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Pinning the Daffodil and Singing Proudly: An American's Search for Modern Meaning in Ancestral Ties

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Pinning the Daffodil and Singing Proudly: An American's Search for Modern Meaning in Ancestral Ties

Abstract

This paper is a collection of my personal experiences with the Welsh culture, both as a celebration of heritage in America and as a way of life in Wales. Using my family's ancestral link to Wales as a narrative base, I trace the connections between Wales and America over the past century and look closely at how those ties have changed over time. The piece focuses on five location-based experiences—two in America and three in Wales—that each changed the way I interpret Welsh culture as a fifth-generation Welsh-American. Each travel experience contains characters, places, and interactions that shape my conception of Welsh heritage—from visiting Cardiff on St. David's Day, to staying with distant relatives on a farm in North Wales, to rallying people to learn the Welsh language at the 2012 North American Festival of Wales in Scranton, Pennsylvania. I explore treasured Welsh traditions such as the *eisteddfod* (music, arts, and literary competition) and the *gymanfa ganu* (festival of song), while also examining iconic symbols of Wales like the daffodil and the Welsh flag. While my ancestors and living relatives become the main characters of the piece, I also interweave biographical information on prominent Welsh figures, from the esteemed Swansea-born poet Dylan Thomas to the lead singer of the Super Furry Animals, a late 90s rock band. The paper seeks to determine the role of family ancestry in the present day and looks at how cultural identity is changing in an increasingly globalized world.

Keywords


Wales, Welsh, ancestry, cultural identity, family history, Dylan Thomas, Cardiff, Swansea, language, traditions

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Pinning the Daffodil and Singing Proudly

*An American's Search for
Modern Meaning in Ancestral Ties*

Liz Williams



2013 Senior Honors Thesis
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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Pinning the Daffodil and Singing Proudly

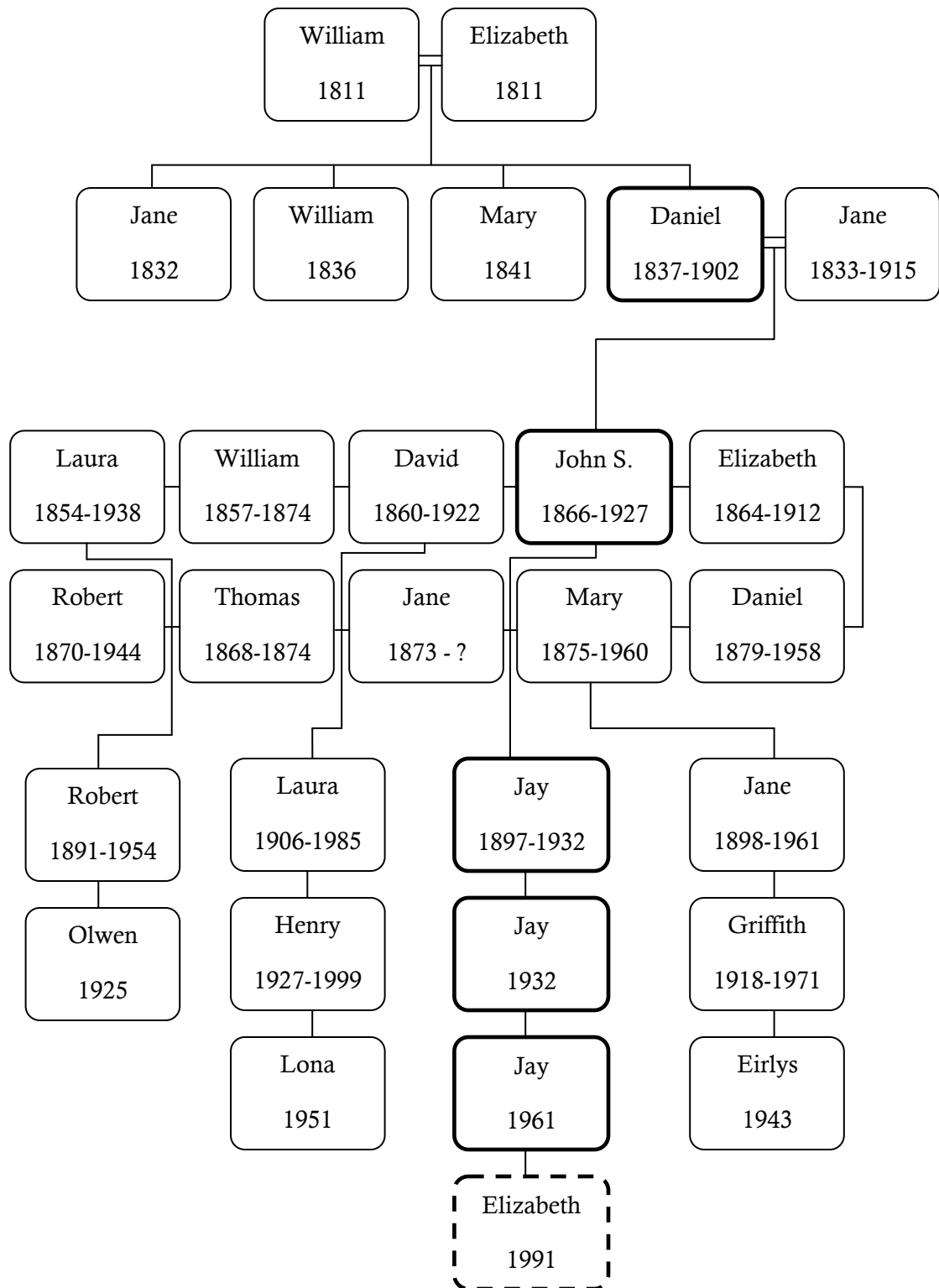
An American's search for modern meaning in ancestral ties

Liz Williams

Thesis Advisor: Kathryn Rhett

March 2013

Family Tree



Family Photos



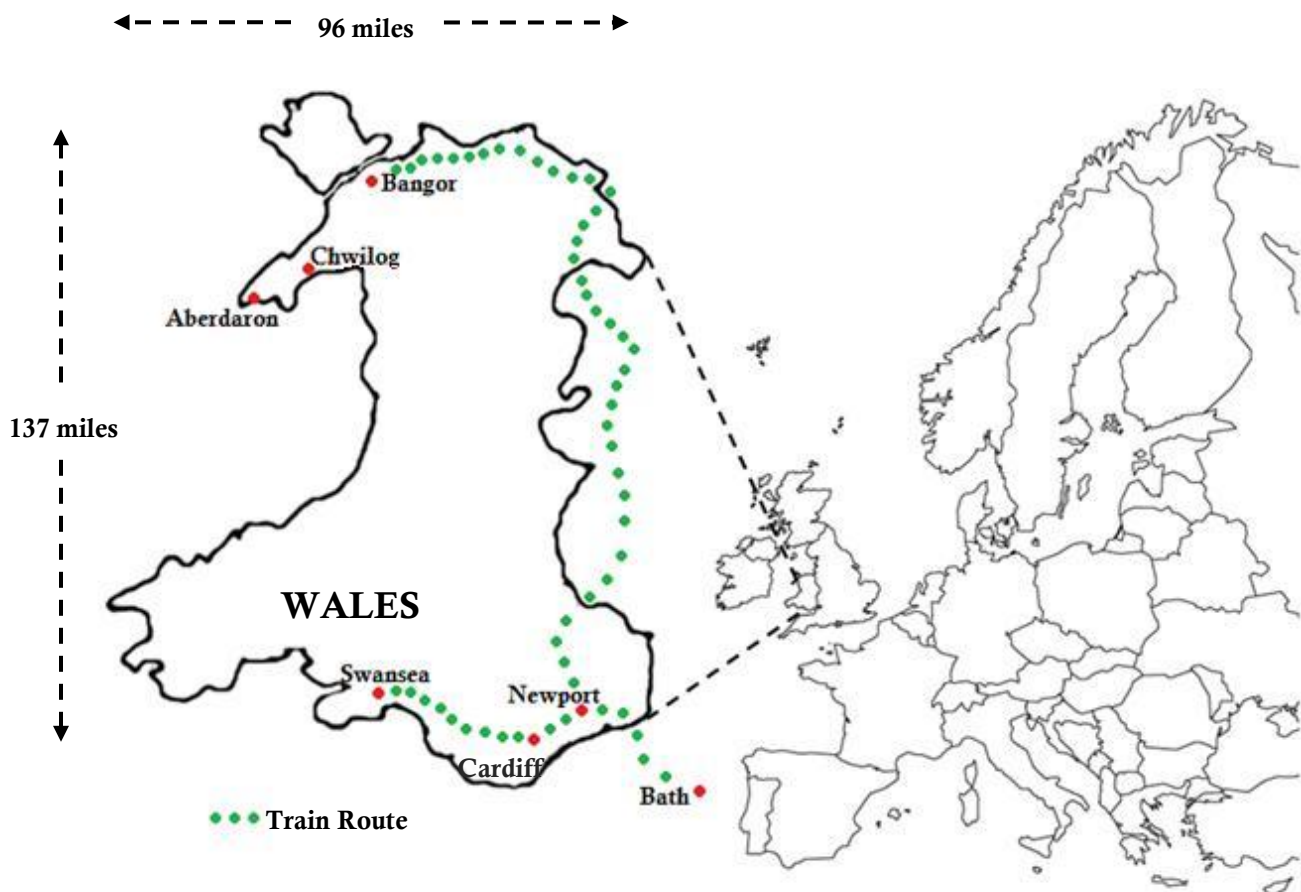
Williams Family at the Utica St. David's Day Banquet in 2007. From left to right: Liz, Tom, Rebecca, Lilly, Jay Williams



Williams Family, around 1915. From left to right: John S., Jay, Elizabeth, Humphrey Williams

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Last of all, I would like to thank John S. Williams for making the courageous decision to leave family and familiarity behind and travel from Wales to America in 1886.

Prologue

My best friend Emily and I are caught in a maze of bookcases twice our size. It's library day in fifth grade and we scour the stacks of the Clinton Elementary School library for books to check out. Our hair is cut the same way and we each wear our favorite color; hers is blue and mine is purple.

"So, I found out we're going to Wales," I say, as we kneel down next to the section of Nancy Drew books. I try to make my voice sound casual, like it's no big deal, like I haven't been waiting years to talk about *my* family's fun vacation. We never went to Florida like the other families. We never saw Sea World or Busch Gardens or Universal Studios. Our family went to Monticello and the Vanderbilt Mansion. We took carriage rides around Charleston and learned how girls my age would have dressed in colonial Williamsburg. Our vacations took place on the battlefields of Gettysburg and Antietam, where we listened to tour guides talk about the thousands who died where we stood.

"When?" Emily asks.

"Next year," I say.

She pulls a book off the shelf and leafs through its pages. I watch her eyes dart between paragraphs, hoping to find some indicator of her reaction. I want to know if she is impressed.

"Why are you going to Wales?" she asks, finally.

I shrug my shoulders, still attempting to appear nonchalant. It will be my first time on a plane; my first time traveling to another country besides Canada. At home, my parents have been making lists of people and places we will visit on our trip. They tell me we are going to visit the tiny coastal town in North Wales—Aberdaron—where my ancestors grew up. I wonder if I will see little girls there dressed in Welsh costumes, like the one I wore when I was younger, or if I will hear the Welsh songs that my family sings. My parents tell me about the castles we will visit and how some of the roads are only wide enough for one car to fit through. I wonder if there will be Welsh cakes there—those little sugar-dusted cookies with currants that all the old ladies at my church bake for Welsh events.

“We have family there, I guess,” I answer.

“Oh,” says Emily. She puts the book back on the shelf and we both stand up, facing each other at exactly the same height. The information hangs lopsided between us as she considers the normalcy of me visiting “family” in Europe. We both sense there are some words that should be spoken between us, but neither of us knows quite what they are.

“We’re going to Florida again—for spring break,” she offers. “My grandparents live there.”

I want to tell her there’s a difference between the Sleeping Beauty Castle at Disney Land and the one we’ll be visiting in Cardiff, but I think I’ll wait until I’ve seen and felt the ancient walls myself.

Chasing the Super Furry Animals

The Welsh were notorious for their obsession for pedigree, their lust for lineage, their superstitious adherence to dubious myths of origin.

—M. Wynn Thomas, *Corresponding Cultures*

A warm breeze of Baltimore air flapped my dress as I descended the parking garage stairs to cobblestone streets. On the verge of sweating, I slowed my step and hoped the lavender perfume I had put on that morning would work its magic. With one hand holding down the skirt of my flowered dress, I reached into my tote bag for the Google Maps image of Inner Harbor I had printed that morning. I turned the page sideways and squinted to read the street names. It was 2:53 p.m. I had seven minutes to locate Fell's Point water taxi stop, find the man with curly hair, and swallow the nerves in my stomach long enough to shake his hand. It was going to happen. I was going to live my teenage dream and interview Gruff Rhys of the Super Furry Animals.

The obsession started when I was fifteen years old and still read *Teen Vogue*. Paging through the lipstick and deodorant ads of a 2007 issue, I spotted a music review for a new CD, "Hey Venus," by a band called the Super Furry Animals. The name of the band alone might have been enough to draw me in, but as soon as I saw the words "Welsh indie band" in the two-sentence description, I knew I was going to be hooked. They were Welsh, just like me.

I ran to my computer and dug up as many of their songs as I could to see if I liked the band's sound. I was just around that age when it was cool to have a favorite band no

one else had heard of, and I could picture myself shrugging my shoulders and answering with nonchalance the next time I was asked about my favorite band. “Oh, I’d have to go with the Super Furry Animals,” I would say. “They’re Welsh.”

Luckily, my fantasies of adopting the Super Furry Animals (SFA) as my new favorite band were met as I discovered troves of their music online and picture after picture of their attractive lead singer, Gruff Rhys, with dark curly hair and eyes that sank closed when he sang. The band’s website, SuperFurry.com, was plastered with strange-looking creatures dancing against a polka dot background, and a function at the top of the page allowed users to cycle through a collection of their songs. I liked how each song sounded different from the next—some had a solid drum beat and catchy chorus, while others were peppered with the twang of spacey, psychedelic instruments.

More than anything, I liked how genuinely Welsh the Super Furry Animals were. Before entering their website, I was first prompted to select a language: Cymraeg (Welsh) or English. Welsh titles were sprinkled through the track listings, and one CD, “Mwng,” was entirely in Welsh. Even when he was singing in English, Gruff had a Welsh accent that made his songs sound just slightly foreign to me, and all the more appealing. Their Welshness made them quirky and unique, and it was something I could identify with after growing up in a family that still celebrated its Welsh ancestry. The longer I listened to Gruff’s soft and soothing voice, the more I knew that the Super Furry Animals were going to be the background music to my life for months—and maybe years—to come.

Just weeks after reading the review in *Teen Vogue*, I saw online that the Super Furry Animals had announced a North American tour and would be stopping in Buffalo, New York, which was three and a half hours from Clinton, the village where I lived. As I read

and reread the announcement on the screen, I felt a mix of excitement and apprehension. I wanted more than anything to see Gruff Rhys in person and to hear his voice up close—and in my home state, of all places! But so much of the band’s appeal for me lay in their foreignness, and in their image in my mind as a fixture of Wales. Wales was the land I had dreamed of—the place I heard about in family stories and could only visualize from old photographs and the select memories I held from a family trip when I was eleven. What if the Super Furry Animals’ performance did not match the image of Welshness I had in my mind?

My conception of Wales relied on the few Americanized celebrations of Welsh heritage that took place in and around Utica, New York, a small city just ten minutes from my house, where hundreds of Welsh immigrants came to settle in the 18th and 19th centuries. Remnants of once-thriving Welsh communities still existed in my area, and my dad was an active part of the Welsh community in central New York. His great-grandfather, John Solomon Williams (known as “John S.” in our family) came over from Wales in 1886 and settled in Plainfield, New York, about 25 miles from Clinton.

In an effort to preserve our family’s tie with Wales, we went to *gymanfa ganus*—Welsh festivals of song—and other Welsh cultural events throughout the year. *Gymanfas* took place in churches of all shapes and sizes—some were huge cathedrals in major cities; others were tiny wooden structures tucked away in overgrown fields. In *Our Welsh Heritage*, a booklet put out by the National Welsh-American Foundation in 1972, Dr. Islyn Thomas describes the *gymanfa*:

This institution, in its present form less than a century old, is expressive of the soul of the Cymry, or Welsh, since it gives an outlet for their deep and fervent religious feeling through the medium they love best, the music of human voices blended in harmony. It is, as it must be to be Welsh, a democratic institution, for persons in all

positions in life take part in it. It is devoted to four-part singing of hymns and anthems, and has given the congregational singing of the Welsh people concededly first place among the nations.

From my experience, the events attracted an elderly crowd, probably because the older generations had the closest ties to those original immigrants. In trying to explain *gymanfas* to friends, I often described them as glorified choir practice. Unlike a choir concert, where a group of singers would stand at the front of the room and sing to an audience, at a *gymanfa*, the audience *was* the choir. A conductor would stand at the front of the church, facing the audience and waving his arms along with the music. He would cue the women to sing louder here and the men to emphasize the harmony there. “Let’s sing verse one and two in English, with the chorus in Welsh,” he would instruct. Or, “Men sing verse one, women sing verse two, and we’ll all come in on verse three. With feeling, now!” Everyone in the room was both a guest and a performer. This sense of equality, and reliance on several parts to comprise one exquisite whole, made the Welsh community in America strong and tightly-knit, and being at a *gymanfa* felt like attending a large family reunion. We sang from the depths of our bellies, projecting the familiar tunes into the grand arched ceilings and hearing their echoes sparkle on the stained-glass windows around us. The glow and swell of the organ mixed with the ocean of voices singing in four-part harmony always gave me a rush, and sometimes, I would cut out for a few measures just to listen to the tremendous sound. My family and I left *gymanfas* with our throats sore from singing and the drone of the organ still pulsing in our foreheads.

At *gymanfas*, and other cultural events held in and around Utica, little girls would dress up in traditional Welsh costumes with red checkered shawls, frilly white aprons, and black stovepipe hats. The women would sell loaves of *bara breith*, a traditional Welsh fruit

bread. People would trade Welsh phrases and greetings, like “*Bore da*” (Good morning) and “*Prynhawn da*” (Good afternoon). My family and I were proud of our Welsh background and loved all things Welsh. Celebrating the culture from time to time was just another part of my identity, thrown in there with my love of bagels and lyric poetry and the Boston Red Sox. I didn’t fully understand what it meant to be Welsh or why our family made such an effort to observe this particular strand of our heritage. It was just something we did.

As a teenager, I knew there was a disconnect between the old culture celebrated by my family and the actual culture of those presently living in Wales—people like Gruff Rhys and the Super Furry Animals. I hoped that seeing the band in New York might give me a glimpse of the current Welsh culture that felt so unfamiliar to me. My dad, who had also begun to listen to SFA, agreed that we would find a way to make it to the concert in February 2008. We disguised the excursion as a trip to look at colleges in western New York, and stopped at Ithaca, Hobart and William Smith, and University of Rochester along the way.

We showed up at the Tralf Music Hall an hour and a half before the show was set to begin. We were first in line and first inside the venue, a small indie club on an otherwise deserted street in downtown Buffalo. The first opening act was a singer from New York City with a generic name who sat on a stool with a guitar and used an over-sized comic book on an easel as a prop to accompany his clammy ballads. The second act, who called himself Gaybot, sat on the ground in a tattered flannel shirt feverishly turning the dials on some sort of synthesizer. We watched, confused, as he cocked his head up into the royal blue lights above him and released an awful wailing sound that somehow fit in with the drones and bleeps of the electronic device. My dad and I looked at each other over the mass of beanie-

covered heads and unicorn arm tattoos, unsure of where the evening was headed. All we wanted was to see the Super Furry Animals and hear their Welsh voices color the American air.

Once the two opening acts had concluded, smoke clouded the stage and we could see the outlines of four band members on stage. I had memorized their names from the inside of one of my SFA CD jackets beforehand: Huw Bunford, Guto Pryce, Cian Ciaran, Dafydd Ieuan, and of course, Gruff Rhys. Blue lights shone down on the foggy set. The crowd buzzed in anticipation, and a burst of notes came from the keyboard in a spacey, synthesized sound. Someone in the audience let out a “yeah!” and the keyboard began again, soon followed by the click of a drum. There were still only four band members on stage—where was Gruff? A series of electronic noises on different pitches joined the beat and the audience bobbed along to the dotted rhythm. Boop. Ding. Shhh. The guitars and bass added to the melody over the looping sound effects.

And then a voice sang, “Mooooove you....Buy and selllll you....Terroriiiiize you....Mass destruuuuct you.....” The fans on either side of us cheered, and then turned toward the back of the room, where a figure emerged in a haze of artificial smoke wearing a red space helmet twice the size of his head. In slow motion, he waded through the crowd and made his way to the front of the room. “Rocks are sloooow life,” he sang. “Rocks are slow life.” With the Welsh accents and weird sound effects, I could rarely pick out the words of SFA songs, and when I did, I had no idea what they meant. But that did not detract from my adoration. They were my band. The figure ascended onto the stage and removed the helmet to shake out his dark, curly hair. From my spot in the front row, I looked up to the most spectacular view of Gruff Rhys’s chin, shaded in with just the right

amount of stubble. Without missing a beat, he pushed his mouth up against the microphone and launched into the second verse of “Slow Life,” a song from SFA’s 2003 album, *Phantom Power*.

I watched with spellbound gaze as Gruff and the other Super Furry Animals shifted around instruments and sang into the microphones with eyes closed and skin drenched in colored lights: “I am glowing radioactive; we draw beams around the world. Wish you could see us when we’re at our best now; we draw rings around the world...” Some of the creatures from SuperFurry.com were embroidered onto the sleeves of their matching suits and drawn on Gruff’s guitars. The stage was a spinning collage of blinking lights, bouncing curls, and painted instruments that dipped with the beat.

Halfway into their set, Gruff sang, “I took some time out to study your actions, of how you painted towns red.” Once again, his eyes were closed and his chin slanted up. “And if my worst fears come to fruition, I’m sure you’d leave us all dead...” The song was “Receptacle for the Respectable,” a tune which includes Paul McCartney chewing celery and carrots into the microphone on the recorded version. Gruff pulled a bright red apple out of his pocket and held it up to the crowd. Taking a big bite, he chewed the fruit into the microphone to make a crunching sound and then spit the bits out into the audience. I was the wide-eyed teenager standing beneath his feet as tiny particles of apple dotted my lavender SFA t-shirt. The show was so far removed from anything I had ever associated with the Welsh culture—there were no tea cakes or dragons or daffodils or harps—and yet Gruff was the real deal, straight from Wales with the accent and everything. I was fascinated by the difference between his Welshness and mine.

We left the club that night around one in the morning and settled into my dad's car for the three and a half hour trip back home. I fell asleep to the sounds of "Into the Night," with Gruff's smooth voice singing, "Hey Venus, did you catch the sun? Hey Venus, did you catch the sun? While searching for the sound that shines into the night, into the night, into the night..."

In 2009, SFA released their final album, "Dark Days/Light Years." Since then, the band has more or less broken up, with each of its members working on individual projects, including a solo album by Gruff, "Hotel Shampoo," for which he was named the inaugural winner of the Welsh Music Prize in 2011. As I left my home in upstate New York and went away to college in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, I remained an avid fan of the Super Furry Animals and proudly displayed on my dorm room wall a vintage SFA poster that my dad had found on e-bay.

