the mountain that betrayed them. He was a quiet man with measured emotions when he grew up, but as a boy, looking down into those graves dug side by side six feet down, Zeph must have felt the whole weight of his anguish and the doom of the dark mining corridors of his future.

Evan and Margaret received \$2,240 in payment from the Pleasant Valley Coal Company for the death of two sons. Instead of using it to spare the rest from work in the mines, they erected a monument. An eight-foot marble obelisk inscribed “THOMAS” stands above the resting place of Evan Jr. and Frederick in the Scofield graveyard. Its size suggests their parents were more consumed with the grief of the moment than the practical challenges of the life that would follow afterwards. Perhaps the thought of buying flour with funds procured by the death of their boys was too much for Evan and Margaret—investing in such a grave-marker might have seemed the only way to dispose of it properly. Work commenced a week after the accident to put the mine back into operation. The miners who stayed and a number of new recruits spent long hours clearing out the debris and shoring up the roof. I can only imagine the feelings of Margaret who watched Evan leave every morning with the awful memory of a rumble. Evan walked to the mine these dreary mornings alone; after the accident, Zeph did not follow behind him.²³

* * *

The two-lane highway to Scofield cuts through the tops of mountains that, from a base altitude of over 6,000 feet, look like hills. Now a ghost town, Winter Quarters is reported to be haunted; miners started reporting sightings a year after the explosion. An article from *The Utah Advocate* of 1901 reads: *The superstitious miners, who are foreigners, have come to the conclusion that the property is haunted, inhabited by a ghost. Several of them have heard a strange and unusual noise, and those favored with a keener vision than their fellow workmen have actually seen a headless man walking about the mine and have accosted the ghost and addressed it or he [sic]. . . . Many supposedly intelligent men have claimed this and some twenty-five or forty have thrown up their jobs in consequence. These same people and others have seen mysterious lights in the graveyard on the side of this hill where many victims of the explosion of May are buried. Efforts to ferret out the cause have been fruitless. . . . These lights are always followed by a death. . . . Tombstones where the light appeared have been blanketed, but the light remains clear to the vision of those who watch from the town.*²⁴

These days hikers and campers report hearing moaning and crying near the opening of the old mine where the women waited in the rain for their men to be carried out in gunnysacks. I traveled to Scofield in search of ghosts, but there is more than one way to approach the dead. Scofield attracts not only those interested in the occult but those seeking communion with their ancestors. This sort of other-worldly link is an accepted aspect of LDS religion. Occasionally members will talk of the “veil being thin,” meaning the veil between this life and the afterlife, this earthly existence and the heavenly existence. We believe in a realm of the dead where our ancestors have passed on only in body but maintain their individuality in spirit, and that this realm is not far from where we are. Visiting Merthyr Tydfil and Scofield was not only a way of gaining understanding of my ancestors’ lives, but also growing emotionally closer through a physical connection to the towns they lived in.

On my first visit to Scofield at nine or ten, I had stood at an overlook, my eyes bouncing from each blare of red, orange, and blue sheet-metal roof that popped out of the summer dun-colored landscape. I don’t remember why I was there or who had brought me, only the connect-the-dot game I played with the colorful roofs

in the valley below. More people lived there then than now; according to the year 2000 census, Scofield is home to twenty-eight people who live in twelve households in a town of seventy-eight households. Some of these households are vacation homes that stay empty for most of the year. Others are just abandoned. In order to serve these twenty-eight residents, Scofield maintains five operating saunas, bearing testimony to a lingering Finnish character.

These homes make up the few streets of a community wrapped around a railroad. Under the eastern mountains on a main street called "Commerce" is a little white LDS chapel. Across on the west, a graveyard is more peopled than the current town. The last saloon marks the end of Commerce Street. Religion has lasted longer as a town gathering theme than drink; although the church still draws a small crowd on the Sabbath, the saloon has been boarded up.

I visited Scofield in 2007 on a fall afternoon when the hills were sprinkled with rows of gold-leafed quaking aspens, set off by the green-black of pines. I stepped from my car and shivered a little in the air with cold moist edge and jiggled the door of the saloon. I don't know that I would have entered had it yielded—above the bar was a sign that said "No checks" and a clock stopped at 2:25. Stools stood vacant over a floor where the white tiles had begun to curl up like brittle sheets of paper. A cabinet was stocked with ancient bottles of Raid and Scope.

