

A Welsh Quarryman in County Tipperary: Further Light on Griffith Parry

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A Welsh language inscribed gravestone in the churchyard at Castletown Arra in County Tipperary was noted in this journal by Siobhán de hÓir in 1988.¹ It commemorates a man named Griffith Parry. Since then, further research and fortuitous circumstance have enabled the author of this article to extend our knowledge of Parry and his milieu. A more accurate translation of the verse and information on its composer is also provided.

Griffith Parry was a native of the parish of Llandygái in the old county of Caernarvonshire, now Gwynedd. Parry had evidently emigrated to Ireland to work in the slate quarries near Killaloe. He was killed by a fall of rock in the Curraghally slate quarry in October 1847.² Over his grave a memorial stone was raised, on which was inscribed a Welsh verse:

Gwir enwog wr o wynedd - wedd iesin,
sydd isod yngorwedd;
Parry y cyfaill Purwedd,
Pur Wych a Fu Parch iw Fedd

Dewi Wnion

(‘A truly famous man from Gwynedd - of bright appearance, / is he who lies below; / Parry, the friend of pure form, / Most excellently pure was he, Peace to his grave.’)

Nearby there is the grave of another Welshman, Maurice W. Morris from Bangor in Caernarvonshire, who was buried on 18 March 1839. His age at death as given may be 35 but the last digit is now unclear.

The present writer visited the slate quarries in 1991, and hearing of the grave, found time to visit the churchyard. On his return to Wales he learnt of the article published by Siobhán de hÓir from Dr Dafydd Roberts, Curator of the Welsh Slate Museum in Llanberis. Then, a number of years later, he received a letter from a Mr H. Parry Jones of Dolgarrog, in the Conwy valley, in connection with family history research. Mrs Parry Jones’s great grandfather, John Parry, had been a slate quarry agent, and had worked in a quarry in Ireland but they had no record of where John Parry’s father was buried; could he shed any light on the Irish slate industry? John Parry, it turned out, was Griffith Parry’s son, and the history of the family began to fall into place.

Despite the nearness of Wales and Ireland, and despite the fact that both areas were marked by population movement in this period, there is scant evidence for a Welsh-born population in Ireland. There was a transient population of sailors, and maidservants in Dublin who sent money home for chapel-building, and who formed the backbone of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Chapel in Talbot Street, Dublin, when it was established in 1838.³

¹ Siobhán de hÓir, ‘A Welsh Quarryman’s Grave at Castletown Arra, Co. Tipperary’, *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, xxx, 1988, pp 35-8.

² The Killaloe slate quarries are actually in County Tipperary. They consist of a series of pits and their associated rubble heaps extending for nearly a mile east-west in the Barony of Ownney and Arra, parish of Castletownarra, District of Nenagh in County Tipperary.

³ W.J. Parry (ed.) *Cofiant Tanymarian*, Dolgellau 1886 p. 267; Hugh Owen, *Brashun o Hanes Methodistiaeth Calfinaid Mōn*, Liverpool 1937, pp 212-5.

There is hardly any more evidence for Irish settlement in north-west Wales. Irish families made their way to the coal mines of South Wales in their droves, but the huge slate quarries of Caernarvonshire and Merionethshire, which for long dominated the production of roofing materials world-wide, were worked almost entirely by Welshmen, drawn from neighbouring agricultural parishes. There was little need or incentive to recruit from further afield. Slate quarrying is extremely skilled work, whether extracting the blocks of good slate from the rock face or splitting them into thin laminae to make roofing material, and the core of the workforce was made up of men who had been brought up to it since childhood. The unskilled labourers were drawn from the expanding rural population. The use of the Welsh language was therefore practically universal in the quarries, where English remained an unknown tongue until the twentieth century. The Irish-born population of the two counties was in any case extremely low.⁴ A deeply Protestant workforce would have resented any influx of Catholic immigrants, and the only Irishman recorded in the industry was Daniel O'Brien of Ballylegan, Ballynoe, County Cork, who after tramping from Bristol to London to North Wales, settled down to learn the skills of a quarryman and the Welsh language, and was converted to Methodism through the gift of an Irish bible.⁵ However, as other parts of the world began to respond to the growing call for roofing materials in the nineteenth century, men who had made the grade at the rockface or in the counting-house of a Welsh quarry might be offered the management of a slate quarry in Devon, Cornwall, Westmoreland or beyond the seas. Many quarrymen made their way to the slate areas of the USA, where they established their own communities. Their graves, and those of their families, survive in their hundreds, many of them still in immaculate condition, often complete with Welsh-language verses.⁶