During my junior year of college, I had the opportunity to study abroad in Bath, England for a semester. I took advantage of my location in southwest England to travel to Wales as many times as I could, and over a period of four months, I visited Wales on five different occasions, searching each time for a deeper understanding of what it truly meant to be Welsh. Just before I was about to come back to America, I saw a post on Gruff Rhys's website announcing the dates for an "investigative concert tour" throughout the United States that summer. Instead of just playing his music to supportive fans in venues across the United States, Gruff would be investigating his ancestry along the way, following in the footsteps of his explorer relative, John Evans, who was sent to America from Wales during the 18th century in search of a mysterious tribe of Welsh Indians. The investigative tour was

set to consist of concerts in several American cities, and footage from Gruff's travels would be turned into his second documentary film. His first, *Separado!* (2010), captured Gruff's quest to Patagonia in search of another long-lost relative, and profiled the vibrant Welsh community that still existed there.

The post on Gruff's website gave a peek into the adventurous life of his ancestor:

John Evans – a 22-year old farmhand from the mountains of Snowdonia, Wales – responded to a plea for a brave soul to ascertain if there was indeed a tribe of Welsh-speaking Native Americans still walking the Great Plains, descendants of Prince Madog (widely believed to have discovered America in 1170). During the course of an extraordinary adventure, Evans wrestled the largest river reptiles ever seen in the Mississippi, hunted Bison with the Omaha tribe, defected to the Spanish in St Louis, discovered imaginary volcanoes in Missouri, annexed North Dakota from the British, and created the map that guided Lewis and Clarke on their legendary expedition. His adventure was cut short when he died broke and out of his mind at 29 in New Orleans.

John Evans was almost the same age as my great-great-grandfather, John S., when he traveled to America, but they came for very different reasons—one to explore and the other to settle. Strangely enough, they both died on American soil, and their journeys over one hundred years ago directly inspired two similar voyages in 2012: my trip to Wales and Gruff's trip to America.

Once again, I found myself reading and rereading the announcement of Gruff's tour, making mental plans of when and how I might be able to see him. So much had changed in my life since attending the Super Furry Animals concert four years earlier, and I wanted to watch Gruff perform with new eyes. I had just come back from a journey of my own, traveling through the cities and towns of Wales in an effort to uncover the mystery of Welsh identity as a fifth-generation Welsh-American. Just as Gruff would be tracing the life of his ancestor, I too had walked in the shoes of my ancestors in Wales. His investigative tour reminded me of my own investigative tour, only in reverse. Instead of an American going

back to Wales to see where my ancestors came from, he was traveling from Wales to America to see where his ancestor had settled. I knew from the moment I read the announcement that I needed to see him—not just see him, but talk to him. I was not a crazed teenage fan girl anymore. I was a researcher; an observer; a questioner. I needed to sit down with Gruff Rhys and have a conversation about what it meant to be Welsh, and it was up to me to make that happen.

Using my background as an English major, combined with some advice from my father, I put together an eight-paragraph-long letter addressed to “The Management of Gruff Rhys,” describing who I was and why it was imperative that I speak with Gruff while he was in Baltimore that summer. I wrote about growing up near Utica, New York, a city popular among Welsh immigrants in the 1800s, and about my investigative travels through Wales over the last semester. I wrote about my distant relatives in North Wales and how I had traced the footsteps of John S. all the way back to the house in Aberdaron where he was born. I even mentioned seeing the Super Furry Animals in 2008 and closed with “Diolch yn fawr,” Welsh for “Thank you very much.”

The day after sending the e-mail off to every address I could find on Gruff’s website, I had a reply from Cat Ramasut, producer of *Separado!* and the woman rumored to be Gruff’s significant other: “Hi Liz, Gruff is up for a chat if you are happy to do so on camera that’d be great. We could meet earlier in the day in Baltimore if that is convenient for you?” I was so ecstatic that I hardly noticed the brevity or bad grammar of the response. Gruff Rhys, the man I had stared at in video after video of SFA performances and music videos, was aware of my existence and was willing to talk to me.

A month later, I found myself on a cobblestone street in Baltimore looking for the Fell's Point water taxi stop, where Cat had told me to meet at 3 p.m. Of course I had no knowledge of Baltimore landmarks or geography, so I got myself pathetically lost in trying to locate the taxi stop. Cat called me a few minutes before three and directed me to the place where she and the rest of the crew were waiting.

"Just keep on walking and there should be a bend in the road," she said. "A trolley just went by, did you see that?"

I saw the trolley.

"I'll be wearing a black hat!" she said, and it took all my composure not to stop where I was standing and balk at the craziness of the situation. I was on the phone with Gruff Rhys's girlfriend, and she was leading me—Welsh accent and all—to the feet of my absolute number one teen idol, who had agreed to talk with me about his life. Sure enough, there was a bend in the road and I saw a woman in a short dress clutching a black sun hat to her head. I waved as I approached and she waved back.

"I'm Cat," she said, extending her arm. "We're over this way."

She motioned behind her to a group of three or four people overlooking the harbor. I recognized him immediately, even though he wore a gray fedora and sunglasses to disguise himself. He was in a full suit and looked so peaceful gazing over the water, his iconic brown curls lifting just slightly in the breeze. As Cat and I approached, the group turned to us and Cat introduced me to the cameramen first and then to Gruff, who shook my hand. When I had anticipated this personally climactic meeting on the ride into Baltimore that morning, I expected myself to become flustered and nervous, to trip over my words and cause Gruff to

second-guess his consent to the meeting. But it was the complete opposite. He seemed so soft-spoken and ordinary, and this put me at ease.

Cat announced she would lead the group back to where the rest of the film crew was waiting, so we followed behind her as she snaked through and around a range of stony buildings. Gruff and I split off by ourselves on the walk over and made small talk about Baltimore and the weather.

“So, what is Utica like?” he asked, but instead of pronouncing it “You-tica,” he said “Oo-tica.” I hesitated in my response as I considered correcting him, and then offered a vaguely positive description of the area I grew up in, playing up the multiculturalism of the city and the beauty of upstate New York.

“And you’ve been to Aberdaron, then?” he asked. I had briefly explained in my e-mail how I had travelled to our small ancestral hometown in North Wales a few months earlier.

“It was wonderful,” I said, nodding enthusiastically. “I have distant relatives there who showed me around. We saw the place where my great-great-grandfather grew up and went to my ancestors’ graves and everything.”

He smiled and looked off into the distance as if he were picturing the place with its rocky coast and grassy hills. Aberdaron—my sister village, the place where John S. grew up and eventually left in pursuit of a better life in New York. Hearing the name on someone else’s lips in America was a new, and pleasant, sensation for me. This foreign pop star and I shared something in common—something that none of my best friends back at Gettysburg would understand in quite the same way. We could both claim ancestry from the same 8,023 square miles of land tucked away on a distant continent. Our ancestors came from

Wales, and yet there we were, on the coast of America, with our minds still caught up in the mysteries of a tangled lineage. I wondered if Gruff had the same expectations of following in his ancestor's footsteps in America as I had when I was in Wales just a few months earlier.

Gruff and I met up with the rest of Cat's team and we settled on a low cement wall by the harbor for the place of our interview. We made casual conversation while the film crew set up their equipment, and Gruff asked me if I watched *The Wire*.

"No, do you?"

"Yeah, this is crazy, you know. Seeing it on TV, and then being here in Baltimore. It's weird."

His eyes got that long-lost look in them again and he stared off into the city behind us. For just a moment, I wanted so badly to brag to my eleventh grade self about how Gruff Rhys and I were chatting about our favorite TV shows. I looked down to see his fingers tapping on the cement as if he were playing a piano.

"All right, go ahead," said one of the cameramen. We eased into the interview, which turned into a 45-minute-long conversation about each of our experiences with the crossover of cultures between Wales and America. Earlier that morning, I had scribbled down a list of questions to ask Gruff, but with the cameras in my face and his eager eyes awaiting my next question, I forgot the list and had to think quickly. Instead of going through the questions that were relevant to his music or the Welsh language, I jumped right to the heart of why I had wanted to meet with Gruff in the first place.

"What do you think is the value for someone like me, who is only distantly connected to Wales, to maintain that tie and continue observing my Welsh heritage?" I

asked him. It was the question I had traveled all over Wales looking for the answer to. Maybe it was a selfish question to ask—it had nothing to do with Gruff and everything to do with my own quest for self-identity—but if anyone could offer insight on the importance of one's heritage, it was him. After all, he too had traveled thousands of miles in the pursuit to uncover a piece of his own past, and was asking himself some of the same questions I found myself struggling with.

“It gives you a sort of extended community,” he said, after a long pause. “There's something sacred about knowing where you come from.”

That was it exactly—*knowing where you come from*. It was the reason for my family's obsession with the Welsh culture five generations after that initial voyage taken by John S. in 1886. We were Americans, yes, but we had not always been Americans. Deep down, we knew we belonged somewhere else, and to us, that somewhere was Wales. Gruff's fingers danced on the cement again and he turned his eyes—just briefly—toward the Atlantic Ocean, whose vast horizon held the bright blue sky.

Daffodils in Cardiff

We are the descendants of people who went to castles with pointy hats.

—Dafydd Ieuan, Super Furry Animals

On my first day in England, I pushed my nose up against the glass of my coach bus's windows and drank in the scenery, too captivated to even blink. My first thought upon crossing into the city of Bath was that we were penetrating a castle. The buildings rose up before me in identical precision—all were made of the same beige stone and rose to the same height as they lined the winding streets. The architecture was drastically different from that of the small hodgepodge towns I had left behind in America. Both Clinton and Gettysburg held a disjointed mix of buildings with clapboards and bricks in all shades and styles, with colorful storefront awnings and tacky neon lights. Bath was a castle, and I had been appointed a member of its royal family for four full months.

During my first few weeks in Bath, I walked. With the whole unexplored city before me, I took the first step in my transition from outsider to insider and walked everywhere I could. If I put myself into the heart of the city *physically*, then maybe I would eventually become a part of the community on a deeper level. By my second week living in Bath, I had devoted a fair number of mornings to wandering everywhere I could—down alleyways, along the river, up stone staircases, and through abandoned passageways.

Although I had been there for a week already, I had yet to speak with any of the locals, aside from the British staff on my program and the black-shirted baristas who took my £2.70 latte order at Caffè Nero. In my wandering, I noticed that people often stood

along High Street with brightly colored vests and hats, holding binders or clipboards with talking points for the charities they were supporting. As a poor college student living in Europe with no source of income for the next four months, I had no intention of giving money, but I desperately wanted a chat. So one day, I decided to let one of the charity advocates give me his spiel.

The guy looked to be in his early twenties, stocky but not short, and wore a green vest, jeans, and a stiff baseball cap. I could see the faint outline of a gold chain around his thick neck.

"How're you doin' today, miss? Do you have a minute?" he asked.

In a heavy accent, the boy named Roighen gave me a long rundown of what Greenpeace does, the woes of deforestation, and the world of good my donation would do. Once I got past the satisfaction of hearing his voice and its dreamy range of foreign inflections, I listened attentively to his speech, and asked a question when he had finished.

"Where are you from?" he asked, noticing my accent. I told him I was from New York.

"Hey, I'm not from around here either," he shrugged. "I'm Welsh! You know where Wales is?"

Wales! What? My eyes lit up at his words and I barely noticed how his tone sounded slightly sarcastic at the end, as if he doubted an American fresh off the plane would have any knowledge of Britain's geography.

"You're really from Wales?" I asked.

"Uh...yes?" he answered, amused by my enthusiastic reaction.

This is awesome, I thought. I was expecting to talk to someone English, but this was even better. Here in front of me was a true Welshman! The real thing! He probably spoke Welsh at home and had a stash of Welsh cakes in his backpack and could quote all of my favorite songs by the Super Furry Animals.

I instinctively responded: "Me too! I'm Welsh!"

Roighen broke into a wide grin and openly laughed at this, as if I had just made an attempt at cross-cultural humor. But then he saw that I was serious, and his expression changed.

"No you're not," he said. "You're American."

I paused. *You're American*. Well, yes, I was American, but *culturally* I was Welsh...wasn't I? Flustered, I tried to explain in a string of disconnected sentences that I was a fifth-generation Welsh-American and my dad's ancestors came from North Wales and I celebrated my Welsh heritage and my last name was Williams.

And then I realized how ridiculous I sounded. My notion of "Welshness" was completely different from that of the boy working for Greenpeace on the streets of Bath. I was clinging to stories of a man who lived in Wales over a century ago. Roighen was the real deal. I eyed his backpack suspiciously. There was no way he had Welsh cakes in there. Did Welsh people even eat Welsh cakes, or was that an American thing? He probably didn't even speak Welsh. Did anyone anymore? It must have been spoken in some communities...

The Greenpeace advocate and I stood facing each other outside the Waitrose on High Street. Sliding doors opened behind us and shoppers rushed by with half-full reusable shopping bags. Men clad in business suits hurried past with heels clicking against the pavement and umbrellas hooked on elbows. New mothers pushed their daughters and frilly

pink blankets in prams toward the Cath Kidston shop down the road. Teenagers typed on their phones and joggers checked their watches and little black dogs itched behind their ears.

All this was happening as I realized I had no idea what it meant to be Welsh. The culture I had grown up with, had idealized in my mind, was nothing more than a diluted and construed version of a culture that once was.

Roighen pulled a clipboard out of his binder and asked if I would be willing to make a pledge. I asked if I could “like” the organization on Facebook instead.

"You could spread your donation out over a few months if that works better for you," he offered.

"I don't know," I answered. I really did want to help his cause but I also knew that every dollar I donated was one dollar less I could spend on train tickets to an unexplored city in Wales.

"It's real easy. All you need is a British bank account."

I shook my head and apologized to Roighen. I could not donate to Greenpeace. I did not have a British bank account. I was American.

Despite all my wandering, I was still an outsider in Bath, and would certainly be considered an outsider in Wales. But the feeling couldn't last forever. When John S. was my age, he too was considered an outsider as he entered a foreign land and tried to make it his home. While I was not living in Bath permanently, I was still developing an attachment to the place, and felt myself gradually transitioning from tourist to resident. How long did it take to fully identify with a place? Months? Years? Generations? Could one ever truly have a second home? I would discover the answer sooner than I thought.

The day after my conversation with Roighen, I met another Welsh expat living in England. I had arranged to have lunch in Oxford with a Welsh novelist named Nia Williams, who had befriended my father when he visited Wales during a high school exchange program in the 1970s. Although they were just teenagers when they met, the two kept in contact over the years, and my dad encouraged us to get together while I was in England. At Nia's suggestion, we agreed to meet at the Strada on Little Clarendon Street in Oxford. As with many of my British adventures, I was relying on the wonders of Google Maps to help me navigate an unfamiliar city. Luckily, I gave myself enough time to walk around the block and up the wrong street and down another side street before finally coming across the identifying red awnings of the chain Italian restaurant. I had half an hour to spare, so I slipped into a café across the street to pass the extra time.

From my seat by the window, I looked out at the restaurant with large red letters proclaiming its identity. Meeting at Strada had been Nia's choice, but I couldn't help but think of it as another reminder of my muddled ethnic pie: 25% Italian, from my mother's side, and just 12.5% Welsh, thanks to John S.

As I sat by myself in the café, I tried to recall two of Nia's books that I had read: *The Colour of Grass*, and *Persons Living or Dead*. I had finished them just weeks before coming to the U.K. and I remembered thinking how un-Welsh they sounded. The stories had no hovering grandmother in a black checkered apron pouring tea from a daffodil-painted teapot. There were no sheep grazing in the characters' backyards or lines of Dylan Thomas clipped onto the ends of dialogue. They were just regular stories of relationships, conflicts, and everyday interactions. They had all the elements of good stories that I had been learning about in my fiction class, but without the quirky Welsh culture lurking in the background as

I had subconsciously expected. I remembered noticing words like “hob” and “carport” that classified the stories as distinctly British, but aside from that, they could have taken place anywhere.

The one thing that struck me as subtly Welsh in Nia’s stories was the focus on ancestry in each of her novels. In *The Colour of Grass*, Helen, a recently-widowed older woman, picks up genealogy as a hobby following her husband’s death. She digs into the past to uncover secrets and tidbits from the life of someone she thought she knew completely. The past directly influences her actions in the present, to the point where her entire life becomes engrossed in the search. If there was one thing about Helen’s experience that I could relate to, it was her intense longing to explore those lost connections of her personal history. After all, that was exactly what I was going to do in Wales: wade through pieces of the past to discover who I was in the present.

I entered the Italian restaurant across the street and found a small woman with short gray hair sitting at a corner table under a dim red light.

“Hi, are you Nia?” I asked.

“You must be Liz!” she said, standing to greet me. “I’ve heard so much about you—come, sit down!”

I eased into the red leathery seat and perused the menu, only to find that all the entrees were written in Italian. Why hadn’t I taken a semester or two of Italian while I had the chance back at Gettysburg? My brother had taken Italian when he was in college, and I’m sure my mother would have no problem deciphering the names. She had never studied the language, but her father, Benedict Peter Viglietta, was a full-blooded Italian. My mother was number ten of thirteen children, who had all gone to Catholic school in Clinton: it was

clear that her father's Italian culture had a strong influence on her upbringing. So then why hadn't we chosen to celebrate our Italian heritage like we did our Welsh ancestry?

I finally came across the word "rigatoni" on the menu, and as it reminded me of chicken riggies, a favorite dish native to Utica, I ordered a plate and hoped for the best.

"How are you liking Bath so far?" Nia asked. I had been in the U.K. for less than two weeks at this point, but was starting to recognize the regional differences in accents. Nia's was hard to peg.

"I love it!" I said. I told her how I had been exploring the many side streets and shops of Bath during my free time and had grown especially fond of doing my homework in cafés.

"I feel like I'm channeling Helen," I said. "Working in cafés and ordering Americanos to sip on while I write."

This made her laugh, and she admitted to me that the fictional Helen's love for working in cafés was based on her own writing habits. She had found a few coffee shops throughout Oxford with atmospheres and clientele that were especially conducive to the creative flow, so she had established herself as a regular. I did not mention that I felt I was channeling Helen in another way: I was striving to uncover a past whose colors I could just barely glimpse from the recesses of time.

Knowing that she had grown up in a Welsh-speaking household and attended a Welsh school, but had relocated to England for her adult life, I was especially curious as to how she dealt with having a sort of dual identity in both the English and Welsh cultures.

"It was difficult at first," she said. "Growing up, we were always taught to stay loyal to Wales, to keep the language alive and not to leave Wales behind."

Although she loved her country, she saw more opportunities outside of Wales, and eventually decided to take the plunge and explore life beyond the land she knew. It was the same reason that John S. set sail for America in 1886—he was in search of a better life. In his case, however, he was not leaving his family a few hundred miles away but an entire ocean away. It was not like he could catch a plane back to Aberdaron any time he felt like paying his parents a visit. When John S. left Wales at twenty years old, he left it for good. Reflecting on his decision, I couldn't help but wonder if I would have made the same choice in his place. I too was twenty years old, and could not imagine the extent of the pros and cons list that must have been churning in John S.'s head as he decided to leave everything and everyone he knew behind for a completely foreign place.

Ultimately, Nia had to make a choice, and her decision was seen as offensive to many of the people she grew up with. They felt she was leaving her culture behind. But deep down, Nia was still Welsh, despite living outside of Wales. As a writer, this identification actually worked to her advantage. Since moving to England, she had put out three novels, all written in English, but published by a Welsh women's press.

"It's difficult to hold on to the Welsh culture now that I'm living in England," Nia said. "But I still wear a daffodil on St. David's Day and keep in contact with friends back home."

One month later, I sat on the floor of my bedroom in Bath and put a cloth daffodil pin in my purse along with train tickets to Cardiff—the capital of Wales—and Google Maps directions to the city center. It was the night before March 1, and I was packed and ready to spend the entire day in Wales, something I had dreamed of doing since I was a little girl.

March 1 was St. David's Day, a holiday similar in nature to St. Patrick's Day in Ireland—it celebrates the patron saint of the nation and is a day to go crazy with patriotism. At home, my dad would fly the Welsh flag outside our house and wear a green tie with a red dragon on it to work. I would dig out whatever Wales-themed clothing I had in my closet and post a "Happy St. David's Day!" message on Facebook or Twitter to all my non-Welsh followers. The only Welsh clothing I owned during high school was a hunter green t-shirt with an embroidered red dragon beneath the word "WALES," but when my parents visited Cardiff in 2011, they brought me home a bright red rugby shirt, and that became my go-to St. David's Day garment throughout college.

One year—I must have been in middle school at the time—my brother tied his Welsh flag around his neck and let it flow over his backpack like a cape. We passed each other in the halls of Clinton Middle School and called out, "*Cymru am byth!*"—"Wales forever!"—to the skeptical looks of our peers and teachers. It was the one day when we had an excuse to celebrate our Welshness as loud as we liked, and that was exactly what we did. But we weren't the only ones at school to sport our Welsh pride on March 1. Our area was once full of Welsh immigrants, and evidence of these long-gone ancestors remained, even if it only emerged on St. David's Day. There were two boys in the grade below me who would always wear Welsh shirts on the first of March, one of which read, "Kiss me, I'm Welsh!" On seeing the green and red shirts, we gave each other knowing nods of approval, but never acknowledged the unspoken link between us outside of St. David's Day.

In Utica, an annual St. David's Day banquet attracts about 80-90 people of Welsh descent from the area. Back in the 1950s, it was considered the social event of the year for the Welsh in central New York. The banquet would be held at the Hotel Utica, a landmark

building in the city that boasted a sweeping ballroom and enormous chandeliers. There would be food and dancing all night long, and the room would be filled to capacity. Up until the 1990s, the mayor of Utica would come to the event, as would the New York State Senators. The officers of the St. David's Society would enter the hall by marching in to "Men of Harlech," a traditional Welsh tune, and one lucky attendee would be named "Welsh Person of the Year." The Welsh community had a vibrant presence in central New York, and in addition to the St. David's Day banquet, the society would host a Christmas party and an annual meeting.

I went to the banquet once, in 2007, because my dad had been named Welsh Person of the Year, an award that was once seen as a great honor within the Welsh community but is no longer given out. Membership in the St. David's Society has steadily declined as its members have become older and the ties with the Welsh culture that were once so strong continue to fade. The banquet itself has become much smaller over the past few decades and no longer holds a grand celebratory presence in Utica. At the event, which is no longer held at the Hotel Utica, little girls dress up in traditional Welsh costumes and the women sell loaves of *bara breith*. The master of ceremonies tells bad Welsh jokes and the evening includes some form of musical entertainment, although not necessarily Welsh in nature. One year, my brother's college a cappella group performed at the event; in 2007, there was a barbershop quartet. St. David's Day was still a big deal in Utica, but the celebrations had slowed significantly from what they once were.

Part of the reason I decided to study abroad in Bath during the spring semester and not the fall was because St. David's Day fell in the spring. I knew how big a holiday St. David's Day once was in Utica, and wanted to see how it was celebrated by the Welsh in

Wales. I checked my calendar early in the semester and found that it fell on a Thursday that year. Luckily, I had no classes on Thursdays and Cardiff was only a 90-minute train ride away. I bought my train tickets weeks in advance and invited my friend Laura along since she also had the day off from classes. Laura was not Welsh at all, but she was curious to explore the city of Cardiff.