I stepped away from the saloon windows and crossed back to my car to drive up to the graveyard. Scattered between the houses with colorful sheet-metal roofs, outhouses and boarded-up shacks crouched that nobody had ever bothered to take down. A few feet from the end of the road stood a sign that said: Open range. Once a booming mining town, this town had reverted to its original purpose of feeding livestock. A half a mile away at the other end of Commerce, a tall, lean dog stared me down. It was the only living creature I had seen yet that day, but it was strangely immobile—not turning its gaze or moving its tail.

There is no lush patch of grass in the Scofield graveyard because there is no gardener to tend it. Tombstones poke irregularly out of mountain grasses—wild, tall, and dry. Even so, in the disarray there are signs of remembrance. A plaque was erected in 1987 with the names of all the miners who died in the Winter Quarters

explosion. The bronze relief above the names expresses a sense of torque, clamor, and night in the faces of coal miners that seem to be craning into a thick haze, their oil-powered lamps on their caps failing to light the path to escape.

At the dedication, Leslie Norris, former poet in residence at BYU and one of the most important Welsh poets of the post World War era, read a poem he had written for the occasion. I met this man while I attended BYU. My writing teachers would invite him to class, to show him off, I suppose, but more because listening to Leslie speak in his Welsh accent with his careful gesture and vibrant imagery was a beautiful experience. It was as if something dew-kissed and green-smelling had burst into the rooms, and the white painted bricks of the basement classrooms were breaking into verse. Once in poetry class he peered over the top of my poems and smiled at me. He was born in Merthyr Tydfil from mining stock just like my ancestors. His father died in a cave-in there.

In 1983, he moved to the U.S. to lecture at BYU for six months. He and his wife, Catherine Morgan, never left. I suppose he found the Mormon community under the rise of the Rockies a little like the land of his countrymen—the people cut off from the rest, a little peculiar with a set of idioms all their own.

His poem to the Scofield miners was published in a run of lithographs:

*I make this poem for the men and boys
whose lives were taken wherever coal is cut,
who went too early to the earth they worked in.
I have brought with me to Winter Quarters
Echoes of the voices of mourning women.
. . . Let the men from Finland,
The Welsh, the Scotts, Englishmen, Frenchmen,
Dying far from their countries a hundred years ago
Let them be united in the rough brotherhood
Of all tragic mines. . . .
I make this poem for the men who died
When darkness exploded, and for their families
And for those of us who come after them.²⁵*

I walked to the back corner where a marble obelisk engraved

with THOMAS marked the resting place of Evan Jr. and Frederick. The stone itself stood six feet tall and was mounted on a two-foot piece of concrete. Red lichen grew on the base, and the inscription listed only names and dates of birth, followed by “sons of E.S. and M.D. Thomas.” The first burial of a Thomas in the new world, it was executed under both the greatest poverty and the most pomp and ceremony. In the whole of Scofield cemetery, only one stone rose more imposing. Bearing the name of Edwin Street, its inscription had worn away so that a couplet was barely legible: “To forget is vain endeavor. Love’s remembrance lasts forever.” An inscription similar to those on a couple other stones throughout the graveyard, this must have been a popular epitaph at the time. The few other massive grave markers in the cemetery belonged to Welsh and English families.

Most of the miners killed were laid to rest in the front of the graveyard in rows. Each grave spanned wide enough for the coffin and a wall of earth between the next. Some families had replaced the original wooden markers with six-inch cement markers engraved with initials, but many of the original wooden markers remained until 1999, when Ann Carter, a local resident, decided to beautify the graveyard to commemorate the 100th year anniversary. She and her husband, Woody, enlisted the help of the Utah Historical Society and x-rayed the gray, splintered tombstones for the original penciled names written by the blacksmith in 1900. Many of them had fallen over and split into pieces.²⁶ Now new wooden markers stand beside the old, engraved with names like Lasko, Kevlcaho, Kitola, Warla, Koloson, Heikkila, Jacobson, Maknus, Niemi, Bintella. In front row of the graveyard, five small cement blocks mark the remains of the six Louma brothers.

