Wales Is Rock

by
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Mewn gweithfeydd sydd yma'n Nghymru,
Gwelir Saeson yn busnesu;
Rhaid cael Cymry i dorri'r garreg,
Nid yw'r graig yn deall Saesneg.

In the quarries here in Wales,
We see the English interfering;
You must get Welshmen to break the stone,
For the rock does not understand English.

—from an unnamed ballad by Dafydd Jones (1803-1868)

All over Wales, I heard English voices. The rounded singsong of Liverpudlians, the posh accents of West End Londoners, the gravel-in-the-back-of-the-throat of Somerset. When I met these people, I found that most had been there a long time—the park ranger, the train conductor, the hippie guy who wanted to live in a boat in the middle of a field, the woman who had worked for decades as a mountaineering guide in Snowdonia but sounded as if she'd just got off the train from London, and who had raised a brood of Welsh-speaking children including a daughter who did her Ph.D. dissertation, on some esoteric scientific subject, entirely in Welsh.

These expatriate English are some of the most passionate people about Wales you'll ever meet, even though their relationship with the place is complicated, to say the least. There are reasons from distant and recent history for this. The Welsh were made to feel *other* for so long,

and now the English who fall in love with Wales are the outsiders. One man I talked to, who came from London but had lived in the same small town in Wales for thirty years, said he was just starting to move from being tolerated to being accepted as part of the local fabric.

I found it harder to find Welsh-born, Welsh-speaking people to talk to, out in the rural west of Wales. I was an outsider too, a strictly transient one, an American traveling for pleasure.

One glancing encounter I had with some old Welsh gentlemen was my friend Jill's doing. In the seaside town of Aberaeron—think of a "Visit Wales" calendar, maybe the month of June or July, big glossy photo of parti-colored fishing boats in the harbor with the tide out so they're all sitting on the mud looking patient and a bit comical, and the harborside is lined with stone houses painted a mix of bright shades and pastels, and the sun is shining and the sea in the distance is twinkling and smiling people are strolling along the harbor wall—I'm in this picture with my friend Jill who is hobbling on an ankle she just sprained on the Coast Path beyond the town. I've slowed my pace to dawdle beside her on our way back to our rooms above the pub, where we hope to obtain ice for her foot. We pass a park bench with two elderly men sitting side by side looking out at the water, and Jill stops in front of them, begins gesturing in her tall, blonde, expansive L.A. way, letting loose her big, broad, theatrical L.A. voice, *Hi there! Do you know if there's a drug store—a chemist I mean—around here somewhere?* Not pausing for an answer but ramping it up and rolling right into the story of what happened to her, *I WAS WALKING ON THE COAST PATH! I WAS LOOKING AT THE SHEEP AND I STEPPED IN A HOLE! CAN YOU BELIEVE IT OH MY GOD IT'S NOT AS BAD AS IT LOOKS BUT I HAVE TO WALK LIKE A TROLL OH MY GOD CAN YOU BELIEVE IT* and so on. That's when I really notice the gentlemen on the bench.

They are still as stone, watching her. They are both wearing gray suits, not as if this is dress-up attire but as if it is what they wear every day in sunny weather to go out and sit on the bench. They are not thin and not fat but solid, burly old dudes. They have weather-worn, red faces, that permanent flushed look. They are straining to understand what this tall, animated American woman is saying—they are trying to catch her words, in addition to trying to absorb the overall shock of her. They start to speak, quiet and mumbly and halting, they spend some time determining the question, then they point away toward the high street where they indicate there is a chemist. I get it all at once that English is not their first choice in languages, certainly not the kind of English they're colliding with at the moment, West Coast American English full of wide flat sounds, wide as an ocean, flat as a super-flat pie crust rolled with a rolling pin.

Jill and I thank our new friends and begin on our hobbly, poky way again, leaving them blinking after us, puzzling over the culture clash they've just been subjected to.

I didn't get a chance to talk with them. That was okay. There would be other opportunities. And I had other things on my mind too—I was hoping to gain insight into a brief but powerful, curious connection my father once had with Wales. And I wanted to see some rocks.

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In Wales, compared to many other places, including elsewhere in the British Isles, there is a lot of rock. And more than other places, its history and culture have been shaped by rock, from the rock underlying the thin skin of soil that made Welsh farmers' lives hard for centuries beyond remembering, to the coal mines and slate quarries that gave England its Industrial Revolution and its empire, to the rugged Welsh coastline, which fed fishermen but shipwrecked them too.