On the morning of March 1, I turned the daffodil pin over in my hands as the Welsh countryside rolled by my train window. I had heard that people pin daffodils to their shirts in Wales on St. David's Day to show their Welsh pride, and thought I might do the same. The daffodil is the national flower of Wales and an especially recognizable emblem of the culture in the United States. Thinking back to my conversations with Roighen and Nia, I debated whether or not I should wear the daffodil on St. David's Day. Compared to them, I was hardly Welsh at all. At home, I would have been going all out to flaunt my Welshness on March 1, but now that I would actually be in Wales, I was at a loss as to how I should act.

A little after 10:30 a.m. on March 1, our train pulled into Cardiff Central Station and Laura and I consulted the maps we had printed off the night before. As we left the station, women were positioned at each of the exits with cardboard boxes holding daffodil pins like the one stashed in my purse.

"Ohh, I want a daffodil!" said Laura. She approached one of the women and called over her shoulder to see if I wanted one as well.

"I got one!" I said.

“What are the daffodils for?” she asked me, returning with the flower tucked in her curls.

“It’s to show that you’re Welsh.”

“Oh, I’m not Welsh, though,” she said.

I looked around at the people busily rushing in and out of the train station. There were daffodils everywhere. “I think everyone is Welsh today,” I said, and I dug the daffodil out of my purse to pin it on my shirt.

I had been to Cardiff nine years before when my family visited Wales, but I had forgotten much of that trip. I was only eleven years old then, and did not realize the significance of the places we were visiting. As Laura and I followed St. Mary’s Street from the train station toward downtown Cardiff, a rush of familiarity passed over me. It was not the streets or the buildings that made me feel at home; it was the flags. Dozens of Welsh flags hung from flagpoles lining the streets, their bright red dragons with arrowed tongues pointing to the sky on a green and white background. It was the same flag that flew outside my house in Clinton during the month of March; that stood at the fronts of churches in Utica; that was saluted before *gymanfas* all over the United States. I had seen Welsh flags in Wales before, but never to this extent. The street was a tunnel of Welsh patriotism, leading to Cardiff Castle at the end.

The castle walls towered over us as Laura and I reached the end of St. Mary’s Street and entered the heart of Cardiff. We paid for our tickets at the entrance to the castle, and once inside, we were met with an oasis of green. The castle walls enclosed a large grassy area, and in the middle was a long gravel path leading up to the keep. The irregular tower of stones stood perched on a manmade grassy mound and peered over the rapidly urbanizing

city below. At the top of the structure, a large Welsh flag flew proudly against a bright blue sky. I stood at the foot of the gravel path memorizing the exact combination of sky and stones and shadows so that I would never forget the image.

“I think there are audio guides over this way,” Laura said. I turned from the castle to see her pointing at a wooden staircase leading up to a doorway in the stone walls. As much as I wanted to turn back around and stare at the keep for a few more minutes, I followed her to the staircase. At the top, we found a room with exhibits relating to the history of the castle and a closet bulging with medieval outfits. We still had over an hour until the St. David’s Day parade was set to begin, so we dug into the rack of clothes. I donned a flowing pink medieval dress that was much too small for me and Laura tried on one that was purple. Over the dresses, we pulled on metal helmets and pieces of chain mail. We must have looked ridiculous, but the sheer novelty of wearing period clothes in a castle—a real 11th century castle—was enough to chase away any feelings of embarrassment. As Americans, where places like the Gettysburg battlefields and Eisenhower’s old farmhouse conjured feelings of antiquity, we were thrilled to play dress-up in a medieval castle.

“That’s a good look,” said an employee, pointing to a satin fur-lined stole I had just added to my outfit.

“You like it?” I asked.

Laura and I twirled our dresses and watched the movement of the fluorescent lights overhead reflected in the shiny material. I asked the museum employee if he was going to get off work to watch the parade later.

“What parade?” he asked.

“The St. David’s Day parade...”

“Oh, we have one of those?”

I couldn't tell if he was joking or not. I had been waiting years to see the St. David's Day parade in Cardiff, and this person who was probably 100% Welsh had no idea the event even existed.

“Maybe it'll go by the window,” he shrugged, referring to a tiny screened-off opening in the castle wall behind his desk.

“Liz, look! Puppets!” Laura said from across the room. She had found a large wooden chest pushed up against the back wall that was home to several puppets in medieval attire. We shed our costumes and dug into the box, ready to put on our own miniature production of “Measure for Measure,” a play we had just seen performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford-upon-Avon a few weeks before. What better backdrop for a Shakespeare performance was there than a castle?

“Ay, but to die, and go we know not where,” Laura squealed, waving her puppet's stocky arms. “To lie in cold obstruction, something something, I don't want to die!”

We ran through what we remembered of the scenes, poorly misquoting lines of dialogue among the robed cast of puppets, and a few other castle employees wandered into the room and sat down in front of us to watch the show. After we had finished with a bow and put our actors safely away in their wooden box, we left to have a look around the castle walls before the parade began. On our way out of the room, one of the employees muttered to the man in charge of the audio guides, “They've got to be Americans,” and we pretended not to hear. Was it our accents that gave us away, or our genuine excitement about being in a castle? Our daffodils were pinned securely to our shirts, but on the inside, our thoughts were still narrated in an eager American voice.

Leaving the castle walls, we took the gravel path to the base of the keep and climbed the ancient spiraling staircase inside. At the top, we took in the magnificent view of Cardiff sprawled out before us. We had not seen much of the city yet, besides the street that led us from the train station to the castle, so we were excited to check out some of the other roads and buildings later in the day. I knew that Cardiff was a major city of Wales, but I was still surprised at how blatantly urban it looked. The horizon was all gray and beige buildings jutting up into the cloudless sky. It was pretty, as far as a city skyline can be, but it looked so...American. This was not the image of Wales I had on file in my mind. There were no sheep-covered hills or thatched-roof cottages. I was standing on the one landmark of the city that looked distinctly Welsh—the castle—and all around me was the underwhelming familiarity of office buildings.

Leaving the castle, we saw people had started to line the roads for the parade. Across the street, a little boy and girl were dressed in matching bright red sweatshirts with “WALES” embroidered across the front. They each held miniature Welsh flags, and behind them stood their mother, holding a large blow-up daffodil beneath her arm. Further down the road, I saw a man dressed in green wearing a yellow headdress. It took a minute to register, but it soon dawned on me that he was dressed as a daffodil. The more I looked, the more I saw the little dots of the yellow flowers attached to lapels or tucked behind ears. They were everywhere—tiny reminders of the heritage they represented. The more daffodils I saw, the less self-conscious I was about wearing my own.

Laura and I stood on the curb as the costumes poured past us. The first character was St. David himself, clothed in a brown robe with a daffodil over his heart. *Our Welsh Heritage* gives a description of St. David:

Dewi Sant (as the Welsh call St. David) was one of the influential monks of the sixth century, the founder and bishop-abbot of the See of St. David's, then called Menevia (the latinized form of the Welsh Mynyw by which it now became known). A descendent of the Royal House of Gwynedd, the year of his birth is uncertain, possibly 520 A.D. in Pembrokeshire, but the date of his death is assumed to be March 1, 589.

The St. David of the parade had a full gray beard and a long wooden staff, and reminded me of Gandalf from *The Lord of the Rings*. On either side of him were children in red rugby shirts carrying Welsh flags. Behind them was a fleet of bagpipers, all wearing dark green vests. Following the bagpipers were rows of people carrying full-sized Welsh flags and cheering for Wales. In between the larger groups of marchers, people were scattered that did not appear to belong to any group but were marching just because they could. Women dressed in traditional costumes with tall black hats, checkered shawls and white lace aprons marched by, waving to the crowds as they passed. Several men played folk tunes on their fiddles as they walked and a man with a funny umbrella and a top hat danced down the street, his shoes clacking against the pavement.

This was nothing like any of the parades I had seen at home, where the main feature was often a float for the Clinton Figure Skating Club or a line of honking fire trucks. If we ever had musicians in our parades, they came in the form of a slouching marching band, never an individual fiddler or group of droning bagpipers. And if someone were to dress up in a traditional American costume—a Thanksgiving Pilgrim, perhaps?—they would be the spectacle of the parade. Here, in Wales, traditional costumes were normal and expected.

“What *is* this?” Laura asked.

I shook my head, mesmerized by the scene that moved before me.

“I have no idea,” I said.

One man held up a sign that read “Walking Gallery” and was followed by five or six people with paintings strapped to their bodies. Dancers in red snaked through the street imitating the Welsh dragon like something I might expect to see at a Chinese New Year’s parade, and crowds of school children in red rugby shirts with dragons painted on their cheeks bounced down the street chanting “Wa-ales! Wa-ales!” with fists raised to the sky as if cheering for their favorite team.

Sprinkled among the more stereotypical portrayals of Welshness were two large groups of marchers that did not look Welsh at all. The first group was made up of men dressed in crisp white shirts and black pants, and women in elaborate brightly-colored dresses that poufed out at the bottom and begged to be danced in. The women, all dark-haired, wore silver tiaras in their hair, which was done up in intricate twists and swirls. Their faces had a distinct look to them and I wondered which Asian nation their ancestors had come from.

As the group approached, I read the banner held proudly in front of them: “Filipino Community in Cardiff.” There was a graphic of two flags—one Welsh and the other Filipino—over the motto, “Happy to Serve.” Behind them was another group dressed in similar attire that carried a banner reading “Wales Nepalese Community, Cardiff – Established Aug. 2009.” They marched by proudly waving their Welsh flags with big smiles. These ethnic communities, originally from distant lands, had claimed Wales as their home. They were living permanently in Wales and had adopted the Welsh customs and traditions as their own. So were these people more Welsh than me? Their ancestors may not have been here long ago, like mine were, but they were residents of Wales here and now, and maybe that counted for more.

When the parade had finished, Laura and I wandered down more streets of the city until we found a small St. David's Day market. Each booth showcased another symbol of the Welsh culture: one sold flags, one had crates of daffodils, and another advertised Welsh cakes—small scone-like cookies that were always served at *gymanfas* and Welsh cultural events back home. In one of the tents, a woman dressed in a traditional costume sat on a wooden chair and leaned into an elegantly-carved harp as her fingers touched the strings. The familiar twinkle of Celtic music lifted from the tent as the woman played, her eyes closed and lips lifting at the corners in quiet contentment. I watched the woman curiously—she was a perfectly packaged bundle of Welshness, propped up on display for one day and one day only.

Outside of St. David's Day, these quintessential emblems of Welsh patriotism—the daffodils, Welsh cakes, dragons, and harpists—had little role in the true culture of Wales. In America, it was the same way. We bought sparklers and Old Navy flag t-shirts for the Fourth of July. We drew hand turkeys and made pumpkin pie for Thanksgiving dinner. In Wales and in America, these symbols were only brought out on special occasions and leaned on as something palpable to represent the vague concepts of national heritage and identity. The real Wales was a blend of backgrounds and traditions. It varied across time periods and localities, and meant different things to different people. The Wales of the 1800s that I clung to through my ancestral ties was just a fragment of a culture that was constantly evolving.

Laura and I left the market and followed the street signs through the city to Cardiff Bay, a harbor located a 20-minute walk away and listed on travel websites as a must-see location in Cardiff. We walked along the pier and poked inside some of the shops and

buildings in the area. In our wandering, we came across a grand structure with three lines of words covering the front of the building. Each letter was six feet tall and formed of stained glass. The words read:

CREU·GWIR·IN·THESE·STONES

FEL·GWYDR·HORIZONS

O·FFWRNAIS·AWEN·SING

I had heard about this building before; it was the Wales Millennium Centre, an arts center that opened in 2004 and housed the national orchestra as well as opera, dance, theatre and literature companies.

I remembered reading online that the words covering the front of the edifice were written by the Welsh poet, Gwyneth Lewis, who resided in Cardiff. I could not read the Welsh half, but was impressed by how the five simple English words conveyed so much that pertained to Welsh identity: “In these stones horizons sing.” “Stones” made me think of castles, history, nature, permanence; “horizons” conjured images of the sun, the future, cycles, and changes; and “sing,” well, the Welsh have always been known for their singing. In a class on Britain in the Middle Ages that I was taking in Bath, we had just read an excerpt of “The Description of Wales,” where Gerald of Wales recounts the Welsh and their singing in 1194: “When they come together to make music, the Welsh sing their traditional songs, not in unison, as is done elsewhere, but in parts, in many modes and modulations...What is even more remarkable, small children sing in parts, and tiny babies do so, too, from the moment they stop screaming and first begin to sing.” Singing was a significant part of life in Wales: rugby and football games always began with singing, there

were choirs in every town, and children were encouraged to compete in local and national singing competitions.

Gwyneth Lewis sought to capture the prominence of music within the Welsh culture with those five simple words. She later explained her word choice on her website: “The stones inside the theatre literally sing with opera, musicals and orchestral music, and I wanted to convey the sense of an international space created by the art of music.” The Welsh words, which translate to “Creating truth like glass from inspiration's furnace,” speak to creativity and art as a whole, which still acknowledges the importance of music. The English words were not simply a translation of the Welsh; they had their own meaning and separate identity.

By using both Welsh and English on the building, Lewis identified another significant component of the Welsh culture: language. The way the words appeared on the structure, Welsh lines blending into English, mirrored the role of the two languages in Cardiff and in Wales. Lewis was raised in a Welsh-speaking home and hardly ever spoke English until she went away to university at eighteen. Welsh was considered a minority language within its country of origin, and was only spoken by about twenty percent of the population. While most of the street signs and place names were displayed in both English and Welsh throughout the city, I did not hear a word of the native tongue spoken in Cardiff while I was there. It was clear that English was the predominant language, and I knew this was true in most of the cities and towns in Wales.

Only a few communities remained where the primary mode of interaction was Welsh, and in those communities, the language was considered an essential component of Welsh identity. So what did that mean for all the residents in the rest of Wales who could

not speak a word of Welsh? Were they any less Welsh than those who spoke the language? What about Dylan Thomas, who was known as the greatest poet to come out of Wales, yet was discouraged from learning Welsh as a child and wrote exclusively in English? These questions and more filled my mind as Laura and I left the streets of Cardiff and boarded a train back to Bath. My first adventure in Wales was complete, and in just a few weeks, I would get to experience a different part of the country—a place where sheep outnumbered people, stars lit the sky, and not a word of English was whispered in the streets.

Village by the Sea

There is no present in Wales,
And no future;
There is only the past,
Brittle with relics.

—R. S. Thomas, “Welsh Landscape”

The month after my trip to Cardiff, I again found myself on a train to Wales. This time, I was venturing up north, to the place where my direct ancestors once lived. I had never met the relatives I would be staying with—Eirlys and Griff—but we had communicated a few times over e-mail in the months leading up to my semester in the U.K., and my parents had stayed with them when they visited Wales the year before. My dad explained to me that Eirlys was in some way related to my great-great-great-grandfather, Daniel Williams, the father of John S. When I first contacted her about my hopes to visit her and her family in North Wales during my semester abroad, she immediately thought of my link to John S. and his family who lived at Aberdaron in a cottage called “Grepach.” She wrote back enthusiastically:

Helo Liz. It's great to hear from you. My family and I would love to have you here in Wales. I cannot help myself hearing the words my great-grandmother, Mary, John Solomon's sister, would be uttering on hearing that John's great-great-granddaughter and I were to meet.

Her simple response caught me off guard – I had not expected her to feel such a living connection to the relatives I had segmented in my mind as occupants of a long-gone place and time. Even more ironically, I had never thought of myself as John S.'s great-great-

granddaughter, but only that he was my great-great-grandfather. Not only did he have a significance to me—I had a significance to him, and I would soon be setting off to discover exactly what that meant.

The connection between Eirlys's immediate family and mine was discovered by chance. Eirlys had been retired for some time and had picked up genealogy as a hobby, sort of like Helen's character in *The Colour of Grass*, the novel I had read by Nia Williams before meeting her in Oxford. In digging into her ancestry, Eirlys discovered that two of the children raised at Grepach had left Wales for America in the late 1800s, and one of those children was John S. She knew that John S. had had a son and a grandson both by the name of Jay Williams, and through a Google search, she found a man with that name who taught religious studies at Hamilton College in Clinton, New York. Eirlys sent my grandfather an e-mail explaining their proposed connection, and he knew exactly who she was from the stories he heard as a child regarding his Welsh heritage. He had never met his father, who died at age 35 before he was born, but the stories had been passed on to his older brother before their father's death.

Until Eirlys contacted my grandfather, we were only in contact with one other relative from Wales, a distant cousin named Lona. Similar to Eirlys's blind efforts in contacting my grandfather over e-mail, my grandfather got in touch with Lona's relatives long ago by a stroke of luck. He remembered hearing about a distant relative named Laura Williams who lived in North Wales, and he wondered if she might still reside there. Knowing nothing more than her name and her village, he sent a letter introducing himself and explaining their proposed connection.

Miraculously, the correct Laura Williams received the letter and knew exactly who my grandfather was and how he was related to the family. They got in further contact in the coming years and she eventually flew over to the United States to visit my grandfather and his family. My grandfather picked her up from the airport in Ottawa and she stayed in the States for a month. It was not only the first time she had been out of Wales, but it was also the first time she had slept outside of her own village. Just like the shock John S. must have felt upon arriving in America for the first time in 1886, Laura also experienced anxiety upon her arrival.

Through Laura, my grandfather was put in touch with her granddaughter, Lona Patel, who was living in Montreal and would later move to Buffalo, New York for a few years. Lona grew up in Aberdaron and was fluent in Welsh. Her husband's native language was Punjabi, and their children were raised speaking French while they lived in Montreal. If anyone knew about the complications of defining ethnic identity, it was Lona. She and her family had since moved back to the United Kingdom and were residing just outside of London when I contacted her at the beginning of the semester.

On the weekend before my trip to Aberdaron, I sat in the kitchen of Lona's house with my fingers warming around a cup of tea. I had spent all day with her and her husband, Parbhu, exploring the English seaside town of Brighton—we walked along the wooden carnival-themed pier, had ice cream on the beach, poked into candle shops tucked down twisting lanes, ate fish and chips in a classic British pub, and wandered through King George IV's pavilion with wide eyes glued to ceilings that dripped with swirling gold. I felt like I was on just another family vacation with Mom and Dad, doing all the typical touristy

things and making sure to sneak in some history along the way. If it weren't for the differences in our physical appearance—Parbhu was Indian, and both he and Lona were inches shorter than me—people might have thought we were one happy family.

And in a way, we were. The earl grey tea still hot on my tongue, I leaned in over the kitchen table to look at the documents that Lona had dug out from the closet. Between us was a piece of paper covered from top to bottom in a web of names in capital letters and connecting lines between them. This was the family tree that Eirlys had mailed to Lona in the months after discovering their shared relation. My dad had procured a copy of the same family tree and had shown it to me before I left New York, attempting to illustrate for me exactly how we were all connected.

“Here it is...Laura,” Lona said, her glasses pushed onto her nose and eyes squinting at the letters. She pointed to the name and I could see that Laura was one of the ten children of Daniel and Jane Williams, my great-great-great-grandparents.

“No, no, maybe it was David,” she said, moving further down the page to David's family line. As I looked at all the names, color-coded by generation, I saw several that appeared over and over again: Jane, Elizabeth, John, Daniel, Laura. They cycled through the generations, reattaching each time to yet another descendant of the Jane and Daniel who lived in the cottage at Aberdaron. Sure enough, Lona found her name in David's family line, two levels beneath her grandmother Laura.

Under “John Solomon” I saw “Jay Gomer” (my great-grandfather), “Jay Gomer” (my grandfather), and “Jay Gomer” a third time (my dad). And there, beneath my dad's name, was Elizabeth, stuck at the bottom of the page in purple ink along with both of my siblings' names. It looked perfectly in place, caught in the colorful web of overlapping

names and dates and occupations, as if it naturally belonged there—one of many Elizabeths dotting the branches of this extended family tree. The familiar twists and turns of my name as I had printed it thousands of times before stared back at me from every generation, snaking all the way back to the original Elizabeth Williams, who was one of two names at the very top of the page. Elizabeth Williams: the trunk from which all the branches extended; the mother of Daniel and grandmother of John S.; my ancient counterpart. Elizabeth Williams, born in 1811, 180 years before me.

The further down the page I looked, the less Welsh the names sounded. Many of the descendants that stayed in Wales retained traditional Welsh names, but influences of other cultures infiltrated the tree as the branches became more and more extended. In my own family line, there were names like Daryl, Suzanne, and Amy. Lona and her husband had named their children Anil, Suresh, and Tara. Only among the families that remained in Wales did I see such typically Welsh names like those of Eirlys's grandchildren: Morgan Gruffydd, Dafydd Glyn, and Catrin Gwen.

Lona was Welsh—there was no question about that—yet she lived just outside the bustling metropolis of London with a husband who claimed 100% Indian heritage. I wanted to know how she came to terms with her Welsh identity in an environment so dramatically removed from her initial surroundings in rural Wales, where the primary language was Welsh.

“I tried speaking Welsh to Anil when he was first born,” Lona told me. “But it’s so difficult to keep up the language when you don’t have anyone to talk to.”

Her husband did not speak Welsh, so Lona’s efforts were one-sided and ineffective. Her children, who were 50% Welsh (as compared to my measly 12.5%), did not speak their

mother's native language, and never had the opportunity to learn it. From my conversation with Lona that night, I could see the genuine love she held for her homeland. Her eyes twinkled when she talked about Wales and growing up there. Despite the several "homes" she had had in her adult life, Aberdaron was still the place that claimed her heart and kept calling her back.

"My kids loved to go there on holiday when they were younger," she told me, and I pictured her three grown children running freely along the coast of the sea. They would never know what it was like to grow up in the village, or to communicate with the locals in their native tongue, but at least Lona could give her kids a glimpse of her childhood home. They were outsiders, like me. They had never belonged to the land like their mother did, but they still had a strong, unyielding tie to the weathered ground their ancestors once walked.

"I'll bet Eirlys will take you to a quilting mill," Lona said, looking up from the document and taking off her glasses. "Or there's a museum that might be interesting...have you heard of David Lloyd George? The Prime Minister?"

The name sounded familiar, but I wasn't sure why. I knew I should have brushed up on my Welsh history before meeting my Welsh relatives. Lona explained to me that David Lloyd George was Prime Minister of Britain during World War I and was revered in Wales as being the only Welsh Prime Minister of Britain. His native language was Welsh and he campaigned for Wales during his time as Prime Minister and in various other political offices he held throughout his life. A museum was dedicated to him in North Wales, near where I would be staying with Eirlys and Griff the following weekend.

We never made it to the museum, but Eirlys had a jam-packed schedule planned for me during my four-day visit to North Wales. I used the five-hour train ride from Bath to Bangor as a time to catch up on some of the homework I would normally have worked on over the weekend. As excited as I was to travel back to the homeland I had idealized and dreamed of since my childhood, I was still a fulltime college student with Shakespeare plays to analyze, media theories to compare, medieval British history to memorize, and short stories to draft.

On the morning of my trip to North Wales, I stood in the station at Newport (S. Wales) waiting to board my second train of the journey. A male voice with a Welsh accent came over the loudspeaker to announce the destination of the incoming train and I listened carefully to make sure it would bring me to Bangor.

“This is the train to Holyhead, calling at: Cwmbran, Pontypool & New Inn, Abergavenny, Hereford, Ludlow, Craven Arms, Church Stretton, Shrewsbury, Gobowen, Chirk, Ruabon, Wrexham General, Chester, Flint, Prestatyn, Rhyl, Colwyn Bay, Llandudno Junction, Conwy, Penmaenmawr, Llanfairfechan, Bangor, Holyhead.”