The Finnish in Winter Quarters kept their connections with the old world; and later, when the mine closed in 1922, many moved up to Salt Lake City, where a large community thrives to this day. They were among the 2,000 people who came on May 1, 2000, to commemorate the death of their ancestors; the blast of a cannon at 10:25 signaled the beginning of ceremonies. After graveside services, descendants shared their oral histories of the Winter Quarters explosion.²⁷ Word reached the great-grandchildren of Mataho Louma, the only spared son of Abe Louma, who accompanied his parents back to their homeland. These two

Loumas, a brother and sister, came from Finland to participate in the celebration.²⁸

Ann Carter descended from a Finnish miner, who came to Winter Quarters a month after the explosion to take the place of a dead miner. After I visited the graveyard, I sat bent over a hand-drawn map of Winter Quarters with the Carters in their living room. Scofield is located in a flat valley between the tops of mountain ranges; and on the far south side of the town, a small road leads up to Winter Quarters. It can be hardly called a valley, the indentation between the two mountain faces is so slight. Tucked away and inconsequential, if it weren't for the accident, Winter Quarters would have disappeared from history. I would know little of the circumstances that Evan, Margaret, and Zeph encountered in their first mining experience in the new world. Winter Quarters is recorded only as a consequence of tragedy. Ann Carter would never have grown up in Scofield if not for the accident that brought a new wave of Finnish immigrants to the area. The Carters and I leaned over the map. Ann pointed to the schoolhouse, the superintendent's home, and the church.

My ancestors might have lived in Scofield or in Winter Quarters. In an area so small it seems hardly worth making a distinction. However in those days, it might have added a mile or so to the morning and evening trudge to and from the shaft where the miners would descend and walk another mile into the side of the mountain. Winter Quarters is private property now, and I arrived in Scofield unwittingly in the middle of hunting season. I drove to the edge of the town and parked in front of a gate. A thick hunter in camouflage was loading a four-wheeler into the back of a truck and, according to an old farmer in faded cap standing by, was the owner of Winter Quarters canyon. He ignored me for fifteen minutes while the farmer and his daughter warned me I might get shot. I insisted, and the hunter turned and waved his hand. I walked up the road to Winter Quarters, convinced my pink and white striped shirt would set me off from the deer.

A farm snuggled into the mouth, but from there the canyon thinned. A creek ran down the middle. Willows sank their roots into the banks, and the woods climbed down the hill covering where telephone poles used to carry energy up to the mine. It was such a narrow canyon that I couldn't imagine how so many small

wooden huts could have clung to the sides of the hill, the cool wind asserting itself through the cracks between the boards where the gum had worked free. I walked the path that Zeph and his brothers would have walked every morning to the mine, trailing behind Evan. I know so little of this man, only that there was something in him that Margaret loved and that he was short and tempestuous. There are a few foundations of outhouses on the outskirts of town and some other lines of stones visible through plant growth. The town was dismantled when the mine closed, every bit of stone and wood hauled out for other enterprises. Only two walls remain of the company store, cutting a lonely silhouette against the deeper canyon where the Finns and Greeks thrived away from the families of the other coal workers.

This intimate, wooded canyon seemed fitting as the ghost town of my ancestors. A deer ran across my path, and then another, in hunting season worse luck than black cats. I shivered, thinking of the hunters in the woods and the shot that could echo at any moment from the trees. I was so sure of my pink and white stripes, but watching the deer dash out of the overgrowth diminished my bravado. The cool air held a light, and a creek lined with willows trickled in the silence of the canyon. The colors of the forest deepened with the approaching dusk. I wasn't insensitive to the beauty or the danger; my heart beat loudly and my breath fell short as I climbed the trail of my ancestors. Fear, wonder, and love—the latter quickening my pulse the most. It was a grasping love of ghosts, spirits I wished would appear so I could say: Yes, this is Evan and this is Margaret, and they lived here, and I long to know them still.