High atop the cliffs of Pembrokeshire, I go walking, to see the rock, to see the sea. These are not your white-cliffs-of-Dover type cliffs——not that color and not that solid wall fronting the sea. Rather, they are black and twisted, deeply eaten into, broken off into chunks and stacks that rise out of the sea which swirls in a white froth at the base of the rock so far, far below. Out to the horizon, the water is jewel-blue; somewhere beyond that line where sea meets sky lies Ireland.

Where I stand on one headland, I look over to another. On top of it, all the way to the edge where the rock drops away, stretches a thin layer of green pasture, with tiny white dots of sheep all over. Below that cliff edge, grass clings on high bits of ledge like scraps of carpet. Throngs of wildflowers blow against my legs as I start along the path—red campion, foxglove, and thrift, also called sea pink or rock rose, or in Welsh, *clustog Fair*, Mary's pillow. Guillemots and gulls fly out from the cliffs, and sail around above the sea—oh to be a bird, unafraid of heights…

When I look closely at the dark rock, I see colors from chocolate to coffee grounds to jet black, I see rock built in obvious layers and then tilted on end and other rock that looks just jumbled and blobbed. How do cliffs happen?

You know that sensation of feeling totally awash in geological explanations? The land masses forming and splitting, plates colliding, magma intruding, mountain ranges ripping upward then wearing down over and over, glaciers creeping and receding, and all those warm shallow seas that come and go, come and go. As we sit in our speck of time, there is no grasping the ages, I don't care what they want us to think in those geology books. The time-lapse photography effect only gets me so far and then I'm just dizzy.

So how do cliffs happen—how do *these* cliffs happen, in Pembrokeshire, in this one part of Pembrokeshire where I walked? (I may not be able to wrap my head around geology, but I can snag this little piece and call it good.) So: the rock is very, very old, not the absolute oldest in Wales but getting there—a couple hundred million years older than the dinosaurs; it includes sedimentary rock made from a great piling up of silt and mud when the place was mostly underwater, later moved around and folded and tilted, along with slightly younger rock that happened when a lot of molten, deep stuff herniated up and flowed about as a result of big collisions of big landmasses from the plates moving around on the Earth's crust; this type of rock, too, was later folded, tilted, shifted around. And lately the incessant worrying of the sea at the rock has sculpted all of it, and still does, the softer rock wearing away first, the harder rock more resistant. The volcanic rock is the harder of the two, which makes sense to me in an intuitive way—rock born of fire and mayhem should be stronger than rock that started out as grains of sand bedding down together for a long nap.

All that coincidental rock and sea action adds up, by chance, to a nice treat for our eyeballs today, in what we call the 21st century. Recently Wales connected all its different coastal trails to form the continuous 870-mile Coast Path, giving the country the distinction of being the only one in the world with its entire coastline walkable by trail. There are local buses that can take you here and there to a lot of it, dropping you at one point, picking you up at another, letting you walk different parts on different days. The peninsula that is Pembrokeshire could be circumambulated in this way, at a lesiurely pace, in a couple of weeks. It has some of Wales' most dramatic, crenellated coastline, about 180 miles in all. A sweeter walking tour cannot be imagined.

Early geologists tramped along those cliffs too, completely obsessed with Wales, because the rock was better exposed there than anyplace else they knew. This was when geology was organizing itself as a science, and its enthusiasts were like Adam in the Book of Genesis, running around giving names to everything they saw—name that formation! name that epoch! name that fossil! Little did the Welsh know that the oldest ages of the world were being named after *them*—the Silurian and the Ordovician were geologic periods named for Welsh tribes who fought the invading Romans, and the words Cambrian and Precambrian, which are the eras 300 million years ago and on back to the beginning of the world, come from the old Latin name for Wales, Cambria, derived from the Welsh name for itself, *Cymru*, which means something like 'compatriot.'

The word Wales, on the other hand, comes from an Anglo-Saxon term that more or less means 'foreigner.' Whether you're a compatriot, or an alien, depends on which side you're on.

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Communing with the rock took me up the slopes of Snowdonia, and down the midge-infested forest trails of Dolgellau, and into a huge, spooky abandoned slate quarry in an area of, once again, very old stone, around 500 million years old. We stood on a wide ledge halfway down, which over the years—geology in action—had acquired soil and wildflowers and its own hidden, high-altitude duck pond. I looked up from there to the dark walls of slate tufted with grass, the quacking of the high lonesome ducks echoing around us. The guy who led me and Jill and several other women to this place was a retired English policeman enjoying a second career as a Welsh climbing guide.