I stared at the LED display in the train station as every letter of every name passed across the screen in bright red. If it took that long for the announcer to pronounce each name, I cringed at how long it would take to arrive at each station and wait for passengers to leave and board the train. I lugged my suitcase and backpack onto the train, settled into a seat, unwrapped my scarf and removed my pea coat. It was going to be a long trip, and my final destination was a far cry from the bustling streets of Bath. I had read a description of Aberdaron on the website of St. Hywyn’s, the village church, the night before:

There is a good coach/car park in the middle of the village.

There are two public toilets. One is at the side entrance of the Tŷ Newydd Hotel, at the top of the slipway to the beach and opposite the gate into the churchyard. You can find the other by walking through the gap to the right of the Eleri Stores and turning right along the wall, and then right again to a new white building: the toilets are at the back.

There are 2 Hotels and 2 Cafés in the village where food can be ordered in advance. There are Exhibitions in the Church.

There is a Church Shop selling prayer cards, books, gifts & souvenirs.

The beach is adjacent to the Church and there are good walks and public footpaths in the area.

Please keep to the footpaths, close all gates and respect the local environment.

The words hardly sounded like the description of an entire village. They could have been talking about a beach area or a town square—but a whole village? I thought Clinton was small...this place sounded miniscule. While the train passed through station after station, the passengers around me continuously changed as people boarded and exited the train. Somewhere around Wrexham, a group of seven or eight schoolchildren got on the train. They looked to be about 13 years old, and must not have intended to stay on the train for long because only two of them sat down while the rest stood near the door.

“I don’t know what to do,” said one of the seated girls to her friend. Her blonde hair was pulled into two long braids on either side of her head and her maroon plaid uniform matched those of the other children. “Should I just tell her? I can’t tell her, she’ll absolutely kill me.”

“You have to tell her,” the girl responded. “What if they call your house?”

“I know, I know,” the first girl whined. “But *how* do I tell her?”

I concentrated intently on the book I had been reading and tried not to make my eavesdropping obvious. The accents of the girls captivated me—they were just like many of

the Welsh accents I had heard before, but just a few decibels higher. I realized then that I might not have ever heard a Welsh child's voice before, and I wanted to hear more.

"Why don't you make your mum a cup of tea as soon as you get home and be as sweet as possible, and *then* tell her?" suggested the friend.

"Oh, I don't know. Would that be suspicious?"

"I don't think so. Just be extra nice."

Evidently, the blonde girl had done something wrong at school and was terrified of having to tell her mother about it. The situation echoed instances from my own adolescence, and I felt the blonde girl's pain. Their dilemma differed from my own childhood experiences only in the girls' accents and placement on a train in Wales instead of on a yellow school bus in America. I was shaken out of my eavesdropping by an exclamation from one of the boys still standing by the door to the train.

"Yeah, but all Americans are fat!" he said, and I turned to see him extending his arms before him to circle a large imaginary belly.

"Fat, fat, fat," he repeated, and the boys around him giggled in agreement.

I was familiar with the stereotype of fat Americans, but still found his words offensive, and debated responding to his ignorant comment with something like, "That's absolutely not true" or "You should probably think before making such generalizations"—all uttered in my obvious American accent, of course. But I had no idea how long these schoolchildren would remain with me on the train, and I had no intention of making enemies in the land I was so eager to adopt as my own.

My anger subsided as the boys left the train at the next stop and I silently wished the blonde girl good luck, sad that I would never know the outcome of her confrontation with

her mother. When the train finally arrived at Bangor, I stepped onto the platform with my suitcase and backpack and looked around me. I realized then that I had no idea what Eirlys or her husband looked like. I had at least seen a picture of Lona before arriving at her train station outside London the weekend before. My eyes swept over the few people gathered on the platform in search of a little old Welsh woman ready to claim me as her distant relative. From farther down the platform, a woman with blonde curly hair and a bright pink windbreaker rushed toward me, with an older man and a girl who looked about twelve trailing behind her. My eyes had skipped over her at first—she didn't have white hair or a wool scarf or a purse full of daffodils like I had mentally pictured an old Welsh relative might have.

“Liz?” she asked.

“Yes!” I said, and she pulled me into a hug.

“*Croeso!*” she said. Welcome. “This is Griff,” she said, signaling to the man. He wore a flat cap like the one my brother used to wear with pride as part of his Welsh costume when we were younger.

“Here, let me get your luggage!” he said, extending his arm.

“It’s okay, I got it,” I said.

“No, no, you’re the guest,” he said, pulling the suitcase out of my grip and heaving it onto his shoulder. His words lingered in my ears for just a few extra moments—there was something eerily recognizable about them. They seemed to spiral—each syllable had a circular shape of its own, and when strung together they had a warm sing-song quality that sounded somehow familiar. I wanted to hear him speak again.

“And this is Catrin—she lives next door,” said Eirlys, motioning to the little girl beside her.

Catrin had blonde hair and wore a light blue hoodie and jeans. She smiled up at me with a few faint freckles dotting her cheeks. She reminded me of a younger, lighter-haired version of my sister, and I felt a sudden twinge of homesickness. I followed the three to a dark SUV in the parking lot and Griff opened the trunk to stow my luggage. I went to sit in the back seat but Eirlys said “No, no, you sit in the front with Griff!” and she stepped in front of me to open the door with a big smile. I settled into the front left seat of the truck and Griff pulled out of the station parking lot.

“You must be tired after your trip,” said Eirlys, “Did you have a nice ride?”

I assured her that the ride had been fine and she asked how my family was doing and what my program in Bath was like. Her voice had the same familiar dips and twists as Griff’s, although I hadn’t noticed it when she first spoke. It must have been a regional accent of North Wales—was it possible that I could have remembered such subtle changes in inflection from the last time I came to North Wales, when I was only eleven years old?

“This is the first time we’ve spoken English in six months!” Griff said, nodding his head in pride. My face reflected my amazement. Six months!? Every other experience I had had in Wales so far had been fully in English. Sure, the street signs and train announcements were in both English and Welsh, but I had not actually heard people speaking Welsh around me. Did people up here really use Welsh as their primary form of communication? I knew that many people spoke Welsh in North Wales, but as someone who had never been fully immersed in a non-English speaking environment, I still imagined people would use English to communicate.

Eirlys and Griff lived about an hour and fifteen minutes south of Bangor. We made small talk for the first half hour or so and then settled into the steady hum of the car's movement along the highway. As tired as I was, I wanted to continue the conversation, but was unsure of what to say to these distant relatives so kindly welcoming me into their life—a life that I could have just as likely been a part of had John S. not decided to set sail for America in 1886. I craved to hear their familiar accents break the silence again. I wanted to drink in that sound and feel the warmth of recognition spread over me again. We drove along the quiet roads and I watched the fields go by, just like I had done so many times before on the way back home from my college town of Gettysburg. I had never been on that road before, or in that car, or with those people—but it somehow still felt like I was driving home.

Along the way to Chwillog, the village where Griff and Eirlys lived, we passed through Caernarfon, a small town with the castle where Charles, Prince of Wales, was invested by Queen Elizabeth II in 1969. I remembered visiting the castle with my family in 2003, when my brother and I ran through the castle walls peeking out of the arrow slits and bounding up spiral staircases, fascinated by the mysterious nature of the ancient structure. Griff took a brief detour from the road to drive around the outside of the castle and show me a bit of the town. It was smaller than I remembered, and I noticed that all of the shop signs were in Welsh.

About twenty minutes later, we arrived in the tiny village of Chwillog and maneuvered down a few one-lane country roads until we arrived at Eirlys and Griff's farm. A small one-story house was tucked behind a hedge-lined lane.

“This is our little bungalow!” said Eirlys as we pulled into the gravel driveway. She pointed to a bigger house next door and explained that that was where she and Griff used to live; now, their son and his family lived there. Only then did I make the connection that Catrin was her granddaughter, not just a girl from next door, as she had been introduced. Eirlys showed me to my room and I set down my luggage on the quilted bed.

“This is my little sewing room,” she said, smiling with pride at her sewing machine and evidence of her work throughout the room. I saw a basket at the top of a bookshelf filled with stuffed animals she had knit. The one on top was a mouse dressed in a traditional Welsh costume – complete with apron, shawl and stovepipe hat. It reminded me of the women I had seen marching in the St. David’s Day parade the month before. Here was the outfit again, neatly packaged into a representation of Welshness that people seemed to accept on both sides of the Atlantic.

“I’ll let you unpack,” Eirlys said, and she went into the kitchen to start working on dinner. I unzipped my backpack and pulled out my laptop, hurriedly switching it on and waiting with fingers crossed to see if there was wi-fi.

There wasn’t.

I exhaled in frustration and then felt embarrassed at my stereotypical reaction: the college girl from New York fiddling with her laptop while miles of pristine Welsh countryside lay sprawled outside her window. Closing my computer, I pulled out a folder from my backpack and rechecked the syllabus for my Shakespeare class. Despite the expanse of rural Wales waiting to be explored, I still had to get cracking on an essay that was due the following week. I would not be able to research outside sources without the

internet, but I could at least start pulling scenes and quotes from my copy of “Measure for Measure” in my free time that weekend.

About twenty minutes after I had unpacked my belongings, Eirlys poked her head into my room to tell me supper was ready. We had a light dinner of soup and sandwiches, followed by cups of tea. I expected to spend the rest of the night chatting with Griff and Eirlys about Aberdaron and mutual ancestors, but Eirlys had other plans.

“You’d better get some rest! Tomorrow is going to be very, very busy,” she said.

I smiled at her concern. I was used to busy days. The semester before, I had days at Gettysburg that began with an 8 a.m. class and ended with a 10-midnight shift at the library, with less than an hour of down time throughout the day. I knew busy. But I was the guest and so I consented to turning in for the night early.

And it’s a good thing I did, because the next day was one of the busiest, most exhausting days of my life—both physically and emotionally.

I woke up around 8 a.m. and we were on the road to Aberdaron by 9:30. The distance from Chwillog to Aberdaron is just over 20 miles and it takes approximately forty minutes to get there by car. It would be like driving to York from Gettysburg or driving to Remsen from Clinton—a short afternoon trip. But going to Aberdaron from Chwillog with my relatives was a monumental affair. Eirlys had planned out every sight we had to see, every person we needed to talk to, and every appointment we had to make. We had packed our picnic basket, filled our thermoses with tea, and brought out extra coats and blankets in case it got cold later. I barely remembered going to Aberdaron as a child, and so I was

unsure of what to expect from the trip. Seeing the intense care and planning Eirlys had put into this trip, however, I knew that it was going to be a special and memorable occasion.

We had barely left Chwilog when we made our first stop. The truck inched along a tiny one-lane road in what Eirlys explained to me was known as the Parish of Denio.

“Stop here,” Eirlys said, motioning for Griff to pull over. “Liz and I will get out and have a little look.”

Unfortunately the road was too small to allow for one to “pull over,” so Griff parked the truck in the middle of the road and Eirlys and I got out. I saw a small farm house a bit further down the road, and figured a distant relative must have lived there at one point and I was about to learn about my connection. I waited for Eirlys’s explanation.

“Do you see it?” asked Eirlys, pointing not at the house down the road but to a low stone wall hidden behind leaves and ivy on the side of the road. “See the little outline of a door?” she asked.

I shook my head. All I saw was a crumbling wall.

“It’s here, you see?” she said, tracing her finger along a slight break in the wall.

“Ohhh...I see it,” I said. I saw nothing resembling a door, but was now curious as to the significance of this invisible door.

“These are the remains of the cottage where Daniel lived,” she said. “His mother, Elizabeth, was born here in 1811.”

Elizabeth...she must have been talking about the original Elizabeth Williams, the one I had found at the top of the family tree at Lona’s house the weekend before. I paused to look more closely at the wall. This was the very spot where she lived, two hundred years

earlier. It was still so rural and remote in this area; I wondered how much it had changed since that time.

“Come on, then!” said Griff, leaning out his window. A car was approaching from behind.

“Hold on, I want to get a picture,” said Eirlys, and she pulled out her camera to take a picture of me in front of the wall. Griff got out of the parked truck and approached the driver’s window of the car that had just pulled up behind us. He must have known the driver because the two engaged in a lengthy conversation. Strains of Welsh punctured the air with each of their exclamations. Eirlys took this time to tell me about Daniel, who had grown up at this mysterious house in the wall and lived there until moving to Grepach in 1837. I had no picture in my mind of what Daniel looked like, but I could imagine a small boy running down this dirt road, listening to the birds overhead and taking in the view of rolling farmland surrounding us. Four generations and over a hundred years had passed between the little Welsh boy and me. Would my great-great-great-granddaughter ever stand in this spot and ponder its significance like I was doing?

We finally left the leaf-covered wall and were once again on the road to Aberdaron. After we had been driving for a while, the car approached a hill and Eirlys eagerly sat up in her seat to take in the view around us. As we reached the crest of the hill, she let out a dramatic sigh.

“Oh, every time we come over this little hill, I feel just like I’m coming home,” she said.

There was that word again—little. Why was everything “little” to Eirlys? Could it be that she saw things on a smaller scale than I did? I was thousands of miles away from home,

after all. I had no trouble exploring big cities like New York, Paris, or London. I had always been encouraged to pursue big things—a flight across the Atlantic, climbing the Eiffel Tower, riding the London Eye. In comparison to the perceived “bigness” of those experiences, a trip to rural North Wales did seem a bit...little. While I was used to five-hour trips (driving from Clinton to Gettysburg takes about five and a half hours on a clear day), traveling from one end of Wales to the other seemed like a major excursion to the Welsh. It was a small country in terms of area—roughly the size of New Jersey—but the varied cultural differences throughout made it seem a lot larger. I thought back to how Laura had never slept outside of her own bed before coming to America to visit my grandfather back in the 1980s. For her, and also for John S., leaving the tiny country of Wales behind for the hugeness of America must have been an unbelievably daunting task.

I watched the tiny houses go past my window and soon the village of Aberdaron came into view. I never would have said it out loud to Eirlys, but something deep inside of me felt like I was coming home too. We came down the hill into the village and Griff pulled into the parking lot of a building with a school bus parked out front. After some words back and forth in Welsh with Griff, it was decided that he would go park the car and meet up with us later. Eirlys and I got out of the car and she explained to me that the building in front of us was the primary school of Aberdaron.

“Oh, that’s nice!” I said, confused as to why we had been dropped off in the school parking lot of all places. Instead of continuing on to the sidewalk that would lead us downtown, Eirlys walked toward the building—we were going inside! She excitedly explained to me how she had asked the schoolmaster earlier if we could stop by the school for a bit to give me an idea of what a Welsh school was like. I was not expecting to visit a

primary school on my trip to Aberdaron—if I had relatives from out of town visiting Clinton for the first time, I would never think to bring them to the elementary school—but Eirlys was my tour guide for the day, so I went along with the plan and followed her into the school.

We opened the door and two little boys were sitting in chairs with books. On seeing Eirlys, they greeted her in Welsh and she said words back to them. I looked around at the brightly colored room, searching for some sort of receptionist or school secretary, but saw no one. The boys looked up at me with wide eyes and I smiled back, unsure of what kind of introduction Eirlys had just given them. They looked at each other briefly, then turned around and ran into the next room. Were they running from me? Could they sense that I did not belong there?

“They’re going to get the schoolmaster,” Eirlys said.

So I hadn’t scared them off. As we waited for the schoolmaster to arrive, I looked at the colorful walls around the entranceway. It had been a long time since I had set foot in an elementary school. Bolded words on the walls labeled pictures of school supplies and other common objects. Cardboard cut-outs of numbers hung from the ceiling with labels on each one. It looked just like an elementary school might look like back in the States, except for one thing.

Everything was in Welsh.

There was not a word of English anywhere! Every bolded word on the walls was in Welsh. All of the signs and display boards were entirely in Welsh. I did not see a single word I recognized.

Soon the two boys returned with a man who looked to be in his forties. He was wearing a sweatshirt, khakis and sneakers. Was he the gym teacher? There was no way this building had a gymnasium—it was tiny.

“Welcome,” he said, extending his hand to me.

This was the “schoolmaster.”

“Come on in!” he said. “The kids are having free time now. They’d love to meet you.” I could tell he was only speaking English for my sake. Chances were he hadn’t used English in months, like Griff and Eirllys. I felt embarrassed that he had to switch into another language just to include me.

Eirllys motioned that I go ahead of her and follow the schoolmaster into the next room. As we entered the main room, we were caught in a whirlwind of movement. Two little girls in pigtails packed sand into a lime green pail. A group of boys gathered around a computer playing a game with space-like sound effects. A girl with a long blonde braid watched her plastic eggs frying on a miniature stove, a pink spatula intensely raised in her tiny fist. Around the room, children were laughing, building, singing, elbowing, sniffing, jumping, reading, drawing...all of this was happening simultaneously and all of this was happening in Welsh.

“Sit here and one of the girls will read to you,” said the schoolmaster, pulling out a tiny red chair for me to sit on. I sat down and turned to watch him and Eirllys go into the next room, leaving me alone in the swirl of unintelligible squeals and murmurs. A girl who looked to be ten or eleven emerged from the blur and pulled out the chair next to mine. She had long brown hair and smiled at me shyly. I wondered if she knew why I was there, or where I was from. She pulled out a picture book and set it on the table in front of us.

Opening the book, she began to read. Her voice was soft at first, but as she turned the pages, her voice grew louder and more confident. I could tell she was proud of herself for reading to me, and she occasionally glanced up at me as if she were seeking my approval. I smiled back at her and she continued with the story, which was of course entirely in Welsh.

She reminded me of myself as a child, always trying to gain that quiet approval of the grown-ups. I could picture myself running home to tell my mom, “I read to a visitor at school today!” The girl reached the end of the book and smiled up at me in response to the story’s humorous ending. I wanted so badly to communicate with this girl in something other than body language—to tell her how good a job she did reading to me and that I loved the story. I wanted to praise her, but did not have the words. I wanted to love the story, but did not understand a word of it.

“Thank you,” I said, and she picked up the book and ran back to her friends, who had all been watching the interaction from the other side of the room.

Once again, I was alone in the room surrounded on all sides by a language I did not understand. I got up from the table and went through the door I had watched Eirlys leave through earlier. That brought me into a smaller room where pre-schoolers were playing. I found Eirlys there, talking with a teacher who looked to be in her thirties with dark brown hair and a kind face. A large cardboard castle stood in one corner of the room and little girls ducked in and out of it with plastic cookies they had just finished “baking.” I peered over the edge of the castle and saw a miniature table and chairs set up inside.

“They’re in the middle of their castle unit,” the teacher said.

Eirlys pointed out each of the children to me, explaining who they were and where they lived and how they were related to other people she knew in the village. I was amazed

at how well she knew these children – she didn't even live in Aberdaron, and yet she had remained part of their community. She addressed one of the little girls in Welsh and asked her a question. The girl could not have been more than four years old, but she responded enthusiastically.

“Her mum will be playing accordion in the concert tonight!” Eirlys translated.

We would be returning to the school later that night for a community concert, held in the cafeteria/gymnasium/auditorium that was adjacent to the main room. Eirlys and I said good-bye to the teacher and the schoolmaster, and left the school to meet up with Griff.

Once outside the building, we walked up the road to the caravan site where Griff had parked the truck and was waiting for us. Before coming to Wales, the term “caravan” brought to mind a train of camels trekking through the desert, their backs packed with colorful luggage and turbaned riders. In the U.K., “caravan” is the term used for a small motorhome or RV that families camp in on vacations. As we approached the caravan site, Eirlys showed me the lot where she and Griff camp their caravan in the summers when they visit Aberdaron for a few weeks on holiday. I could imagine visiting Aberdaron for the day, but I had never considered that people might like to stay there for weeks at a time. It was a tiny town with barely more than a restaurant, a gift shop, a hotel and a church. It had a beautiful rocky shore overlooking the ocean, but not much else. How would they entertain themselves for weeks?

“I just love staying in Aberdaron,” Eirlys said. “Sometimes I take a little walk by the water, or just sit in the village and talk to the people. This is my favorite place.”

A little walk, I repeated to myself. So this was the quiet satisfaction that a small place like Wales could provide. No one ever talks of “taking a little walk” through New York City

or other big metropolises. Everything in the city is hurried and rushed. The smoky streets are constantly flashing and honking in twelve different languages and it would be physically impossible to take a peaceful stroll down 7th Avenue. So many people look to big cities as the place where dreams come true, but for Eirlys, I could tell that Aberdaron—in all its “littleness”—was enough to make her happy.

We found Griff reading a newspaper in his truck, and Eirlys got back in the car for our next destination: the house where Jane Williams, my great-great-great-grandmother, grew up. To get there, we had to navigate down more six-foot-wide country lanes that twisted through the sheep-dotted Welsh farmland. After getting lost at least twice, we finally came to the end of a driveway in the absolute middle of nowhere. A sign on the gate at the bottom of the driveway read “Tyn Gamdda.”

“This must be it!” said Eirlys. “Shall we have a look?”

Griff parked the truck at the end of the driveway and Eirlys and I followed two wheel-rutted tracks up to the house. A farmer was resting by some machinery at the top of the driveway and watched us approaching. He was dressed in worn overalls and a heavy brown coat. I imagined he had not had visitors trudging up his driveway in a long time.

As we came closer, Eirlys called out a friendly Welsh greeting to the man. He was silent until we came closer. She explained to him that we were descendants of Daniel Williams of Grepach and he broke into a smile of recognition. He knew exactly who we were, despite the decades and generations separating us.

“*Croeso*,” he said. Welcome.

Eirlys explained who I was and he extended his hand to me.

“Welcome back,” he said, and the words echoed in my mind.

Eirlys, cheerful as ever, engaged the man in a lengthy conversation about where our ancestors ended up and how the land had changed. I appreciated that they switched into English to include me in the conversation, even though I did not have much to contribute.

“Please, have a look around,” he said, sweeping his arm around the length of his property. Eirlys and I followed a path toward the house. She explained to me that Jane had lived there as a housemaid before marrying Daniel Williams and moving to Grepach, the cottage where she would raise ten children, one of whom was John S. Eirlys took a picture of me in front of the house and we said good-bye to the farmer. He leaned back against the machinery and watched us leave, plodding down the long dirt path to where the truck was parked.

As Eirlys and I climbed back into the vehicle, Griff put down his newspaper and turned into the back seat to confirm our next destination with his wife.

“To Grepach?” he asked.

“Yes!” said Eirlys, beaming.

In the months leading up to my trip to Aberdaron, Grepach was one of the few locations I could visualize. A photograph of the tiny cottage sat in a picture frame in my family room and the place had been idealized in my family for as long as I could remember. The name “Grepach” had consistently floated in and out of family lore and my dad made sure we all learned the history of the people who lived there when we were growing up. I vaguely remembered the site from when we visited in 2003, but was ready to see the family homestead with new eyes. The story of Daniel and Jane and John S. was no longer some ancient tale that came out every once in a while in conversation at my grandparents’ house. There was a real family with real descendents still intimately attached to the land and the

village surrounding Grepach. The fact that the cottage was still standing represented the stability of a family that had maintained a presence in the same area for several lifetimes.

As we came up the steep gravelly driveway, the cottage came into view behind a row of low hedges. It looked like two or three cottages pushed together, with multiple roofs sloping up into the clear blue sky above.