In the slate quarrying areas of Ireland there is evidence for an intermittent but marked Welsh presence, which has continued from the early nineteenth century almost to the present day. There were Welsh managers at Valentia quarry in County Kerry from 1826 to 1911.⁷ In Ahenny, County Tipperary, local tradition preserves the memory of an autocratic Welshman, Mr Hughes, 'the man above', who ran the Victoria Quarry at Clashnasmut towards the end of the nineteenth century, and who lived in remote splendour with his unmarried sister.⁸ The little Kilcavan Quarry in County Wicklow was run by Welsh managers in the 1930s and 1940s.⁹ By no means all these Welshmen benefited from their translation. At Westport in County Mayo the ne'er-do-well son of the agent of Lord Penrhyn's Welsh quarries managed a small undertaking, but returned to Wales to write pseudonymous letters to the authorities in London suggesting that his Lordship had no right to the crown wastes on which he was working.¹⁰ In the Nantlle slate belt in Caernarvonshire John Jones Pen y Cae was long remembered for his high opinion of himself, doubly blessed in his own estimation for having managed a quarry in Ireland and for being able to speak English.¹¹

The slate quarries on the east banks of the Shannon together were, and are, the largest in Ireland. Welshmen worked here in the nineteenth century and again in the 1990s, when one of the quarries was reopened by Alfred McAlpine Slate Products, who sent over one of the staff from the Penrhyn Slate Quarry to oversee production. Coincidentally, it was almost certainly at Penrhyn Quarry, long the biggest slate quarry in the world, that Griffith Parry learnt his trade.

⁴ R. Merfyn Jones, *The North Wales Quarrymen 1874-1922*, Cardiff 1982, p. 15.

⁵ W. Hobley, *Hanes Methodistiaeth Arfon, Dosbarth Clynnog*, Caernarfon 1910, pp 162-3.

⁶ Gwilym R. Roberts, *New Lives in the Valley*, Somersworth, New Hampshire 1998, *passim*.

⁷ David Gwyn, 'Valentia Slate Slab Quarry', *Cumann Seandálaíochta is Staire Chiarraí/Journal of the Kerry Archaeological and Historical Society* 24, 1995 (for 1991) pp 40-57.

⁸ Pers. Comm. Mrs Agnes Cody, Ahenny, County Tipperary. His assistant was another Welsh man, Danny Evans; a Daniel Evans was manager at Valentia from 1900, Gwyn, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

⁹ Pers. Comm. the late Meurig Hughes, Y Ffor, Gwynedd (manager, 1938-1942) and the late Councillor Dafydd Orwig.

¹⁰ Dafydd Glyn Jones, *Un o Wyr y Medra: Bywyd a Gwaith William Williams Llandygái*, Denbigh 1999, p. 58.

¹¹ Robert Williams, 'Hunangofiant Chwarelwr: XI Hen Deuloedd Nantlle', *Cymru* 15fed Tachwedd 1900 Cyf. XIX, rhif 112, t. 208. Again, it is possible that he was the former manager of Valentia, where a John Jones is recorded in 1827, Gwyn, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

The Penrhyn Quarry's origins are medieval, but from 1768 onwards it began to reap the benefits of investment from its new owner, Richard Pennant, a West-Indian sugar plantation owner, who spent huge sums of money building cart-roads and in 1801 an iron railway, to connect it to the coast at Abercegin, near Bangor, six miles to the north. It developed on an enormous scale, expanding onto the common land above the earlier workings and creating a huge stepped amphitheatre surrounded by mounds of unusable slate rock. It remained in the hands of the family until the 1960s, when Alfred McAlpine took over, and the quarry remains in active production to this day.