Slate is remarkable stuff. Its perfect flatness makes it a natural for billiard tables. Unaffected by heat or acids, it is ideal for laboratory benches. Because its ability to absorb water

is so low as to be almost unmeasurable, it makes roof tiles that can last more or less forever. The roof atop the St. Asaph Cathedral in Wales dates from the 1600s, and when the church was renovated in the 1930s, its 300-hundred-year-old slates were reused, over new timbers.

Slate starts out as shale, a type of rock formed by mud and clay, maybe some volcanic ash, piling up over a very long time in slow-moving water. Shale is flaky, friable, has layers but they're not oriented or organized any particular way. To become slate, this stuff undergoes a lot of heat and pressure (generally just by being crushed deep down under a whole lot of other rock), producing changes at a chemical level. The minerals recrystallize, and through the magic of chemistry they change orientation, turn and line up in a new direction, resulting in consistent, reliable, clean layers that when struck a certain way by a certain tool in an expert hand, part into lovely smooth sheets: a tile for your roof, a slab for your floor, a square of gray for a schoolchild to scribble upon with chalk.

Quarrying slate goes back at least to Roman times, but as an industry it grew up with the Industrial Revolution. It put a roof over English heads so they could conquer the world and, in English churchyards, put headstones over those heads so that those great men might—they hoped—be remembered.

In the nineteenth century, canals and railroads made it easy to transport slate, to meet the new demand. In 1882, Wales mined almost half a million tons of slate; a century later, the annual quantity was less than 5% of that. Economic ups and downs, two world wars, and the development of cheaper roofing materials led to this decline, although slate actually remains in huge demand. Now, though, it comes from Brazil and China.

The prosperity of those bygone glory days belies the tensions between the quarrymen and their overlords. The quarrymen lost their rights to work the slate independently, and saw more

and more land appropriated by the British Crown. I kept coming upon the stories: in Caernarfon in 1800, 150 quarrymen march on the town and attack the granary; a year later, English soldiers are sent to the same area to keep the peace; in 1809 the cavalry puts down a riot over a plan by quarry owner Thomas Assheton Smith to add the local common to his own lands—he succeeds and expands his estate by nearly three thousand acres. Quarrymen's attempts to organize in the late 1800s lead to long strikes that end with little resolved; negotiations between the sides require interpreters, because the Welsh quarrymen and the English landlords can't communicate without them.

But the issues with England go way, way back. Every Welsh schoolchild knows the year 1282, when Edward I of England subdued Llywelyn the Last (whose name says it all, about Welsh independence). Edward's genius was to build massive numbers of massive castles all over Wales, his way of saying he was *done* with the uppity Welsh, so that today Wales holds the undisputed castle-density record among nations, with 400 intact, semi-decayed, and crumbled castles in this place the size of New Jersey.

Much of this small land is hard up against a border with England that has always been long, raggedy, and highly permeable. That, in a way, has made all the difference, past and present.

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The other great Welsh rock—and the one that brought my father to Wales a long time ago—is coal. For England during the Industrial Revolution it meant fuel for trains and ships, heat for slate-roofed halls and factories. It amazes me because it's a stone that *burns*.

Coal is a sedimentary rock that begins, like slate, in a process of compression. But where slate starts with compressed dirt, coal is compressed vegetation. Most of the coal used around

the world—and it is plentiful—has its origins 300 million years ago when there were a lot of dense forests around, which then got buried under soil (interestingly, though, there exists some coal that comes from a time before plants existed—it's made from compressed algae). The coal-to-be enjoyed conditions that let it escape ordinary decay, either too acidic, or sealed away from oxygen by solid mud. As with slate, heat and pressure—and incomprehensible amounts of time—turned the ingredients to stone.

Even more than slate, coal transformed Wales from agrarian to industrial. At its peak just before World War I, Wales was carving 61 million tons of coal out of the earth each year. Just like slate, there was no manufacturing, only the export of resources. The coal in Wales is concentrated in one southern area, and is the reason two-thirds of the Welsh today live in the south, though it's been almost a century since coal was much of an industry there. It declined for a host of reasons, including the rise of oil.

It was one summer evening in the south of Wales, not far from the valleys of the coal mines, that I had, at last, a chance to really talk with some old Welsh gentlemen. I'd been standing there watching them sing—they were a traditional Welsh male choir, 29 of them, all in green sportcoats with brass buttons and black-and-green striped ties, their hair snowy white if they had hair at all, their faces a study in concentration as hymns and folk songs sailed out of them in complex, pristine harmonies. The conductor was a blond woman in a black backless cocktail dress, skimpy attire for the cold evening sunshine. Their backdrop was a thousand-year-old stone barn with windows deepset into thick walls, crowned with a slate roof. Above us we had blue sky with a cirrus cloud wash, and the wind in the high treetops of the woods all around.