“We’re here!” Eirllys said, releasing a sigh. As we climbed the hill to the end of the driveway, I saw there was a gate blocking us from driving any further. I looked ahead of us to the small garage next to the house. There was no car in sight—the owners must not have been home. To my surprise, Eirllys jumped out of the back seat of the truck and opened the gate, stepping aside to let Griff drive through. The driveway blended into grass and we pulled off to a patch of grass on the right side of the house. I looked behind us at the closed gate separating us from the road, and at the cottage sitting in silence with its perfectly trimmed hedges and a small wooden bench by the front door. We were definitely standing in someone’s backyard. Despite all the people Eirllys knew in Aberdaron, she was not close with the current owners of Grepach, and so we awkwardly observed the cottage from a distance of about 50 feet.

A dark green sign near the door had painted white letters that read: “GREPACH.” This was the right house, but it was not at all the ancient one-room cottage I had expected it to be. Someone lived there, today, in 2012. For all I knew, there might have been a flat-screen TV and a blinking refrigerator and maybe even *beanbag chairs* behind those stone white walls. I was finally there—physically standing, not just looking at a photo—at the site of the ancestral homestead. Grepach was the location of so much familial significance, and yet it was the one place I could not get closer to or actually touch.

“There it is,” said Eirlys, smiling. She pointed to the middle section of the house and explained to me that the original cottage was only a fragment of the structure standing before us. It had been expanded on over the years and all that remained of the original building were a few stone walls within the house. The three of us stood against the truck and took in the sight of the little cottage on the hill overlooking the rest of Aberdaron and the sprawling coastline below. The wind had picked up by this point, and whipped against my face.

“Shall we have some lunch, then?” Eirlys asked. We followed her to the back of the truck where the picnic basket was packed away. She procured sandwiches and cups of tea for each of us. We ate quickly, squinting in the wind and hoping the owners did not come home in the middle of our picnic on their lawn. It felt strange rushing to finish our sandwiches and leave the place that was so revered by my family and memorialized in family lore. When I had thought about visiting Grepach on the train ride up from Bath, I had visualized myself lying on the grass outside the cottage and basking in the sunlight that poured down its sloping roof. I pictured myself placing both my palms against the rough exterior of the cottage and relishing each breath of the air my ancestors once breathed. Instead, I was huddled behind my relatives’ truck trying to wolf down my lunch before two headlights came into view and signaled that we were not welcome in that place. The air grew colder and soon I was shivering, despite my attempts at layering in a sweater, scarf and pea coat. Griff took off his jacket and put it around my shoulders.

“Beautiful here, isn’t it?” he said.

There was that accent again. I had started to get used to it, and I didn’t like that. I wanted to feel that same intense longing that I had experienced when I first heard Griff

Speak at the train station back in Bangor. The wind howled on the top of the hill and none of us spoke. We were cold and uncomfortable and trespassing on someone else's lawn. It was nothing like the warm, fulfilling scene I had pictured on the train. Not wanting to admit my eagerness to leave the ancestral homestead, I waited for Eirlys to signal that the picnic was over.

"Well then, we'd better get going. We have an appointment at 2:00!" she said.

I was the first one back in the car and I pulled my coat closer around me as we left the property of Grepach and started down the hill toward Aberdaron. For the first time that day, we were en route to a place that none of us had been to before. Eirlys had arranged for two members of the County Council to give us a tour of two cottages that were being worked on. One was being restored to what it would have been like in the 1800s, and the other was being modernized so that someone could live in it today. She wanted me to see what the inside of a cottage might have looked like during Daniel and Jane's lifetime. If I could not physically enter Grepach, I could at least get an idea of what it might have looked like inside when my ancestors lived there.

We headed back into the downtown area of Aberdaron and emerged on another hill that ran out of the village. We had just enough time to get to the cottages by 2:00, but unfortunately, Eirlys did not know exactly where the cottages were located. The only directions she had received from the council members were to turn right at a certain church and continue down the road. It might have helped if we knew where the church was located...but then again, how many churches could there have been in this rural area?

After driving through miles of identically green and sheep-covered farmland, it was clear that neither Griff nor Eirlys knew where we were going. We finally stopped by a house on the side of the road, where an old man was sitting out on his front porch. Griff got out of the truck and killed the engine. The man came down the steps of the small tan house to meet him in the driveway, and they spoke to each other in Welsh. I assumed Griff was asking if the man knew where the cottages were located. Seeing the two engage in conversation, Eirlys hopped out of the back seat to join them. The three spoke to each other for a full fifteen minutes as I sat in the passenger seat without a clue as to what they were saying.

Up until that point, Griff and Eirlys had hardly spoken any Welsh around me. Now, secluded inside the car, I observed them interact with the man in a completely unscripted way. They looked so comfortable and relaxed talking to this man they had just met. It was as if they shared an unspoken understanding—something a foreigner like me could observe from a distance but not fully comprehend. The scene played out in front of me through the dashboard window: I watched as they pointed one way and then the other and took out their phones and dialed numbers and shook their heads and squinted their eyes into the distance, all without a word of English.

Eventually the three must have come to some conclusion because Griff and Eirlys piled back into the car and we started down the road in the opposite direction. Soon enough, we came to a church, turned right, and saw two cars parked on the side of the road. We were only about ten minutes late.

The two council members were waiting for us by the side of the road. One was a woman who looked to be in her late twenties; the other was a man in his thirties with a

camera around his neck. Eirlys introduced me as her relative from New York and they switched into English to welcome me. We followed the two council members down a steep path off the side of the road. The rock-lined dirt path wound around a small house and through a field toward a wooded area. Above the tall grass on either side of the path, I could barely make out the coast of the sea in the distance. The man with the camera led the way and behind him were Griff and the younger woman. Although they were several yards in front of us, I could hear the rise and fall of their friendly conversation. The words they spoke were in Welsh, but their body language was familiar to me: I could picture my father or grandfather making the same kind of small talk with the same subtle hand gestures on a wooded path in New York.

After about half a mile, we came upon two cottages tucked away in the field. A sign identified the cottages as property of the County Council, and two men in hard hats were working away on the roof of the first cottage. Our personal tour guides led the way past the “No Unauthorised Access” signs and piles of splintering wood to the inside of the cottage. Eirlys introduced me to the construction workers and they also greeted me in English. The inside of the cottage was miniscule. The main room could not have been more than 10 x 12 feet, and one smaller room was attached to the back.

“Have a look up the chimney,” one of the workers said, motioning to the large brick structure taking up most of one wall. I stepped over a pile of wood and crouched down to the base of the fireplace. Turning my neck, I peeked up the length of the chimney and saw nothing but darkness above. I pulled my head out from under the fireplace and looked up at everyone uncomfortably huddled into the tiny room. I thought my dorm room at Gettysburg College was small, and that was meant for only two people. This was not much

bigger, and it was intended to house a whole family. Was it possible that a family as large as John S.'s could have lived in a space this small? It was no wonder he wanted to leave.

By the time we got back to Aberdaron, it was about four o'clock and we had no plans until dinner. Eirlys suggested we sit down for a cup of coffee in town. After parking the truck in the one parking lot in Aberdaron, we walked over a bridge and past a small inn on our way to Gwesty Tŷ Newydd, the village's main restaurant and hotel. This was my second time in the restaurant that day—we had stopped in earlier that morning to reserve a table for dinner. I could not imagine the need for reservations in such a tiny and isolated village, yet Eirlys assured me it was better to stay on the safe side since there were no other eating options. If we didn't eat at Gwesty Tŷ Newydd, we weren't eating at all.

After warming up to cups of coffee overlooking the coast, the three of us left the restaurant and took a few steps down the street to a tall stone building. On the first floor of the building lived Olwen, an 87-year-old woman whom Eirlys always called on when she visited Aberdaron. Olwen had lived in Aberdaron her entire life and had witnessed its changes throughout the generations. It turns out she was a relative of ours as well—John S. was her grandmother's brother.

"You're more closely related to Olwen than you are to me!" explained Eirlys, as we approached the house. I considered the bizarreness of this connection. It seemed as if everyone I met in the village was in some way related to me or knew exactly who I was. I thought back to earlier that morning, when we stopped by a house on the way to Aberdaron to meet Iris, another relative descended from one of the children at Grepach. She too had known who I was and asked how my parents were doing. The question had startled me—it

was something I might have expected to hear from a family friend in the grocery store at Clinton, not from a woman who lived in a random house on the road to Aberdaron.

We knocked on the door of Olwen's house and a slight old woman answered the door. Her white hair was combed back and a gold necklace was draped over her white turtleneck. She wore a light yellow skirt that looked freshly ironed and her house smelled like vanilla. I wondered if she had dressed up especially for us. She pulled me into a hug as I followed Eirlys and Griff into her living room. Her frail arms stretched around me felt warm and familiar, almost like those of my grandmother when I come home for Thanksgiving dinner after spending months away at college in the fall. I soon found out that Olwen also knew exactly who I was and had met several of my family members in the past. People had come and gone through Aberdaron, but she had always remained there, quietly watching and filing our faces away onto different branches of the family tree.

"We were at Grepach this afternoon," said Eirlys.

The four of us sat in armchairs in the small pastel living room. Old photographs were hung on the walls and propped up on bookcases next to candles that had not been lit in years. A crocheted blanket was draped over the back of my chair. The room was simply decorated, like my grandparents' living room in Clinton, and not an item was out of place. I hoped my boots had not tracked any mud from Grepach or the cottages onto the cream-colored carpet.

"Ah, Grepach," said Olwen. "How was that, then?"

"Windy," I said.

Eirlys told her all about our day, beginning with the trip to the primary school and the house where Jane grew up. The soft wrinkles of Olwen's face formed a smile as she visualized each of the places we had visited.

"We've dinner reservations for six," said Eirlys. "Would you like to join us?"

There was no need to mention which restaurant or figure out transportation. The one restaurant in town was literally twenty yards from her house. We agreed to come back for her a few minutes before six, and the three of us left Olwen's house. Griff went back to the car to read more of his newspaper, and Eirlys and I walked up the street to St. Hywyn's, a small stone church dating back to the twelfth century. The structure overlooked the water and was surrounded on three sides by rows of headstones. The scattered stones covering the area between the church structure and the adjacent coastline made it look as though the building blended into the sea. Behind the church, the ground sloped up into a hill, so that if you looked at the structure head-on, the gravestones seemed to mesh into the blue sky above.

I followed Eirlys to the graves at the back of the church.

"We're looking for Jane and Daniel," she said. "I think they're over this way."

I knew she was talking about my long-deceased great-great-great-grandparents, but the way she spoke made it sound like they were still alive and all we needed to do was look for them. She pointed to the top corner of the graveyard and began the ascent in pursuit of the graves. As she made a bee-line for the top left corner of the cemetery, I followed behind, pausing as I climbed to bend down and read some of the headstones. The letters and dates were weathered away in places making the stones difficult to read. It was windy in the graveyard, but not as windy as it had been at Grepach. Seagulls cawed overhead and I could

hear the persistent lapping of the ocean along the coast. There was something so constant and soothing about the sound of the sea—it was a sound I rarely experienced spending all of my life in inland towns. Like the accents of my relatives, I relished the sound and wanted to hear more. I did not know when I would visit Aberdaron again—it could be years from then; decades, even. I listened to the rhythmic sound of the same sea that had lapped the shores when my forefathers walked those hills. The land had held the feet of generation after generation, while the sea, just slightly displaced from the action, remained a quiet observer.

“Over here!” Eirlys said, motioning enthusiastically to a cluster of stones at the top of the hill. I pulled my scarf tighter around my neck and made my way up the hill. The incline was steepest at the spot where she was standing, and I could not help but worry about her precarious position among the jutting gravestones. The last thing I needed was for one of my elderly relatives to take a tumble in our ancestors’ graveyard.

“There they are, then,” Eirlys said, proudly pointing to two deteriorating gravestones. Her magenta windbreaker clashed with the subdued tones of the headstone and earth below. I went to read the inscription but realized the words were in Welsh. Even if I had been able to read the language, the state of the stones made the words barely perceptible. All I could make out were the names at the top of the graves. The first said “DANIEL WILLIAMS” and beneath that was carved “Grepach Uwchmynydd.” Uwchmynydd referred to the area about a mile and a half outside of Aberdaron where the Grepach cottage was located. Jane’s grave was similar to Daniel’s, and next to those two graves was that of David, the brother of John S. whom Lona was descended from.

As I stood up, I was met with the most beautiful view of Aberdaron. The stones sprawled out on the grassy slope before me, ending at the double-arched church at the base

of the hill. Beyond the church, a clear semi-circle of coastline extended all the way to the rocky shore rising up in the distance with Grepach lifted up on its plateau. The hills were green around us, and the few houses and buildings of Aberdaron were clumped together in the middle of the semi-circle like a white, angular pendant strung on a coastline necklace. I remembered this view. I had seen it nine years ago, standing at my great-great-great-grandparents' graves as an eleven-year-old, when I didn't quite know what I was looking at. I remembered being cold and wanting to go back to the car, but the view at the top of the graveyard had stopped me. It affected me then as it affected me now, and I paused to let the picture brand itself into my mind once again.

"Shall we have a little look in the church, then?" Eirlys asked. Gripping the cast-iron fence lining the outer edge of the graveyard, we carefully descended down the hill and entered the front door of the church.

The building was named for St. Hywyn, a man who lived in the fifth century and preached to the people of Aberdaron from a small house located at the site of the current church. The church was constructed in the twelfth century and had been a place of rest for those making pilgrimages to Bardsey Island, an island off the coast of Aberdaron where 20,000 saints are said to have been buried in medieval times. Inside the stone church were two sanctuaries, side by side—the right was more formal than the left, but they were about the same size. Chairs were set up in the right sanctuary, and there was an altar at the front of the church. On the left, four pews were set up in a circle, with round, personalized seat cushions on each of the pews. They must not get very many people on a Sunday, I thought.

In the back of the church, where we entered, a few tables were set up with historical artifacts associated with the church. To the left were shelves filled with books for sale, each

of them relating in some way to Aberdaron, North Wales, or R.S. Thomas—the esteemed Welsh poet who served as the minister at St. Hywyn’s from 1967 to 1978. I remembered Lona talking about R. S. Thomas, who lived in Aberdaron when she was a child. She recalled seeing him in the village from time to time and remembered her father interacting with him while she was still young and did not realize his significance to the world of Anglo-Welsh literature.

Thomas was born in Cardiff to a family that spoke no Welsh, yet he learned the language as an adult in order to communicate with his congregations in North Wales, one of which was Aberdaron. As a well-educated non-Welsh-speaker coming to North Wales, Thomas felt like an outsider at first and struggled to identify with the poor, Welsh-speaking farmers that made up his congregations. He saw firsthand the great distinctions between regional interpretations of Welsh identity, and communicated many of those differences in his poetry, which was always written in English. Propped up against the wall in St. Hywyn’s was a gravestone with one of his poems, “The Other” written on its face in white ink, the beginning of which reads:

There are nights that are so still
that I can hear the small owl calling
far off and a fox barking
miles away. It is then that I lie
in the lean hours awake listening
to the swell born somewhere in the Atlantic
rising and falling, rising and falling
wave on wave on the long shore
by the village, that is without light
and companionless.

I felt a strong connection to the words of the poem—just like R. S. Thomas, I found it difficult to identify with the people of Aberdaron, yet I was intensely affected by the land and the sea, and by the history that they represented.

Moving past the mini exhibit on R. S. Thomas, I saw various books and binders spread out on a table that contained records of the church and town. Finding a guest book, I excitedly flipped to the back on the off-chance that my name was still etched in pen from my visit in 2003. Unfortunately the list only went back to 2006, but I found my parents' and sister's names scrawled in an entry dated 24-2-2011, from when they had visited Wales without me the previous year. I scanned the names of other people who had visited during the same week as my parents, and was surprised to see the range of locations they came from. Some traveled from Spain and New Zealand; others, from various parts of Wales. In the comments section, I recognized my father's loopy handwriting: "Wonderful." Two entries beneath his, "The Jones Family" had simply written: "home."

Signing my name in the current page of the guestbook, I put it away and moved on to some of the historical documents. I flipped through one binder full of old documents slipped in plastic sleeves. About halfway through the book, I found a paper listing all the emigrants from Aberdaron during some year in the late 1800s. Next to each name was written the place that they immigrated to. I could not believe what I read. Out of about thirty names, almost every single one was accompanied by "Steuben, NY," a town about 25 miles away from my house in Clinton. It was almost surreal reading the name of something so familiar to me in such a foreign place.

According to *Memory Stones*, a book written by my father on the history of Welsh-Americans in Central New York, the Welsh settled in my area almost by accident. A man by the name(s) of Baron Frederick William Augustus Henry Ferdinand de Steuben received a grant of land in upstate New York from the federal government as compensation for his work in the Revolutionary War. After his death, the executor of Baron de Steuben's estate,

Col. Benjamin Walker, was working with the immigration department at the Port Authority in New York City and encouraged a family of Welsh immigrants to settle on Steuben's land in Central New York. That initial settlement of a few families in 1795 led to a steady flow of Welsh immigrants from New York City to the land in upstate New York known simply as "Steuben."

Due to a series of bad harvests in Wales between 1798 and 1802, large numbers of Welsh immigrants came to New York to make a new home for themselves during that time. Many Welsh churches were built and communities of Welsh immigrants sprang up all over Central New York, including in Utica. When John S. left Wales for America in 1886, he settled in Plainfield Center, NY, a small village with a thriving Welsh community where he knew he would be surrounded by expatriates like himself. He began in the industry he knew best—farming—before carrying mail for the U.S. Postal Service for thirteen years and becoming heavily involved in the Welsh Presbyterian Church in his area. Religion was an essential component to Welsh life in America at that time, as was the continuation and appreciation of music and the arts.

After a hearty dinner at Gwesty Tŷ Newydd with Olwen, my relatives and I headed back to the primary school for the highlight of our evening, a "*Noson Lawen*," which translates literally to "Happy Evening." While this may sound vague to an American's ears, in Wales, happiness is equated with music, and therefore a *Noson Lawen* is a night of musical entertainment. The evening included performances by local musicians and schoolchildren, many of whom I had met earlier that day. It was hosted by the community to raise money for the helicopter that flies between Aberdaron and Caernarfon, where the closest hospital is

located. We truly were isolated in Aberdaron—there were no hospitals, shopping malls, or transportation bases for miles around. When you went outside at night, you heard the wind or the sea, not the rushing of cars or trucks on the highway. And when you looked up into the sky, there were stars—hundreds and hundreds of stars. There were so many that it looked like someone had sprinkled sugar into the sky, producing layers on layers of sparkling brightness, instead of individual dots waiting to be connected into dippers or bears.

On the stage of the gymnasium/cafeteria/auditorium, the host of the evening introduced two Welsh folk singers with guitars to open up the show with a few songs. After they had gotten the audience clapping and nodding along to their familiar tunes, the folk singers took a break and two young girls who could barely reach the microphone sang a melody with the pure voices that only little girls can have. In between acts, the host made jokes and called people out in the audience. The event was entirely in Welsh, of course, so I sat back and observed while everyone laughed and sang along around me. A woman with an accordion took to the stage, presumably the mother of the little girl I had met earlier that morning. Following her act, a man who looked to be in his late twenties wowed the audience with a powerful baritone voice. The old women around me cooed over the young man's voice, exclaiming to each other in impassioned whispers.

The folk singers took to the stage once again and launched into a bouncy song that everyone else seemed to know, and they followed the tune with what sounded to me like a round of jokes. By this point, I had tuned out whatever the people on stage were talking about, and was instead eyeing the handmade decorations covering the walls of the auditorium. I was again reminded of my elementary school, apart from the fact that all the

words were in a language I could not read. My eyes wandered to a row of paper trees lining the left wall, when suddenly there was a shift in the audience around me. The bodies in front of me twisted, perching their elbows on the backs of their chairs and turning their faces away from the folk singers on stage and around to the back of the room where I was sitting. Everyone in the entire Welsh-speaking, music-loving, land-rooted audience was staring directly at me.

Eirlys nudged me, saying, “Stand up!”

Stand up? Why? I felt the warmth of embarrassment crawling up my neck toward my face. On stage, the folk singers had not skipped a beat, but were still babbling away. And then I heard their strands of Welsh punctured by three familiar sounds: Liz. New York.

Croeso.

They were welcoming me! Finally aware of what was happening, I sort of half-stood up and lifted my hand in a wave, unsure if this was the proper way to greet a crowd of strangers.

“Ah, Liz, this song is dedicated to you, then!” said one of the singers.

As they began to play, the chords sounded vaguely familiar but I could not place the tune. Nevertheless, I was so happy to hear English in public, that I could not stop smiling as they sang. And in the transition from the first verse to the chorus, I suddenly knew exactly what song they were singing: Me & Bobby McGee by Janis Joplin.

“Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose,” I sang, and Eirlys swayed along next to me.

“I wonder who told the singers, then?” Eirlys said on the way out to the car after the concert.

“It wasn’t you?” I asked.

“Oh, no! Griff and I didn’t say a word. But I told so many people you were coming...someone must have written them a little note before they went on stage.”

We got into the truck and pulled onto the road that would lead us out of Aberdaron and back to Chwilog. What was this place that I was leaving behind? Who were these strangers who knew me so well? I pulled out of my purse a small book of R. S. Thomas’s poetry that Eirlys had bought for me at the gift shop in Aberdaron before the *Noson Lawen*. It was dark inside the truck, but a sliver of moonlight illuminated a fragment of each page as I flipped through the book. I caught the last stanza of a poem, which read:

Where can I go, then, from the smell
Of decay, from the putrefying of a dead
Nation? I have walked the shore
For an hour and seen the English
Scavenging among the remains
Of our culture, covering the sand
Like the tide and, with the roughness
Of the tide, elbowing our language
Into the grave that we have dug for it.

Was I one of the English, scavenging among the remains of the Welsh culture, as Thomas suggests in his poem? I liked to think my search had a more endearing quality. I was enchanted by the presence of the past still lingering in Wales, and found myself drawn to its hills and smells and voices with a removed sense of wonder. Wales might not have been as economically “alive” as England or America, but it was certainly not dead. Closing the book of poems, I rested my head and listened to the hum of Griff’s truck against the pavement on the way back to Chwilog. The valley of Aberdaron faded into the distance in the rearview mirror and above us, the moon shone brightly, with a thousand tiny stars echoing its glow.

Photographs





Left page, clockwise from upper left: Gruff Rhys chewing apple at SFA concert in Buffalo, 2008; Gruff Rhys and I in Baltimore, 2012; Welsh flags and schoolchildren in St. David's Day parade, Cardiff; the keep at Cardiff Castle.

Right page, top: marchers wearing traditional Welsh costumes in St. David's Day parade, Cardiff; bottom: Wales Millennium Centre, Cardiff.



Top: Tŷ Newydd Hotel, Aberdaron; bottom: St. Hywyn's Church and graveyard, Aberdaron.



Top: Dylan Thomas Centre, Swansea; Bottom: Welsh Americans gathered before a *gymanfa ganu* at the North American Festival of Wales in Scranton, 2012

In the Footsteps of Dylan Thomas

I first saw the light of day in a Glamorgan villa, and, amid the terrors of the Welsh accent and the smoke of the tinsplate stacks, grew up to be a sweet baby, a precocious child, a rebellious boy, and a morbid youth.