In the photos of Winter Quarters taken just after the accident in 1900, it is early spring, and the quakies are leafless. They make thin stick figures against the evergreens. At that time the willows were cleared from the side of the river to make room for the railroad. Compared to most trees, aspens have short life spans, somewhere between 70–100 years, but the pines live longer. The pines that seemed to crowd closer into the slender valley as dusk deepened could be more than a century old. These same pines might have lined Evan and Zeph's early morning walks to the mine. These pines could have blocked the winter wind coming through the cracks of their cabin. It was possible that in this moment my

life and the lives of Evan, Margaret, and Zephaniah were contemporary in the life of a tree.

Notes

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3. Wirt Sikes, *Rambles and Studies in Old South Wales* (London: S. Low, 1881); quoted in "Merthyr Tydfil," Genuki.org, <http://www.genuki.org.uk/big/wal/GLA/MerthyrTydfil/> (accessed July 25, 2010).
4. Huw Williams, "Brass Bands, Jazz Bands, Choirs: Aspects of Music in Merthyr," *Merthyr Historian* 3 (1980): 100–110.
5. Quoted in R. Meurig Evans, *Children in the Mines, 1840–42* (Cardiff: National Museum of Wales, 1979), 15.
6. *Ibid.*, 7.
7. John L. Hughs, "Nothing Special," in *Coal: An Anthology of Mining*, edited by Tony Curtis (Bridgend, Wales: Seren, 1997), 44.
8. For the information on the South Wales mining industry, see J. Y. Morris and L. J. Williams, *The South Wales Coal Industry, 1841–1875* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1958).
9. Margaret Wilding Thomas, "History of Zephaniah Davis Thomas," in my possession.
10. Marie Trevelyan, *Glimpses of Welsh Life and Character* (London: J. Hogg, 1893), 240.
11. For information on Dan Jones, see Mike Cannon, "Festival Celebrates Welsh Heritage," *LDS Church News*, March 13, 1993.
12. Mary Jane Thomas Jones, "Margaret Davis Thomas: My Mother," in my possession.
13. "Local Intelligence," *Merthyr Express*, June 22, 1870.
14. Borrow, *Wild Wales*, 460.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Welsh Mormon History, <http://welshmormonhistory.org/> (accessed July 25, 2010).
17. *Ibid.*
18. Quoted in Robert N. Reid, *The Scofield Mine Disaster* (Lincoln, Neb.: BR Enterprises, 2002), 27.
19. Margaret Wilding Thomas, "History of Zephaniah Davis Thomas."
20. Quoted in Reid, *The Scofield Mine Disaster*, 42.
21. "Most Appalling Mine Horror!" *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 2, 1900, 1.

22. Kimberly Mele, "Part II: 'One Spark of Time': The Winter Quarters Mine Disaster," *Holmes Safety Association*, July 2007, 22, <http://www.holmessafety.org/2000/july00.pdf> (accessed July 2010). Additional sources used on the Scofield Mine disaster include J. W. Dilley, *History of the Scofield Mine Disaster: A Concise Account of the Incidents and Scenes that Took Place at Scofield, Utah, May 1, 1900, When Mine Number Four Exploded, Killing 200 Men* (Provo, Utah: Skelton Publishing, 1900); "The Death Toll Had Reached 250," *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 4, 1900; Utah's Castle Country, "Winter Quarters Coal Mine Disaster," http://www.castlecountry.com/what_to_do/mining_winter_quarters.html; Ronald G. Watt, "Explosion of Pleasant Valley Coal Company," *Utah History to Go*, http://historytogo.utah.gov/utah_chapters/statehood_and_the_progressive_era/explosionofpleasantvalleycoalcompany.html.

23. The information on Evan, Margaret, and Zephaniah Thomas was obtained from the following family history documents: (1) Mary Jane Thomas Jones, "Margaret Davis Thomas: My Mother"; (2) Cornel Thomas, "Years of Violence, Years of Growth: A Chapter in the Life of My Grandfather, Zephaniah Davis Thomas"; (3) Margaret Wilding Thomas, "History of Zephaniah Davis Thomas."

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26. Brent Israelsen, "Mine Disaster in Carbon County Won't Be Forgotten," *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 31, 1999.

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28. Information obtained by interview with Ann Carter, 2007.