One of the songs they sang was called "The Peacemakers." As the leader introduced it, I knew I would try to talk to him. The song rose into the evening air, lyrics all in Welsh,

inscrutable to me, but I could hear the reverence the men gave the words. It was a poem by Waldo Williams set to music, a famous song, a kind of anthem. Williams is an interesting hero, a pacifist poet schoolteacher. An outspoken nationalist, he grew up with a Welsh-speaking father and an English-speaking mother. He came from the Preseli Mountains in Pembrokeshire, above the sea. There were slate quarries there, now abandoned. One of the types of rock used at Stonehenge—igneous dolerite, harder than granite—has been confirmed to have come from the Preseli hills, two hundred miles from Stonehenge.

"The Peacemakers" is about the burning of Swansea in World War II, which Williams witnessed; it's a cry for peace in a world of madness and sorrow—here is a tiny bit of it, translated into English:

> …The day will come that will hear them,
> Peacemakers, children of God.
> What is their inheritance tonight,
> Tonight, with the world ablaze?

Williams was a conscientious objector in the war. This is what the choir leader told us as he introduced the song. My father was a conscientious objector in the same war, exiled to Wales; this is what I thought about as I listened to the singing. I was still thinking about it while I talked with the singers afterwards, as they told me about Waldo Williams and what he saw at Swansea and how it moved him. One of them wrote out for me, in a shaky hand, the name of the poem in Welsh—*Tangnefeddwr* [TONGnayFAYthoor]. They spoke in a happy rush, their voices like song—up and down over the rapid English phrases. The sounds were breathy and sweet, the vowels soft, the consonants crisp and at the same time whispery.

I was listening, but I was remembering my father, who during the war left England to do two years of alternative service in the Welsh mines. Because so many of the miners went away to fight, there was a great need for replacements. It was a time my dad never spoke of much

when he was alive. He went on to success as a journalist and economist, but at the time he was just a kid from the gray industrial slums of Manchester, England—scrawny and awkward is how he looks in old photographs—and his family, in response to his pacifist stance, came as close to disowning him as people can without actually doing so. Not being willing to go fight Hitler was something they didn't get. No doubt the locals in and around those Welsh coal mining towns didn't get it either, although Wales has a long, deep strain of pacifism, with roots in the Welsh nonconformist Christian religious tradition, stretching back to World War I and further. The country's long complicated history with England, and witnessing of the expansion of the British empire, were factors. Pacifism found voice in Welsh poetry, in the work of Waldo Williams and others. Pacifist ideas, however, caused great controversy and division in Welsh society during the world wars. Agricultural areas leaned more pacifist than the industrial areas and coal-mining valleys of the south.

Some of those men in the choir were the same age my father would be now. How many had fought in the second world war? And now they sang "The Peacemakers," with a reverence that was a product of their years. Yet, when I mentioned to one of them that my father, like Waldo Williams, had been an objector during the war, and that he had served in the mines, I got back a blank look—an elderly, pale, lined face with nothing to say—he hadn't been expecting that, he didn't know what to think of it, better to keep everything out of his face than to let the wrong feeling creep in. I understood. I didn't mind. I knew, these old questions of war and peace are not really old, they stay with us, they don't go away, perhaps especially for these men who lived through those questions, whose childhoods and adulthoods were shaped so much by those terrible wars.

I thought how my dad was, for a time, like so many others before and after him, just another Englishman in Wales. A new thought about him warmed me then: when he was far from home in the coal mines, he would have been in the company of others like him, there for the same reason he was, which must have eased his loneliness. I remembered the slender blue lines along his forearms, which I would trace with a curious fingertip when I was a child—scars made blue by coal dust that settled in the cuts.

As the audience around me slowly moved off, I thought about the choir and their passionate singing, and all the other, equally passionate people I'd met in Wales, and realized I had found my Welsh people, they had been all around me all along. I stood staring at the ancient stone barn in the dusk, thinking how haunting, and haunted, is this land of rock.

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In case you're wondering what happened to Jill, by the time I left Wales, she had moved on. She put that ankle-twisting, stony little country behind her and hobbled off to France. She does not speak French, but she had a ball in Paris. There, with her reliable flair for the dramatic, she limped two hours on her sprained ankle with an armful of white roses from Montparnasse to Père Lachaise cemetery, where she laid her offering upon Chopin's grave. I wasn't there to see it, but I can imagine it well. Head held high, traffic zooming past her, limping across the bridge over the Seine, cradling those roses like a baby in her arms.

"Prolonging the journey," she told me later. "Because you never, never want it to end."