—Dylan Thomas, letter to Pamela Hansford
Johnson, November 1933

On the afternoon of Christmas Eve, our house in upstate New York became a snow globe. The frigid air hit the windows and flurries outside swirled to rest on iced-over snow banks. My dad poked his head into the family room, where my siblings and I sat around the TV, and took our drink orders. My brother Tom was home for a few days from his Ph.D. program in computer science at Tufts University. I was enjoying my last winter break away from Gettysburg College before starting the spring semester of my senior year. My sister Rebecca had a week off from her sophomore year at Clinton Senior High School, where she was learning the basics of trigonometry and chemistry, reading *Romeo and Juliet*, and becoming an expert on the Russian Revolution. When my dad returned with steaming red mugs of cocoa and glasses of creamy eggnog, Tom leaned forward and pressed “play” on the DVD player. The familiar music of our favorite Christmas movie filled the air and we sank into our back pillows and arm rests, content that yet another Christmas Eve had arrived, and the family was together to watch the film adaptation of Dylan Thomas’s prose poem, “A Child’s Christmas in Wales.”

My dad recorded the 1987 made-for-TV movie off our television set in 1988, the year my brother was born on Christmas Day. The film quality was awful; it was so fuzzy that we could barely make out the image, and the static was so loud that the voices sounded

distorted. But we watched the film every year, and when my brother discovered a copy of the DVD version on Amazon, we were finally able to see and hear the film clearly. The story never got old for us—we were captivated by the picture of Christmas in Swansea, where Dylan Thomas grew up. The story is composed in a style that borders both prose and poetry. It describes an industrial seaside city in Wales, but could have just as effectively portrayed the winter scenes I cherished so much in Clinton: *Our snow was not only shaken from white wash buckets down the sky, it came shawling out of the ground and swam and drifted out of the arms and hands and bodies of the trees.* His snow sounded just like our snow, and the child's perspective of the poem was something I identified with in my youth and reminisced about as an adult. From watching the film so many times, I subconsciously memorized the colors and sounds and feel of each scene, and always looked forward to watching it once and only once each year—on Christmas Eve.

When I grew older and started to appreciate literature more, I claimed Dylan Thomas as my favorite poet. I knew I could say with confidence at least one fact about him: he was Welsh. It was not until my final year of high school that I decided to learn something more about Dylan Thomas. At Clinton Senior High School, every senior had to write a research paper on the subject of his or her choice. I wanted to make sure I wrote about something I was passionate about, so I came into class with paper topics related to three of my favorite things: jazz flute, bagels, and Dylan Thomas. I had been playing the flute since I was ten years old and was especially fond of Ian Anderson, the jazz flutist for Jethro Tull. I also had a minor obsession with a bagel shop in Utica called Bagel Grove, where my family always stopped for lunch on the way home from church. Writing on

Dylan Thomas was originally my third choice for a topic, but my English teacher had other ideas.

"I've been waiting 35 years for a paper on Dylan Thomas," she told me. "I have so many books you can borrow!"

Her response caught me off guard, and it was only then that I realized Dylan Thomas was more than just a Welsh person. Claiming Dylan Thomas as my favorite poet had been more of a hobby than any serious literary appreciation. I had hardly read any of his poems; I just assumed I should like him because he was Welsh and he wrote "A Child's Christmas in Wales." Little did I know what a strong contribution Thomas made to the canon of 20th century poetry. Or that he didn't even speak Welsh.

Dylan Thomas was born on October 27, 1914 at 5 Cwmdonkin Drive in Swansea, a seaport in the Welsh county historically known as Glamorgan. The city was a center of copper manufacturing during the Industrial Revolution, and it was during that time that an influx of English workers came to reside in Swansea. The refusal of the English workers to learn Welsh led to a decline in the use of the native language throughout industrial South Wales. Although both of his parents came from Welsh-speaking communities and were fluent in the language, Dylan only spoke English growing up, and he never learned Welsh. His father, who was an English teacher and avid lover of English literature, instilled an appreciation for writing in Dylan from a young age.

By the time he was a teenager, Thomas was regularly writing poetry and had several poems published in his school magazine. After the publication of "Light breaks where no sun shines" in 1934 in *The Listener*, a weekly magazine established by the BBC, Thomas's poetry gained popularity outside of Wales. By December 1934, when he was just twenty

years old, Thomas had published his first book of poems, *18 Poems*. Although he moved away from Swansea to London in 1936, half of his poems were written in his childhood home at 5 Cwmdonkin Drive.

During my semester abroad in England, I knew I had to make it out to Swansea to see the place where Dylan Thomas grew up. On the last Friday of April, I took the earliest train from Bath, switched at Newport, and watched the sun come over the hills of Southwestern Wales. Two hours later, the train pulled into Swansea and I got out my Google Maps directions to the Dylan Thomas Centre.

When the building came into view, I was surprised at how beautiful it was. The Centre was housed in a grand stone structure with a row of floor-to-ceiling windows on the second floor and two large wooden doors with glass arcs above and oversized lanterns beside them. The building looked like it could have been the Swansea Town Hall or the city's library. A small sign attached to the gate by the parking lot read "Canolfan Dylan Thomas Centre," with the poet's name squeezed between the two languages of his homeland. As I got closer, I noticed that the building itself had no signage for the museum. Trying a door, I stepped inside and found a long hallway that was partially covered in plastic and only dimly lit. The building must have been going through some renovation, but there were no workers in sight. I hesitated, wondering if this was really the place I had come so far to see. It was so underwhelming compared to the outside. Hoping for a more optimistic sight beyond the plastic, I made my way down to the end of the hallway and found a man at a desk surrounded by books and brochures. There were still no signs designating my arrival at the Dylan Thomas Centre.

"Is this the Dylan Thomas museum?" I asked.

"The Dylan Thomas *Centre*, yes," he answered. "You can start over there," he said, motioning to a darkened doorway on his right.

I thanked him with a smile and stood for a moment in front of the shadowy entrance before stepping inside. *This is it*, I thought to myself. *An entire museum dedicated to Dylan Thomas!* Less than a month earlier, I had been to the British Museum in London, the Picasso Museum in Barcelona, and the Louvre in Paris. Those were all fascinating in their own respects, but as I stood in front of the quiet doorway in the Dylan Thomas Centre—probably one of only two people in the entire building—for the first time ever entering a museum, a shiver of anticipation shot through my skin.

Stepping inside, the initial object I saw was a suit in a glass case. A plaque identified the garment as the suit Dylan Thomas wore just days before his death in New York City in 1953. He was only 39 years old then, and his weakened body had finally succumbed to his excessive drinking. At the time of his death, Thomas was on a reading tour through the United States, where his poems had gained popularity.

My grandfather was still in college when Dylan Thomas passed away. Like Thomas, his father (my great-grandfather) also died in his thirties, although his death was not from alcoholism. Jay Williams, the firstborn son of John S., died at 35 from a ruptured appendix and was remembered as a prominent figure in the Welsh community of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where he was the minister of a Presbyterian congregation. An obituary from a Milwaukee newspaper reads, "With his wonderful vocabulary, both in English and Welsh, he scathingly denounced the powers of evil which tend to lower clean, Christ-like standards of living." The story goes that his appendix burst while he was singing in a concert under the direction of the great Welsh composer, Daniel Protheroe. Instead of excusing himself

from the concert and dealing with the immense pain he was experiencing, my great-grandfather remained on stage throughout the remainder of the concert, in true expression of his passion for the music and for Wales. While he was not known on nearly as large a scale as Dylan Thomas, Jay Williams was loved and revered by many, and his untimely death was considered a tragedy to his community.

I got an eerie feeling, looking at the suit and recognizing its significance, and I hoped the rest of the museum would not be so morbid. Glancing around the room, I saw lines of poetry painted across the walls, including verses of Thomas's famous poem written for his dying father: *Do not go gentle into that good night, Old age should burn and rave at close of day; Rage, rage against the dying of the light.* More glass cases lined the walls, displaying items of significance from Thomas's life. I soon discovered that the "museum" was actually only two rooms, and was somewhat disappointed. But as I continued to browse the exhibits, I remembered they were dedicated to a poet, not to a painter or sculptor or architect. Unlike an artist, who leaves behind a large body of physical work to decorate the walls, Thomas's art was unseen: it survived in the spoken sounds of his words, in verses strung together and stripped apart by countless voices since the poet's death. One can only accumulate so many manuscript drafts and eyeglasses and suit jackets from a poet, however great he might be.

After silently wandering around the two rooms for an hour, I headed back to the area where the man still sat at his desk. Beyond him was a little gift shop with books of poetry and other Dylan Thomas-themed trinkets. I looked at my watch: it was about ten minutes until twelve o'clock.

Weeks before coming to Swansea, I had poked around online looking for any places or people I could visit in Wales that might give me increased insight into the Welsh-

American connection. A Google search for "Welsh American literature" produced a series of pages linked to the Swansea University website. Clicking through the links, I discovered that Swansea University had an entire academic program that explored some of the connections I was interested in. The "Centre for Research in the English Literature and Language of Wales" (CREW) offered undergraduate and postgraduate programs that examined the emergence of English as a primary Welsh language in the twentieth century. Some of the course titles include "Welsh Writing in English: Canon and Context," "Dylan Thomas and the Idea of Welsh Writing in English" and "American Wales: Writing the Transatlantic."

I felt like I had struck gold. If only Gettysburg College offered such courses—I could have minored in Welsh-American Literary Studies. As I browsed through the course descriptions, I was fascinated that all the questions I had circulating in my mind about the Welsh-American and Welsh-English relationships had been integrated into an actual academic course. I went to the Staff page and scrolled through the list of professors. If anyone could answer the questions I had about my role as a Welsh-American, and about the history of Welsh communities in America such as the one John S. settled in, it was someone from this program. They had studied the Welsh-American culture in depth and surely would be able to offer me some insight.

The first person listed on the Staff page was "Professor M. Wynn Thomas - Emyr Humphreys Chair of Welsh Writing in English." There was a picture of an old man in glasses and a brown sweater sitting in front of a tall bookcase with a stern look on his face. Below his name was a link that read: "Publications." Clicking on the link, a long list of titles with accompanying images of book covers appeared on my screen. I scrolled through the list

of books, all written by M. Wynn Thomas, with widened eyes. There were so many of them that they were organized into categories: Critical Studies, Scholarly Editions, Edited Collections, Translations, Special Editions and Pamphlets. Who was this guy? When I finally got to the bottom of the page, there were eleven more links: articles, reviews, contributions to books, translation studies, etc.

A bit overwhelmed, I went back to the Staff page and clicked on the next professor's name. This was Dr. Daniel Williams. We had the same last name! Well, Williams is the Smith of Wales, but it was still a connection. Beneath his name appeared the credentials: BA (U.E.A), MA (Harvard), PhD (Cantab.). He had gone to school in America, just like me! Well, my degree-in-progress from Gettysburg College was not quite as prestigious as a Masters from Harvard, but again, it was still a connection. Clicking on his name, I discovered that he was the Director of the CREW program. At the bottom of his page, two books were listed. Two was plenty. I e-mailed him to ask if he might be available for a conversation if I ever had the chance to pop over to Swansea.

The next day, I had a reply from Dr. Williams. He was pleased to hear about my interest in the Welsh-American connection, but regretfully would not be able to meet. He was spending the semester at Harvard and would not be coming back to Wales while I was there. "I suggest you contact my colleague, M. Wynn Thomas," he wrote. "He should be in Swansea and I'm sure he'd be happy to meet with you."

And so, several weeks later, I stood in the gift shop at the Dylan Thomas Centre idly reading the backs of books of poetry and waiting for my watch to read noon, the time at which I had agreed to meet the esteemed professor at the reception desk. Just a few minutes before twelve, I heard footsteps coming down the hallway. I glued my eyes to the back of

Quite Early One Morning as a male voice addressed the man at the desk. The sense of familiarity in their tone made it seem like they knew each other but had not spoken in some time. They began talking about the renovations on the building and I turned around to sneak a glance of the speaker. He was a tall man in a tweed jacket and glasses—typical British professor garb. It had to be Mr. Thomas. He must have felt my gaze on his back because he turned at that moment and caught my eye. I put the book down and approached the desk.

"Are you Elizabeth?" he asked in a soft voice, extending his hand.

The man at the desk seemed surprised that we knew each other and a bit confused as to why this smiley American girl had arranged to meet with *the* M. Wynn Thomas in the gift shop of the Dylan Thomas Centre. We left the museum and headed across a bridge to a restaurant that the man at the desk had recommended. It was cloudy outside and looked like it might rain. The bridge crossed over a section of water where rows of sailboats were tied up to the dock. We walked in silence for a few moments until his soft, hesitant voice spoke again.

"So, tell me about yourself," he said, as we crossed the wooden bridge.

Luckily, the bridge was just long enough for me to restate some of the points I had mentioned in my initial e-mail to the professor. We neared a restaurant at the end of the bridge and he held the door for me as we entered. The room had big glass windows overlooking the water and a red-orange-brown color scheme with artsy lights dangling from the ceiling. We both ordered the soup and Professor Thomas asked if I had a sheet of loose leaf handy. I pulled out my notebook, paged past my list of potential questions that I had scribbled down on the train ride in, and ripped out a piece of paper.

“So, you’re interested in the Welsh-American connection?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Hmmm...Have you looked at the newspapers? *Y Drych? Ninnau?*”

The paper names sounded vaguely familiar. I knew my dad got a Welsh-American newspaper delivered to our house every other month, but I had only opened it once or twice. It was called *Ninnau* and was full of updates from Welsh-American communities around the country and from Wales. Some headlines from the January-February 2012 edition read, “Delaware Welsh Celebrate Christmas,” “Hitting the Oregon Trail...to Wales!,” “A Child’s Vacation in Wales,” and “David Thomas: Father of the American Anthracite Industry.” There was a literature section in the middle, announcements of exchange opportunities, ads for holiday cottages for rent in Wales, and advice on how to research family history.

“That might be a good place to start,” said the professor. After a long pause, he continued, “You can get lots of information from newspapers, yes? You know Utica was the hub of the Welsh-language publishing industry in the States at one point, right?”

I shook my head. I knew Utica had once boasted a large Welsh population, but I had no idea Welsh newspapers were printed in the city. Maybe if I had read my copy of *Our Welsh Heritage* before embarking on my journey to Wales, I would have seen the chapter titled, “‘Y Drych’ The American Organ of the Welsh People,” and its description of the paper’s early history:

“Y Drych” came into the possession of John W. Jones, who was its editor at the time, and in 1869 it was moved to Utica. Still later, the paper was sold to John Mather Jones, with the former owner remaining as editor. In Utica, it was printed by Thomas J. Griffiths and his sons for 91 years.

“Oh, yes!” said the professor, raising his eyebrows and slouching closer to me over his steaming tomato soup. “There was a time when *all* the Welsh-American newspapers came out of Utica! They circulated news from Welsh communities around the country. Terribly important, the newspapers were.”

His voice grew more excited with every word, and once again I was left with the odd feeling of experiencing something intimately familiar to me in a foreign place. Just like I had been taken by surprise upon seeing the list of names in Aberdaron paired with “Steuben, NY,” I was not expecting to hear the name of my city on the professor’s lips.

I asked the professor if he knew of any modern writers who had left Wales for America, or of writers who identified as Welsh-Americans who might have a unique perspective worth pursuing. He took a long look at the blank loose leaf in front of him.

“Have you heard of David Lloyd?” he asked.

The name sounded familiar, but then again all Welsh names sounded familiar. Everyone was named either Jones, Lloyd, Williams, Rhys, or Evans. I told him I had not.

“No?” he said, eyebrows raised again. He clicked his tongue in mock disappointment and shook his head. “He’s from up near you. In New York, somewhere.”

I smiled. New York was a large state. Usually, when I said I was from New York, people assumed I was talking about the City. Clinton, New York was four hours north of the City, and about as far away from the vigor and excitement of the Big Apple as one could get. It was highly unlikely that I would have any clue who this David Lloyd figure was. Professor Thomas wrote his name down on the sheet of loose leaf so I could look him up later. Little did I know that my father knew David Lloyd personally, or that they had played together at my grandparents’ house as children, long before I was born.

As our conversation progressed, the professor provided me with a list of names of other people I might want to get in contact with. *Professor Aled Jones (Aberystwyth)*, he wrote. *Dr. Bill Jones (Cardiff University)*. *Jerry Hunter (Bangor University)*. As he wrote down each name, he explained what topics that person had written on and how they were important in the context of Welsh-American relations. He wrote down book titles along with short one- or two-word descriptions to jog my memory when I got home. He was so enthusiastic and excited about the people and works he was recommending that it was impossible not to admire his passion. His eyes lit up as each story reminded him of another that might be even more relevant to my search. By the time I got to the bottom of my soup, he had filled both sides of the sheet of paper with names of people, books, and subjects which might be helpful in my exploration of Welsh-American culture.

“Do you have another sheet?” he asked.

I pulled out the notebook again and ripped out another piece of paper. We had been talking for nearly an hour and he had hardly touched his soup. The tentative professor I had met in the gift shop had evolved into an impassioned fountain of knowledge right before my eyes. I placed the loose leaf in front of him.

“Actually, could you write your address on that one?” he asked. “I’d like to send you a chapter of one of my books.”

I could hardly believe my ears. *The M. Wynn Thomas*—the premiere scholar on Welsh-American literature, the executor of R. S. Thomas’s unpublished literary estate, the chairman of the Welsh Books Council, an Officer of the Order of the British Empire—was asking for my address. It was no big deal. He just wanted to personally mail me an excerpt from his book. It was totally casual. I wrote down my address in my best handwriting and

thanked him profusely for being kind enough to meet with me. He paid for our lunch and then we walked back across the bridge we had crossed earlier.

“So are you heading back to Bath soon? Or do you have some extra time?” he asked.

“I was hoping to look around the city a bit,” I told him. I had no rush to get back, and wanted to at least see the birthplace of Dylan Thomas before I left.

“I was thinking I could give you a little tour around Swansea,” he said.

Once again, I was taken aback by his words. Was this really happening? I had printed out a map of downtown Swansea the night before but realized there was no way I would feasibly get to all the landmarks on the map without a car. The walk to the Dylan Thomas Birthplace alone would take at least half an hour. I wasn’t sure what kind of tour the professor was thinking of, but I gladly accepted.

We reached the Dylan Thomas Centre again and I followed him to the front parking lot, where I had stood earlier, marveling at the beautiful architecture of the building.

“You’re on that side,” he said, pointing to the left side of a black car. “You Americans always seem to get confused.”

I laughed because he was right. But as I opened the door to the left-hand passenger seat and sat down, I was overcome by a completely different feeling: nostalgia—but for what? I had never been in M. Wynn Thomas’s car before. I had never even been to Swansea. But it was not the car itself that felt familiar—it was the view from the left side of the car. The only other time I had been a passenger in a car during my time in Britain was when I was with my relatives, Griff and Eirlys, just a few weekends before. Something in that perspective on the left side of the car gave me a twinge of homesickness—not for my “home” in Clinton, but for North Wales.

As we pulled out of the parking lot, I stole a quick look around the professor's car. Piled in between our two seats was a stash of CDs in jewel cases. From the slivers visible to me, they looked like classical CDs but I could not tell for sure. All he had to do was turn the radio on and I would have felt like I was in my grandparents' car at home, which was constantly tuned to Classic FM. I wondered if he had any grandchildren who looked up to him in the same way that I looked up to my grandparents.

As we drove through the streets of Swansea, the professor pointed out various museums and buildings of significance on either side of the road. He recommended a good place to walk along the bay and made sure I got a good look at Swansea University, where he worked. Once again, I was reminded of my own grandfather, who was also a professor back in the United States, and had lived in the same town since he began teaching in 1960. I wondered if he had ever given a foreign student a tour of Clinton, pointing out with fondness the buildings that had grown and developed under his watchful eye throughout the decades. The professor seemed to have a story to tell about every location in Swansea, and he addressed each spot with a tone of genuine affection.

"How long have you lived in Swansea?" I asked him.

"Oh, about sixty years now," he said.

Sixty years—that was more than half a century! My twenty years in Clinton suddenly felt so insignificant. I had always thought of Clinton as my home, but to spend sixty years in one location—that must have *really* felt like home. It was no wonder he had something to say about every crossroad that we passed. After pointing out the landmarks of the city, we snaked down some side streets and ended up in a residential area.

“There it is—number five!” he said, pointing to a nondescript two-story house on one of the side streets.

Number five—did he mean...5 Cwmdonkin Drive? The birthplace of Dylan Thomas? Before us stood a plain house with brick red clapboards and two bay windows facing the road. It was not even a full house, but half of a two-family house. The structure blended in with all the other houses on the street, aside from a tiny circular plaque on the bottom right side that read:

DYLAN THOMAS
A man of words
1914-1953
was born in
this house

The professor had agreed to drop me off at the house, so he pulled the car over on the side of the road. I thanked him again for his time and for his unexpected personal tour of Swansea. Waving good-bye to M. Wynn Thomas, I walked up to the side of 5 Cwmdonkin Drive and knocked on the door three times.

I had read on the website for the house the night before that an event was being hosted there that day in celebration of Dylan Thomas’s mother’s birthday. The house, which is privately owned, is not usually open to the public except for paid tours. Luckily, this event was advertised as free and open to the public, and people were invited to come down and share stories of their “Welsh mams” to be read as part of a live broadcast. It seemed to be geared toward older people with strong Welsh mothers who carried their families through the forties or fifties when keeping up appearances in a severely class-divided Swansea was a difficult task.

Well, I was born in New York in 1991 and my mother is Italian. But I really wanted free entry into the house and a taste of the tea and Welsh cakes so enticingly promised to contributors. So on my two-hour train ride into Swansea that morning, I wrote something up on a piece of loose leaf about how my mother put up with—and even participated in—the somewhat extreme observance of Welsh culture within our family when I was younger. She had only a trace of Welsh in her, from some distant branch of her family tree. Her mother’s maiden name was Wynne, a Welsh name, but no one really knew where it came from since her mother was Irish.

According to the website, the event was set to run from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m. When I got to the house, it was about ten till two, and a man with long red hair and a black t-shirt for some metal band answered the door.

“Are you here for a tour or Welsh mam’s day?” he asked.

“Welsh mam’s day!” I said, feeling like I had the secret password.

“Follow me,” he said.

I was brought into a small room where three women were perched in wooden armchairs sipping tea. A line from “A Child’s Christmas in Wales” popped into my head as I took in the scene: *Some few small aunts, not wanted in the kitchen, nor anywhere else for that matter, sat on the very edge of their chairs, poised and brittle, afraid to break, like faded cups and saucers.* Two of the women matched this description exactly. They looked to be in their seventies or eighties, with thin white curls and cool bony fingers laced through the handles on their teacups. The third woman was in her thirties and appeared to be part of the staff.

“Can I get you some tea?” asked the man in black.

“Oh sure, that would be great!” I said, trying to sound nonchalant. They didn’t need to know I had been waiting all my life to have tea in Dylan Thomas’s house.

The three women looked like they had been sitting and chatting for some time in the quiet parlor. They were caught a bit off guard when I burst into the room just before 2 p.m., American accent and all, to celebrate Welsh Mam’s Day. The younger woman cocked her head to the side and said “But...you don’t *sound* Welsh!” I hastily assured her I was aware of that fact and had prepared a piece about my “different kind” of Welsh mam.

“Where are you from, then?” the woman asked.

I told her where I was from, making sure to include the “Upstate” before New York, but the old ladies didn’t seem to notice the specification. They raised their eyebrows, still clutching their fragile tea cups with half-lifted pinkies, and collectively cooed, “Oh, New York!”

But the attention was just as soon shifted off of me and onto one of the white-haired ladies.

“Wait till you hear who this woman is,” the younger woman said. She nodded at one of the older women with a mysterious smile and the man in black handed me a tea cup and saucer. I took a whiff of the tea and let the sweet smell sink in. I wanted to remember this.

“Well, my mother used to live in this house,” she said. I lowered the tea cup and smiled. It smelled so good. “She was the maid in Dylan’s family.”

And just like that, the scent was gone. Who cares about tea when you are sitting in the presence of Dylan Thomas’s housemaid’s daughter? My first instinct was to stand up and hug her, but thankfully I resisted and settled for staring at her in open-mouthed wonder

while her words sunk in. The woman graciously overlooked my gawking and went on to tell the story of how her mother had grown up alongside Dylan Thomas in the very house where we were sitting. She had been there when he began crafting his first poetic masterpieces. When the curators of the house were looking to restore the interior of the building to how it would have looked when Dylan was a child, they used this woman as a resource—she could tell them exactly what colors the walls were and what the furniture looked like. She had been a living link to the sacred past of Dylan’s youth, and had only just recently passed away at the age of 95.

The walls around me suddenly felt fuller, and more real. This was not just a house restored to look like the place where Dylan grew up. He had actually sat here before, in this exact place, with this exact view. I looked beyond the seated women to the backyard framed in a window behind them. *Auntie Dosie had to have three aspirins, but Auntie Hannah, who liked port, stood in the middle of the snowbound back yard, singing like a big-bosomed thrush.* The fireplace to my right had logs ready to be lit. Dylan would have felt that concentrated heat. He would have shifted in his wooden armchair trying to get comfortable. He would have had a cup of tea.

“So, what’s your story?” asked the younger woman.

I had barely processed the words of the housemaid’s daughter at this point, and now felt more than ever the need to justify my connection to Wales. I dug into my backpack for the piece I had hurriedly written earlier that morning. Extracting the wrinkled sheet, I read aloud to the three women in the room.

My Welsh mam isn’t actually Welsh at all. Well, that’s not exactly true. When my family pulled in to Pennsylvania, Ohio, or New Hampshire for another one of Dad’s *Gymanfas*, she lifted her pointer finger with a smile and reminded us Welsh-blooded kids, “My mother’s maiden name was Wynne, you know!” We would arrive at the

churches, some tiny buildings hidden in fields, others great urban structures, with voices ready to sing in four-part harmony. My mom was the one who kept us in line and made sure we behaved ourselves while Dad raised his arms to conduct at the front of the church. You could say Welshness was thrust upon her. In marrying my dad, I don't think she knew quite what she was getting herself into—the research for his books on Welsh churches, the St. David's Day dinners, trekking across the country for the “National” Gymanfa Ganu each year—but she jumped right in, as if the culture had always been a part of her. She's never liked to sew, but when I was only five years old, she made me a traditional Welsh costume—skirt, shawl, and apron—to wear at the National in Utica. She is not too keen on baking, but she always made me Welsh cakes to bring in for cultural food days at school. She has no interest in hiking, but came along with a smile as my dad led us on hours-long searches through heavily wooded New York state lands looking for the foundation of our Welsh ancestors' home. My mom might not be considered the typical Welsh mam, but she has a kindness and patience in her spirit that has helped me become who I am.

“Oh, that's lovely!” the women exclaimed.

“You *have* to read that for Annie,” said the younger woman, rising from her chair.

“Why don't you give a quick tour while I go find her?” she said, nodding to the man in black who was now standing in the doorway to the kitchen with his own cup of tea.

While the woman left to find “Annie,” the man led me up the stairs to the second floor of the building. The first room we looked at was called the front bedroom. The tour guide asked me who I thought slept there. There was a large bed and beautiful wooden furniture along the edges of the room. I had not seen the other rooms yet, but from the layout of the house I could tell that this was probably the biggest bedroom. It also faced the street below and had a nice view of the neighborhood.

“The parents?” I guessed.

He explained that this was actually the guest room. The class distinctions in Swansea were so prominent in Dylan Thomas's time that families found themselves in a constant

struggle to keep up appearances and maintain their status within the community. Dylan's family was no different. The front room, like the living room below, was set up to make a statement of wealth to visitors.

This emphasis on class affected not only Dylan's living situation but his sense of identity. In early 20th century South Wales, the tour guide explained, it was considered a symbol of the lower classes to speak Welsh. English was the preferred language of communication and came to symbolize progress and success. In North Wales, where the culture was—and still is—more rural, Welsh continued to be spoken regularly. But in the South, speaking Welsh was frowned upon among the upper and middle classes. For this reason, Dylan Thomas knew hardly any Welsh even though both of his parents were native speakers. Dylan was discouraged from using Welsh, and never made an effort to learn. Because of this, his poetry is composed entirely in English and he has become one of the most well-known English language poets of the twentieth century. In comparison to the Welsh-speaking relatives I had just visited in North Wales, this conception of Welsh identity seemed completely different. Dylan Thomas was undoubtedly Welsh—he was born in Wales and lived in Wales for the majority of his adult life. Even so, he could not speak the native language that so many claimed to be the primary identifying factor of their Welsh identity.

The next room we came to was Dylan's. I say room, because it was technically his bedroom, but the area itself was hardly bigger than a closet. It had space only for a small bed and writing desk. In restoring the house, the curators strove to make Dylan's room appear exactly as it once was—except for one thing. Painted onto the wall just next to the window and curving around the gas lamp were two lines from "A Child's Christmas in

Wales”: *I turned the gas down, I got into bed. I said some words to the close and holy darkness, and then I slept.* Seeing the words, I instinctively reached for my camera. I needed to get a picture of this for my brother Tom. These were the ending lines of the poem, words that I had grown accustomed to hearing my brother deliver with just the right length of pauses between commas in our shared rendition of “A Child’s Christmas in Wales.”

Because the piece had such a significant role in our lives, my brother and I came up with a plan one year to pay tribute to Dylan Thomas. We were going to commit the 2,904-word prose poem to memory. We sat over my copy of the piece one fall with a pencil and divvied it up into roughly four sections. I would start the poem, Tom would take the next section, I would recite the third, and he would finish it off. The goal was to have the poem memorized by Christmas that year, as a surprise to our grandparents who were also Dylan Thomas enthusiasts. Tom and I were both college students at the time—it would take some extra work, but we were both committed.

It’s one thing to read a beautiful piece of poetry: it’s another to memorize it, to *know* it. The words become a part of you and you feel their meaning so much more intensely. In the weeks before Christmas, I devoted hours to memorizing my half of the poem. I repeated the lines to myself all day, every day: in the shower, before I went to sleep, as I was eating breakfast. My roommate would walk in on me as I sat with the book in my lap, mouthing the words to myself in a sort of half-whisper. As I walked to class, Dylan Thomas came with me: *Not many those mornings trod the piling streets: an old man always, fawn-bowlered, yellow-gloved and, at this time of year, with spats of snow, would take his constitutional to the white bowling green and back, as he would take it wet or fine on Christmas Day or Doomsday...*

On Christmas day, my family sat around a candlelit table at my grandparents' house with my aunt and uncle after finishing a hearty dinner prepared by my grandmother. Tom and I sat opposite each other at the table and waited for a lull in the conversation. Rebecca, who rarely interjected in the intellectual conversations that sprung up at Grandma and Grandpa's house, sat up in her chair and addressed me across the table, just like we had practiced beforehand: "Liz, what was Christmas like when you were a kid?"

I took a breath and began: "One Christmas was so much like another, in those years around the sea-town corner now and out of all sound except the distant speaking of the voices I sometimes hear a moment before sleep, that I can never remember whether it snowed for six days and six nights when I was twelve or whether it snowed for twelve days and twelve nights when I was six."

One sentence down, I continued on to the next. All around the table, my grandparents, aunt, and uncle stared in confusion.

"All the Christmases roll down toward the two-tongued sea, like a cold and headlong moon bundling down the sky that was our street; and they stop at the rim of the ice-edged fish-freezing waves, and I plunge my hands in the snow and bring out whatever I can find."

"Ahh..." my grandmother said, smiling. She had figured it out.

"In goes my hand into that wool-white bell-tongued ball of holidays resting at the rim of the carol-singing sea, and out come Mrs. Prothero and the firemen," I continued, and everyone listened in delight as they slowly realized what I was doing and any traces of the previous conversation were forgotten.

I finally came to the end of the first section and my brother chimed in from across the table: "Years and years ago, when I was a boy, when there were wolves in Wales, and birds

the color of red-flannel petticoats whisked past the harp-shaped hills, when we sang and wallowed all night and day in caves that smelt like Sunday afternoons in damp front farmhouse parlors...” The eyes which had been on me shifted to my brother as the surprise got even better: we had both memorized the poem.

Fifteen minutes later, my brother finished with those last tender lines that were painted on the walls of Dylan Thomas’s bedroom. The table erupted in applause and my grandparents remained baffled at what had just taken place. We had gone back to that special tradition of poem recitation that is not valued in America to the same extent as it is in Wales.

When others heard about how we had memorized the poem, my brother and I were recruited for several performances. In the same way we had stood side by side at the fronts of churches in our youth, blissfully crooning out the Welsh chorus to *Calon Lân* as the “special music” portion of Dad’s *gymanfas*, we were again standing side by side and proclaiming our Welsh pride for anyone who would listen. Our high school English teacher—the same one who had encouraged me to write my senior research paper on Dylan Thomas—invited us in to all of her classes and we recited the poem for group after group of students. My brother always started his section by securing a monocle in his eye and drawling out the words like one of the wise old uncles in the story: “Years and years ago, when I was a boy...” The students listened intently as we delivered Thomas’s brilliantly crafted picture of a child’s life in Wales. We had finally found a way to share our treasured Welsh culture with people who had no connection to Wales, and it felt incredibly fulfilling.

Standing in Dylan Thomas’s bedroom and tracing the words of the poem across his wall with my finger, I took a moment to visualize the poet as a child sleeping in the

cramped bedroom, and as a teenager writing at the tiny desk. In letters he wrote to Pamela Hansford Johnson, a friend and correspondent during his late teens and twenties, Thomas describes his room as a “tiny, renovated bedroom, all papers and books, cigarette ends, hardly any light. I really have to go out to turn around.” Although his personal space was small, it was still enough to foster his creativity. In another letter to Johnson, dated May 2, 1934, Thomas writes, “I have decided not to get up today, to lie serene in my bed and write of the things that go round me, the shapes of shadows on my mountainous knees, the curving of my immaculate breast and the life in my ever-scribbling fingers.”

I followed the man in black downstairs, where Annie, the curator of the house, had emerged from the front room. She had been meeting with journalists from *The Guardian*, who were working on a piece that would describe the various places in Wales where Dylan Thomas lived. The two old ladies had left and the living room felt emptier than it had before my tour upstairs.

“This is Liz, from New York,” the younger woman introduced me. “You must read the piece she wrote!”

Annie was a small woman with short blonde hair and an energy that moved with her. After reading my piece, she exclaimed, “Oh, that’s wonderful,” and pulled me in for a big hug. I was not fully prepared for her enthusiasm, and was caught off guard when she planted a kiss on my cheek.

“Come meet Liz!” she called over my shoulder, beckoning to the journalists in the other room. I heard them shuffling behind me and then two faces appeared in the doorway.

“This is Liz, from New York!” Annie said, introducing me. I wondered what I had done to win her over so quickly. It sounded as if she had known me for years. We were old pals, standing in the doorway to Dylan Thomas’s living room.

“Ahhh, New York,” the journalists said, and I corrected them, “*Upstate* New York.”

“So...Buffalo?” one asked. He had a stereotypically hipster look, with the exact style of dress I might have envisioned a British journalist to have: fedora, thick black glasses, striped button-down shirt, and leathery pointed shoes.

“Close to there!” I said. Actually, Buffalo was three and a half hours away, but that was close enough for me. We all retired to the living room again and I took my seat by the fireplace where I had sat with my cup of tea earlier that afternoon. The Welsh Mam’s Day event was long over by this point, so the group of us sat in a circle very casually sipping tea and chatting.

Eventually, the journalists had to leave, and only the staff and I remained in the house. I didn’t want to leave but I also didn’t want to overstay my welcome. Annie stood up abruptly and asked if the members of the staff could join her in the front room for a minute. I zipped up my jacket and closed my backpack while everyone else went into the next room. I figured her calling an impromptu meeting was my cue to leave. Annie and her staff had a lot to do to get ready for that evening, when they were hosting a classy poetry event that I had also seen advertised on the website. Welsh poets would be reading their work throughout the house and visitors could attend for an entrance fee of £10. I had been tempted to stay for the event, but did not want to spend the £10 and would have to cut out early anyway to catch a train back to Bath. I had a busy day in the morning, when I would be taking another solo trip through Wales, this time to the town of Haverfordwest and to St.

David's Cathedral, one of the largest ancient churches of Wales. If I left right away, I could still get to some of the museums the professor had pointed out before heading back to the train station. I pretended to look through an illustrated book of "A Child's Christmas in Wales" while I heard whispering voices coming from behind the closed door to the next room.

A few minutes later, Annie emerged with the younger woman and the man in black. She put her hand on my shoulder and said, "Liz, we'd like you to stay for tonight."

Her request was the opposite of what I had been expecting. I was convinced she was about to tell me I had been there long enough and should move on with my travels through Swansea. Flattered as I was by her request, however, I explained to Annie that I couldn't make the poetry event. I would only be able to stay for a half hour or so in order to catch the last train back to Bath.

"No, we've already considered the train situation," Annie said. "We want you to stay here tonight. You can pick any room, even Dylan's."

For the second time that afternoon, I found myself gawking at the words I had just heard. The curator of Dylan Thomas's house was offering me to SLEEP in Dylan Thomas's CHILDHOOD BEDROOM for FREE. After much online scouring prior to coming to Swansea, I had discovered that 5 Cwmdonkin Dr. was available for rent, but cost about £130 a night and needed to be booked weeks in advance. As a poor college student, I had sadly written off that option the moment I saw the price tag.

Needless to say, I was overwhelmed by her offer. I could hardly fathom the thought of sleeping in the tiny room that had so captivated me earlier that afternoon. I wanted so badly to say yes to Annie and the incredible opportunity she had so kindly offered me, but I

knew I could not do it. I had to catch a train back to Bath that night so that I could get on another train the following morning for part two of my weekend adventure in Wales. I had already bought my train tickets and needed to go home to get a change of clothes and print off my Google Maps directions. I explained my predicament to Annie and she understood.

But my time spent stalking Dylan Thomas's life did not end there. The younger woman offered to take me to Cwmdonkin Park, the park down the road where Dylan Thomas played as a child and which served as inspiration for several of his poems, especially those about nature and childhood. Like his birthplace, the park looked plain and ordinary. It had large open grassy areas, clumps of trees and shrubs, and concrete pathways lined with a few benches. If it were not for my guide, I would have had no idea that this was the park I had heard so much about in relation to Dylan Thomas.

"There should be a rock here somewhere," the woman said, peeking into an enclosed area of plants and trees near one of the pathways.

"Ah, yes, there it is!" she said, pointing to a round stone that was partially hidden by the surrounding foliage. As I leaned closer, I could see that the last three lines from "Fern Hill," one of Thomas's poems, were inscribed on the stone:

Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,
Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

The poem reflects memories of time spent at an aunt's house during Thomas's youth, and begins with the lines:

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,
The night above the dingle starry,
Time let me hail and climb
Golden in the heydays of his eyes

Recalling the playful, innocent tone of the poem, I conjured a scene of childhood, and could not help but think back to the movie of “A Child’s Christmas in Wales,” where a small boy peers in on the lives of his older relatives and members of his community. He recognizes his distinction from the adult world, but instead of trying to grow up too quickly, he embraces his childhood and continues in his mischievous ways: throwing snowballs, pretending to smoke cigarettes, playing tricks on his uncles, and scheming with his friends.

I said good-bye to my guide and followed her directions back to the main part of the city. I still had time before my train came, so I checked out some of the places the professor had pointed out to me earlier that morning, including the Swansea Museum and the National Waterfront Museum. Since the professor had taken me to lunch, I still had a sandwich and some snacks in my backpack, so I decided to have my own picnic dinner on the beach at Swansea Bay.

Finding some abandoned stairs, I sat down and pulled out the lunch I had packed for myself early that morning. The beach lay sprawled in front of me with thousands of crusty shells wedged into the still-damp sand. It was quiet, except for the steady roll of the ocean stirring just beyond the sand. *The silent one-clouded heavens drifted on to the sea.* I bit into my peanut butter and jelly sandwich and smiled at the familiar taste. I had eaten hundreds of these sandwiches in my lifetime, but never on the beach at Swansea Bay. I was glad no one was there to watch me—a typical American savoring her comfort food while traveling in a foreign place.

The more I reflected on my experiences in Swansea, the less ashamed I felt of the mixed identity I represented. I was not the only one who did not fit the perfect version of “being Welsh.” The Wales that Dylan Thomas experienced as a child in the early 1920s was

not the same Wales I saw on my visit in 2012, and it was not the same Wales that John S. grew up in either. The people had changed; the customs had changed; many of the buildings had been destroyed and rebuilt over time. But it was still Wales—and Wales was constantly evolving. As the land transformed, so did the people and the overarching idea of what it meant to “be Welsh.”

And it was not just the toll of decades that accounted for the changing definition of Welsh identity. I thought back to my time in Cardiff and in Aberdaron, and about how dramatically different those experiences had been in comparison to my visit to Swansea. Cardiff was a bustling metropolis that thrived on its diversity of ethnic composition. Aberdaron and the other villages I visited in North Wales considered the language and a close-knit sense of community as primary components of Welsh identity. Swansea represented a different slice of Wales, with its almost complete lack of the Welsh language and strong focus on industrialization. Swansea was still “Welsh,” but in a very different way. Just like in America, where each state has a distinct identity, Wales also was a land of many cultures.

Taking a last look at the beach, I consulted my Google Maps directions one more time to make sure I knew the way back to the train station. I slung my backpack over my shoulder, brushed the sand off my jeans, and headed toward the train station with the sound of the ocean still churning behind me.

The North American Festival of Wales

The *Eisteddfod* is the final expression of all that is most vital and lovable in Welsh life, and reflects to perfection the Welsh character, with its love of good company, gaiety, music, poetry, oratory, and intellectual rivalry.

—Dr. Islyn Thomas, O.B.E., *Our Welsh Heritage*

In a hotel meeting room in Scranton, Pennsylvania, two white-haired women wearing green aprons carefully unpacked boxes of cookbooks, tea cups, postcards, and doilies. They neatly arranged the contents of the boxes on a table, just like the other pairs of white-haired men and women were doing all around the room. Some folded t-shirts or unpacked scarves and blankets. Others laid out jewelry adorned with silver Gaelic crosses. A man in one corner of the room unpacked a pile of books and spread them out in a fan on the table in front of him. Someone had turned on a CD player and delicate harp music leapt from table to table. A banner over the door read “Marketplace.”

A few hundred miles south, I packed up my suitcase in Gettysburg, filled my car with gas, and hit the road north. I was on my way to the annual North American Festival of Wales (NAFOW). Set in a different U.S. city each year, the event attracts hundreds of people of Welsh descent. Having attending several of these festivals with my family from the time I was five years old, I was familiar with the set-up of the weekend. There would be concerts featuring Welsh musicians, seminars on notable Welsh-Americans or Welsh communities within the United States, Welsh language classes, a marketplace selling goods from Wales, an *eisteddfod* (music, arts and poetry competition), a church service, and the central event of the weekend: an enormous *gymanfa ganu* during which six hundred Welsh-

Americans would join together to sing—partly in Welsh and partly in English, and always in four-part harmony. The weekend was an explosion of Welsh heritage, and anyone dedicated enough to attend usually had an interesting story of their connection to Wales.

Scranton was a three-hour drive north of Gettysburg, where I was beginning my senior year of college, and a three-hour drive south of Clinton, where my parents and sister still lived. I had planned to drive up to Scranton on Friday night so that I could arrive at the hotel and conference center on Saturday morning. For the first time, I would be attending the festival as more than a regular participant. This year, I would be running an event. I had arranged a gathering at the festival for people who had been using the Welsh language course “SaySomethingInWelsh.com” (SSiW), and I did not want to be late to my own meeting. Earlier that summer, I had begun taking oral language lessons online, and had gone through fifteen out of twenty-five half-hour lessons that made up the introductory course. Two subsequent intermediate courses were available after completion of the first. My dad had also been taking lessons over the summer, and we tried to practice with each other over the phone from time to time, so that something other than our computer screens would hear our heartfelt sentences: *Dw i eisiau agor y drws*. I want to open the door. *Bydda i’n cerdded i’r pub heno*. I will go to the pub tonight. *Wnest ti gysgu yn dda?* Did you sleep well?

A week or so before the festival, I had written a note on the SSiW support forum asking if anyone attending NAFOW would be interested in meeting other users of the course from across the country. I received a few positive responses so I got in touch with the director of the festival and found a time and a place where we could meet up. Knowing that the majority of people attending this meet-up would not know each other and would not

know me, I added to my entry on the forum that I would be wearing a bright red Welsh rugby shirt in hopes that I would be easy to find. “Meet in the tea room at 11:45!” I wrote.

On Saturday morning, I checked out of my hotel room and sat down for a cup of coffee and a bagel in the hotel lobby.

“*Bore da!*” said a voice, and I looked up to see a man enthusiastically gesturing to my shirt. He had sunglasses pushed on top of his gray hair and a red lanyard hung around his neck with “NAFOW” printed along the outside in white block letters. Even if he hadn’t greeted me in Welsh, I could have guessed he was in Scranton for the festival.

“*Bore da,*” I responded, and he uttered a question I could only take to mean, “Do you speak Welsh?”

After eight years of Spanish classes in high school and college, my first reaction to hearing a foreign language was to respond “*un poco,*” but I reconsidered and said “a little,” pinching my fingers together to demonstrate. He asked if he could sit with me so I motioned to the empty chair across the table. We introduced ourselves and I found out he was not from Pennsylvania or New York or anywhere on this side of the Atlantic. He was from Pembrokeshire, in Wales!

Eirian had come to the festival with three others from his town. They had been to Toronto earlier in the week and were headed to New York City after the conclusion of the festival. I asked him if he was visiting relatives in the States and he told me that he had no personal link to America, but had always been fascinated by the Welsh-American culture. “This is my fifth time in America,” he said, proudly. “And every time it’s been to attend a Welsh-American event. I find it so interesting that the Welsh culture still survives in the States.”

“So have you been to this festival before?” I asked.

“No, no, this is my first time.”

He told me about attending Welsh Heritage Week and about the Welsh-American musicians he had seen perform over the years. The excitement in his expression reminded me of my own excitement traveling to Wales the previous semester. Just like Eirian, I had been fascinated by how one culture was celebrated on two sides of the ocean, and wanted to learn all I could about the connection between Wales and America. Within a few minutes, Eirian and I found that we had more than just our excitement in common: we had a wealth of mutual experiences and acquaintances. He was familiar with every location I had traveled to in Wales, and when I told him about meeting M. Wynn Thomas, he asked, “Tall chap with glasses?” That was him.

I mentioned that my dad was heavily involved in the Welsh-American community in New York and that he traveled across the country conducting *gymanfa ganus*.

“Ah, Jay Williams!” he said. “I’ve got his book at home. I’ve been meaning to meet him!”

If this interaction had taken place a year or even six months earlier, I would have been floored by the fact that this man from Wales who I had met in a Scranton hotel lobby somehow knew my father. But after all my traveling in Wales and conversations with people in various communities, I realized that Wales was, as Eirlys would say, “little.” The country itself was tiny, and the communities within were so tightly-knit, that chances were good I would have a connection with every person I met.

As Eirian and I finished our breakfast, I met the three women who had come over with him from Pembrokeshire. They had been at the festival since Thursday and had been

taking taxis and buses into town from the hotel. Since I had four extra seats in my Kia Spectra, I asked if they would like to ride into the city with me.

“Oh, bless you!” the women cooed. “That would be wonderful!”

A few minutes later, I signaled onto Route 81 with three elderly women babbling in the back seat of my car. They switched in and out of English (probably out of politeness to me) and the woman in the passenger seat told me all about her grandchildren. We arrived in the heart of Scranton and the woman beside me excitedly pointed to a building up ahead.

“There it is!” she said. “You see it?”

The conference center was impossible to miss: it had a large Welsh flag hanging in the entrance along with a banner that read: “North American Festival of Wales.” I circled around the back of the building to look for parking as the three in the back chatted together in Welsh. I was soon caught in the confusion of one-way streets with the threat of parallel parking creeping ever closer, when Eirian called out from the back, “Let’s park in this pub!” He motioned to a restaurant labeled Kildare’s Irish Pub with a small parking lot in front. A large sign read “Customer Parking Only.”

“Park here and I’ll go in and ask if it’s okay,” said Eirian.

I parked in the lot and Eirian went inside. A silence settled over us and I finally had a chance to catch my breath and marvel at the situation, which I never could have predicted when I checked out of the hotel that morning. I was in the middle of downtown Scranton with three Welsh ladies packed into my little car waiting for a man I had just met in a hotel to emerge from an Irish pub.

Feeling as if I had been momentarily thrust into the role of hostess, I tried to make conversation with my guests as we waited in the car. “What’s the Welsh for car park?” I

asked, remembering the British term for “parking lot.” They all responded in unison, eager to help me learn, and I tried to repeat the phrase they had collectively spoken. It was funny how after hours and hours of Welsh lessons online, I still did not know much basic vocabulary. That morning, I had practiced some of my Welsh phrases on Eirian and he commented on my Northern accent, something I must have picked up from the speaker in my SSiW lessons. I felt a hint of nervousness as I remembered the meet-up scheduled for later that morning. My parents were expecting to get in to Scranton around 11:30 a.m., so if no one else showed up to my meeting, at least my dad and I could practice our Welsh.

Eirian returned to the car and reiterated the message of the employees inside the pub. If we promised to come in and eat there for lunch, we were free to park in their parking lot.

“It helps to play the part of the confused tourist,” he told me. “Just go in there and pretend you haven’t an idea what’s going on. It always works!” His words reminded me of my own travels in Wales, where I donned the role of oblivious American more than a few times.

Once inside the conference center, we parted ways and agreed to meet in the tea room around noon so that I could introduce Eirian to my dad. As I went up to the registration desk to collect my name tag and accompanying red lanyard, I saw someone had taped a sign up to the wall reading “SSiW Meetup: Tea Room, 11:45.” Beside it was one of the SSiW flyers that I had posted on the forum and encouraged people to print out before coming. Not expecting anyone to actually take my suggestion, I had printed a stack of flyers out at the library before leaving Gettysburg. *Well, at least one person’s coming*, I thought.

I had just enough time to scope out the tea room before the appointed meeting time. The “room” was not a room at all, but a big open area with large drums of hot water for tea

and plates of Welsh cakes spread out on a long table. Surrounding me was a blur of people sitting around tables and chatting away over cups of tea. The nerves came on again as I wondered if anyone in the room was there for the SSiW meet-up and if any of them would identify themselves or approach me.

Out of the crowd, a familiar smile appeared and I breathed a sigh of relief. My mother approached me, her hands cradling a cup of tea.

“Hi, Liz!” she said. “Dad and Becca are over there.” She motioned to where my dad and sister were sitting, each of them in khakis and a hunter green top. My dad’s shirt had a little red dragon over the left breast and my sister’s new sweatshirt said “WALES” across the front.

I followed my mom to where they were sitting and my dad asked about my drive in. I had just begun to tell him about the people I had met in the hotel lobby that morning when out of the corner of my eye people started standing up from their chairs all across the room. Mid-conversation with my dad, I was suddenly swarmed from all angles with people introducing themselves to me and letting me know what level in the course they had reached so far.

“I’m only on Lesson Seven,” one woman said, “but I’m really liking it so far!”

The excitement buzzed around me and I listened to the enthusiastic stories of every person that approached me. I kept hearing my name on the peoples’ lips and everyone seemed eager for me to tell them what to do next. My mom touched my shoulder from behind. She and my dad had found an empty room just off the tea room that would easily accommodate the mass of people that had gathered.

I ushered people into the room, where a group had formed around a big table and those without chairs were sitting on the floor. I counted 25 people, all of whom were excitedly talking at once. Four women had come from Cornell University, where they were taking SSiW lessons together and practiced with each other on a weekly basis. One man had driven several hours and paid the registration fee for NAFOW just to attend the SSiW meet-up. Some people had been taking the Northern course and others had been taking the Southern course. One woman was from Illinois; another was from Washington, D.C. Everyone in the room was at a different level in the SSiW course, but they all had one key thing in common: a genuine enthusiasm about learning the Welsh language.

The room glowed with positive energy, and instead of just meeting other SSiWers and practicing our conversations, the meet-up turned into a sort of business meeting where we started brainstorming ways to improve the SSiW community in America. The website primarily drew users from Wales, where they had developed a smooth system of weekly meet-ups and SSiW events. In America, where the Welsh populations were much more spread out and disconnected, there was hardly any sense of community. Thrust into the role of moderator, I stood at the front of the room and directed the flow of conversation, making sure everyone had the chance to voice their opinion.

One idea that seemed very popular among the group was to set up a virtual chat room or online meet-up schedule for Americans who could not get to physical meet-ups. Some suggested they would like the option of being paired up with a partner who they could Skype with to practice their Welsh. Another suggestion was to have a specific time set aside each week for people to group-Skype, designating different times for different levels. The consensus from the group meeting was that many Welsh Americans were trying to learn

Welsh on their own and would benefit from a more focused online community and support system. I took down the names and e-mails of everyone who came to the session, and got two volunteers to help set up and administer online groups for the Northern course and the Southern course. Little did I know that a week and a half later, I would be presenting the ideas generated from the meet-up via video conference call to Aran Jones, CEO and Founder of Say Something in Welsh.

An hour after our meeting had begun, the room emptied out and only my family and I remained. “Nice job, Liz,” my sister said. In the vacant room, I could finally take a deep breath and reflect on the role I had just filled. At that moment, in Scranton, Pennsylvania, I was not “the English major” or “the student intern”—titles I had grown accustomed to identifying myself with in Gettysburg. I was the unifier of Welsh-speakers. I was the face of current Welsh-American culture. People in pockets all over the United States were eager to learn a dying language from a distant land, and I was going to be instrumental in making that happen.

Four months earlier, I sat on a thin wooden pew in the back of a church in North Wales with my distant relative Eirlys. At the front of the church, a dark-haired man ran through a list of criticism for each of the children who had just competed in the singing portion of the local *eisteddfod*. He wore a suit and scowled into a notebook, periodically glancing up from his notes to address the child in question. The judge spoke entirely in Welsh, so I did not know what he was saying, but I could tell from the tone of his voice what he was implying, and if I followed his gaze to the reddened face of the poor boy or girl enduring the remarks, I could deduce the extent of his harshness. When Eirlys’s

granddaughter Catrin got up to compete in the category of poem recitation, she had just the right mix of diction and expression to win her second place and a prize of £4.

An *eisteddfod* was an arts, literature, and music competition. The events were common in Wales, especially among school-aged children, and were considered one of the most sacred traditions of the Welsh, dating back to at least the twelfth century. Even in the present day, the Welsh valued their arts, music, and poetry on a level that Americans could not fully relate to. In America, we gleefully applauded our mediocre children as they trembled on stage at the school talent show. We presented our sons and daughters with bouquets of flowers or hearty embraces no matter how awfully they butchered their piano solo or violin performance. In Wales, even the most juvenile performers were given criticism and strict suggestions for improvement. While it might have seemed like a harsh system to Americans, the quality of arts, music and poetry produced by the Welsh was astounding and proved that the system was effective. Their vocalists—even the young ones, like those I heard at Catrin’s *eisteddfod*—created the purist ripples of sound imaginable. Their poetry recitations were not just reiterations of classic poetry, but carefully rehearsed packages of diction and delivery. It was no wonder the National *Eisteddfod*, hosted in a different Welsh town each year, consistently attracted thousands of spectators and countless more via internet or television broadcast. The Welsh were good at what they did, and their culture fostered the continuance of that high standard of perfection in the arts.

In the afternoon after the SSiW meet-up, my sister Rebecca and I attended an *eisteddfod* competition for semi-professional solo voice. The event had three competitors, and each sang two selections: one in Welsh and another in the language of her choice. After each contestant had performed, the judges deliberated between each other and the audience

waited in silent suspense for the announcement of the winner. While the winners of the *eisteddfod* in North Wales were each given a few pounds as a prize, the winner of this competition would be awarded \$3,500 and guaranteed a spot at competing in the National *Eisteddfod* in Wales the following year. This was a big deal.

I was in a show choir once, before our high school choral teacher's position got cut due to budget constraints. By the time I graduated from high school, one teacher directed the high school and middle school bands, another was covering the high school and middle school choirs, and a third was in charge of all the orchestra students, grades four through twelve. The arts had been spread thinner and thinner over the years, and participation in ensembles declined as more cuts were made. Music was steadily losing its value back home; at NAFOW, and in Wales, it was stronger than ever.

After a few minutes of hushed discussion, the judges stood and addressed the crowd.

"Quite honestly, your breathing was terrible in the second piece," the female judge addressed the first contestant. "It was much too shallow and because of that, your sound suffered in the upper register. You must remember to start every song hand in hand with your breath."

My sister turned to me, horrified, as the judge released her string of harsh criticism. Her look paralleled the one I wore just months earlier, as I listened to the judge's comments back in North Wales, baffled by the fact that it was considered normal to humiliate these children in front of an entire church full of people.

"This is part of it," I told my sister, as if I went to *eisteddfodau* all the time. "They always do this."

As the first day of the festival came to a close, there was one more person I needed to speak with. A few years earlier, I had discovered an online social network called "Americymru.net." The network was similar to Facebook in that users had profiles and could add friends, post comments, and send messages. What united all of the users on the site, however, was their connection to Wales. The website described itself as a place for the Welsh, Welsh expats and persons of Welsh descent to share their experiences of Wales while simultaneously serving as a forum to promote Wales and the Welsh-American community within the United States.

For so much of my life, I equated my Welsh heritage with older and simpler times. I heard stories of my great-great-great-grandparents living on a farm in Wales. I dressed up in the traditional costumes that were modeled on Welsh dress from the mid-19th century. I buried myself in faded black-and-white photographs of unsmiling relatives and filled my ears with songs written by Welsh composers in the 1800s. "Being Welsh" was by no means current. The charm of the culture came not only from its distance overseas, but from its setting in the past. I celebrated it because it represented a different place and a different time—drastically removed from contemporary American college life.

Americymru, like the Super Furry Animals or SaySomethingInWelsh.com, represented a new version of Wales. It represented a recent effort among Welsh-Americans to change the former idealization of Wales as the rural sheep-dotted homeland of our ancestors into something vibrant and relevant in the present day. Fascinated by the proposal of this transition, I decided to contact the man who created Americymru.net, Ceri Shaw.

I found Ceri in the marketplace on Saturday afternoon, selling books and t-shirts at a booth for Americymru. The gray t-shirts on display had "Americymru" printed in green

letters above a dragon filled in with American stars and stripes. The logo combined the red, white and green of the Welsh flag with the red, white and blue of the American flag, illustrating a merging of the two countries.

"Excuse me, are you Ceri?" I asked. He looked vaguely similar to the headshot thumbnail on his Americymru profile that I had tried to memorize the night before. The man looked up from his table of merchandise and I introduced myself, citing the e-mail I had sent him earlier that asked if we could meet for a conversation.

"Of course! Shall we get a cup of tea?" he asked.

"Sure!" I said, knowing in the back of my mind that the tea room had closed about an hour ago, but feeling it might be easier to "discover" that with him than to suggest another location. I followed him out of the marketplace and into the adjacent tea room, where all the cream upholstered arm-chairs were filled with resting attendees. The hot water dispensers had been put away and all that remained of the tea area was a container of sugar packets and a large bowl full of discarded tea bags that had accumulated throughout the day. The scent of tea emanating from the bowl was just slightly off—it had a cool, stale smell so unlike the welcoming aroma of hot tea that had warmed me earlier with memories of sitting in Eirlys's kitchen in Chwillog.

"I think there are some chairs near the theater," I said, remembering a sitting area from earlier in the day. We found the grouping of chairs just around the corner from the registration desk and out of sight and earshot from the bustling festival that was winding down for the day. Ceri took the couch and I perched on an armchair with a notebook in my lap that listed a few questions I had come up with earlier.

The interesting thing about interviews like this one was that I hardly ever looked at my prepared questions. The conversation would almost always take a turn somewhere I wasn't expecting, and I would be given a wealth of new ideas and perspectives to turn over in my head as I walked away. Instead of talking about Americymru.net, which most of my questions focused on, we started talking about the future of the Welsh culture in America. Ceri looked to be in his late 40s, which was young for a NAFOW attendee. If anyone could offer insight into the future of Welsh America, it was him.

Ceri's hands gestured about him, mirroring his enthusiasm. "You know what our biggest mistake was this year?" he asked. "Not renting out the square down there." He motioned in the direction behind me, where a few blocks over, an Italian cultural festival was crawling with live music, craft vendors, and food stands. "There's no reason we're not out there right now. Think how many more people we would get!"

His suggestion surprised me, as I had never associated NAFOW with an event as trendy or attractive to the public as an outdoor festival. Instead of walking around with plates full of ethnic food, we stayed inside, huddled around cups of tea and bits of Welsh cakes. Instead of gathering around a microphoned folk musician on the grass, we holed ourselves up in churches to sing ancient tunes. Instead of showing off our jewelry and crafts in a row of open-air booths, we clumped a few vendors into a room with barely enough space to pass through without risk of shattering a dragon-clad tea-cup. You didn't "walk by" the North American Festival of Wales and decide to stop in for some food or entertainment. You had to plan months in advance and carefully select which seminars and events you wanted to attend.

The setup of NAFOW was not necessarily a bad thing—people who came to the event each year expected the same general format, so they knew what they were going to get. But it was not exactly friendly to outsiders and passerby, like the Italian festival down the street. If the Welsh didn't make their festival more inviting soon, attendance would continue to dwindle—not because the numbers of Welsh people were decreasing but because the older generations so tied to the traditional customs were dying out. Chances were good that some of the people attending NAFOW had Italian blood in them as well, so what was keeping them from celebrating that heritage instead? After all, I was a lot more Italian than I was Welsh. The main reason I was at the Welsh festival was because I grew up in the Welsh-American community still active in Central New York, and that community was fading with every generation.

"Welsh culture needs to be sexy," Ceri said. "We're not like the Italian or the Irish. Everyone claims heritage from those countries, but no one wants to be Welsh. We need to make the Welsh culture more appealing, especially to the youth. Look around yourself at this festival. It's mostly older people, yeah? Pretty soon they're not gonna be around and then who's gonna come to this festival?"

He was right. The majority of people at NAFOW were over sixty. That was not exactly appealing to the younger generation. Unless you were brought up in the tradition of celebrating the Welsh culture, it was highly unlikely that you were going to start.

"So how can we make the Welsh culture more appealing to young people?" I asked him.

This was not a new question for Ceri. He had been wrestling with it for years, ever since he arrived in America and saw firsthand how Welsh culture had come to be

represented in the United States. While much of Welsh-American culture was based in the Northeast, where settlers first landed and communities developed, Ceri had been trying to reinvent the Welsh culture on the West coast. Instead of using the *gymanfa ganu* as the focal point of Welsh celebration, Ceri brought the *eisteddfod* to center stage. This slight change in focus was met with exceptional success. Ceri's "West Coast Eisteddfod," which was in its fourth year, had been held in both Portland and Los Angeles, and attracted hundreds of people each year. It was a one-day event of storytelling and poetry competitions with a grand concert at the end that featured musicians of Welsh descent. Besides the physical event, there was also an online *eisteddfod* run through Americymru.net that corresponded with the West Coast Eisteddfod. The event brought in Welsh poets, authors and musicians, and portrayed the Welsh culture as something current and exciting, exactly the opposite of the North American Festival of Wales.

How do I get tickets? I thought. The West Coast Eisteddfod sounded like something I could bring my friends to. If only Portland weren't thousands of miles away...

"The goal is to bring something like the West Coast Eisteddfod to NAFOW," said Ceri. "I've finally got the go-ahead to start planning something for Minneapolis." NAFOW was set to take place in Minneapolis in 2014, and Ceri was on the planning board for that event.

"We've got to start thinking out of the box," he said.

He was right. I hung onto his words, enthusiastic gestures and all, as he verbalized the thoughts that had been loosely accumulating in my mind about changing the image of Wales in America. If we didn't do something soon to revitalize the Welsh presence in America, it was going to fade out along with its aging population. Celebrating Welsh

culture should be fun and exciting—an experience that people actively want to embrace, not something they halfheartedly acknowledge because their parents or grandparents always did. The current North American Festival of Wales was a great event—don't get me wrong—but it lacked the vivacity and tone that would attract younger generations. Ceri listed off all his ideas for a supplemental festival that would run alongside the traditional NAFOW event but would implement new ways of celebrating Welsh culture in America. The event would emphasize the *eisteddfod* and would offer an outdoor festival with live musicians and activities. As he paused for breath, I jumped in—without thinking, really—to offer my commitment.

"I'm planning to be at Minneapolis for 2014 anyway. Could I be involved in this somehow?" I asked.

"You are? You'll be there?"

Something winced in my conscience as I nodded enthusiastically and happily pledged my participation. To be honest, I had no idea the festival was going to be held in Minneapolis in 2014 prior to our conversation. I also had no idea where I would be in 2014 and what I would be doing with my life at that time. The fun thing about being a senior in college is the absolute uncertainty of what comes next. Hopefully, I would be employed in 2014...at my first real-person job...with limited vacation time. Hopefully, I would have such a thrilling, busy life that I wouldn't be able to take time off or dish out hundreds of dollars on a plane ticket to go sing Welsh songs with a crowd of elderly people in Minneapolis.

But then again, this could be a great opportunity to become more involved in the Welsh community and use my perspective as someone under 30 to bring a different set of ideas to the table. As strange as it was, I loved growing up emerged in the eccentricities of

the Welsh culture. After thoroughly exploring the extent of my Welsh identity, I could appreciate the tremendous benefits of staying in touch with my Welsh heritage. If I hadn't grown up in this community, I never would have been provoked to travel to Wales and explore my ancestry there. I never would have observed the variety of world views contained in a culture that is constantly redefining itself in an increasingly globalized world. I would never have had the value of poetry and music instilled in me from a young age and might never have tried my hand at writing or playing music, two elements of my life that I considered desperately close to who I was.

Maybe this was my chance to be personally involved in the continuance of the Welsh-American community.

"Yeah, I'll be there!" I said.

"That would be great; we could definitely use some extra help! You know, this idea only came to me on Wednesday," Ceri said. He explained that he had brought it up to the NAFOW board earlier that week and a committee had been formed to work on the idea over the next year. "There are eight of us on the committee. Well, nine, including you. We need to propose something substantial next year for it to actually go through."

As I finished up my conversation with Ceri, I felt enthusiastic and optimistic about the future of the Welsh-American community. We had barely spoken about Americymru.net, but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. The social network was a great asset to the Welsh-American community, but the energy and ideas that its founder had to offer regarding the community's physical presence seemed even more essential.

Saying good-bye to Ceri, I wandered back out to the tea room, where my parents and sister were waiting for me. It was almost six o'clock and we had to be back from dinner by seven for a concert featuring a choir from Wales.

"How'd it go?" asked my dad.

"Well, I somehow just signed myself up for another committee..." I said.

I followed them down the stairs and out of the conference center, promising to deliver all the details over dinner. We stepped out into the muggy air and set off down a side street in the direction of a restaurant district a few blocks away. Over the sound of traffic from a busy road nearby, we heard the faint strand of Italian music carried over speakers in the opposite direction. My mom looked at her watch and we all stopped walking as the same thought came over us.

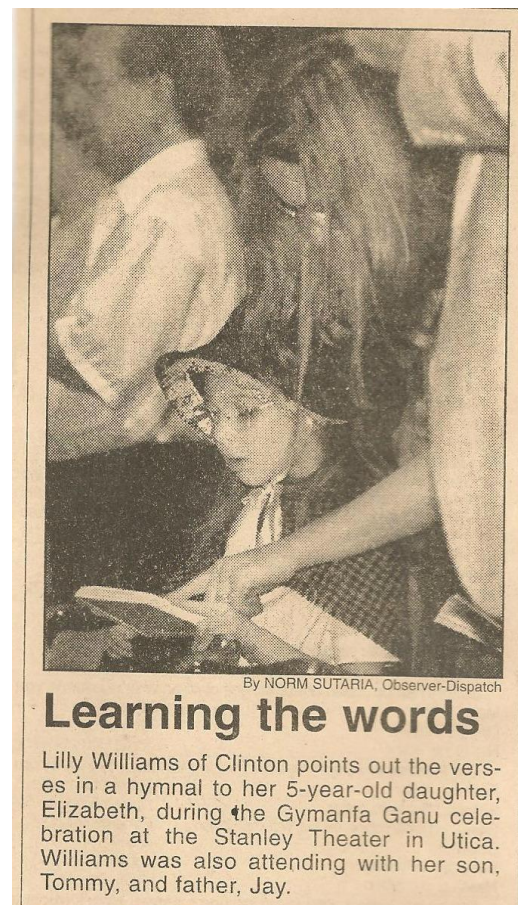
"Do you guys just want to go to the Italian festival for dinner?" asked my dad.

"Yes," we responded, and stashing our bright red NAFOW lanyards in my bag, we followed the sounds and smells toward the rows of booths proudly displaying their red, white and green.

Epilogue

A newspaper clipping from the *Utica Observer-Dispatch* in September 1996 shows a small girl in glasses with hair tucked under a stiff black bonnet. She is focused on a book in front of her, where her mother moves an index finger along a line of text. The caption reads “Learning the words,” a journalist’s summary of the girl’s concentrated action. Earlier that morning, her mother helped assemble the familiar costume she wears in the photo: starched white shirt, black and white checked skirt down to her knees, lacy white apron, red and black checked shawl tied around her shoulders, and black hat with lace trim.

The room fills with the thick and rumbling tone of the organ, and the little girl silently sounds out the words as she prepares to sing: *Calon lân yn llawn daioni, tecach yw na’r lili dlos*. She has heard the words sung hundreds of times before—by her father, by her grandparents, by the little old ladies who sit in the back of the church and fan their faces with folded programs. Today she will join in the song and claim the words as her own. The text of the English chorus goes unnoticed: “A clean heart o’erflowed with goodness, fairer than the lily bright; a clean heart forever singing, singing



through the day and night.” Today, in Utica, New York, she will sing in Welsh: *Dim ond calon lân all ganu, canu’r dydd a chanu’r nos*. Raising his arms, the conductor at the front of the room invites a wall of vocal harmony. The little girl joins in, and suddenly she, too, is caught up in that glorious chorus of voices with the curious feeling she is where she belongs.

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