The only Griffith Parry to appear in the registers of Llandygái, the parish in which Penrhyn Quarry is situated, for this period was baptised on 15 December 1787.¹² He was the son of Evan Parry, 'labourer' - which may mean either a farm labourer or a quarry labourer.¹³ The Penrhyn Quarry archive does not preserve full employment records from this period but it is highly likely that he would have begun work there before his tenth birthday. He would have been one of several hundred workers at the quarry. However, the next we hear of him is on 20 March 1816 when he married Jane Evans at the parish church in the port town of Conwy, some fourteen miles away, not a great distance even in Wales in the early nineteenth century, but it is hard to see why he should have made the move. Possibly he had lost his job at Penrhyn in the depression that followed Waterloo. At the time of his wedding he is described as 'of Llandegai', suggesting that he had not yet uprooted himself from his native heath.¹⁴ However, when their son John was baptised on 5 May that year, Griffith Parry is described as of Conwy, 'slate dresser'.¹⁵ A 'dresser' splits the blocks of slate into thin laminae then trims the edges to make the roofing tile. There were quarries in the Conwy valley, though very small compared to Penrhyn; a clue as to his workplace is provided by one of the witnesses at his wedding, John Parry, possibly a relation. On 2 October 1820 a 'John Parry of Gyffin, Quarryman' baptised a son, also called John, at Conwy. Gyffin is a parish immediately to the south of the town where the small Llechan Quarry, which had been exploited in earlier years, was briefly revived around this time.¹⁶ It is likely, though incapable of proof, that John and Griffith worked there.

How Griffith Parry and his family ended up in Tipperary we are unlikely to learn. A sea-port town like Conwy would always be full of people on their way to and from Ireland, and perhaps when Llechan closed down he took his chance and made his way there. Or possibly he worked elsewhere in the meantime; there is evidence that in this early period the more enterprising quarrymen were prepared to move around from one place to another to look for work.¹⁷ When the Mining Company of Ireland took out a lease on the Killaloe quarries in 1824, they made use of Welsh expertise; a Mr Rogers, who had experience of Welsh slate quarries (but of whom nothing else is known), was working for them in July 1826.¹⁸

The engraving of the Curraghbally pit in 1845 [Plate 1], which shows an intriguing variety of machinery, provides further evidence of Welsh influence.¹⁹ Some of these devices were common to all extractive industries of the period, such as the rod-system to transfer power from a water-wheel to the pumps in the quarry pit. But others are similar to those used in Welsh slate quarries, in particular the unusual design of aerial ropeways spanning the pit, operated by horse-gins. These are known

¹² Griffith Parry's age at death is given as 58 on his grave slab but it is likely that his family had only an approximate idea of his age.

¹³ Caernarfon Record Office, parish registers reel 14.

¹⁴ Caernarfon Record Office, parish registers reel 7.

¹⁵ Caernarfon Record Office, parish registers reel 5. No other children of the marriage were baptised in Conwy in the period 1816-1824.

¹⁶ Llechan was worked in 1687/88 (University of Wales, Baron Hill mss 4725) and Edmund Hyde Hall remarks c. 1810 'In Gyffin a small slate quarry has been opened, but it is worked with little spirit' (Edmund Hyde Hall, *A Description of Caernarvonshire*, Caernarfon 1954, p. 72).

¹⁷ One of the few quarrymen's autobiographies from this period, the memoirs of Robert Williams, published between 1899 and 1901, detail his movements from one quarry to another, in both Caernarvonshire and Merionethshire and a period spent as a foreman in a quarry in Devon, see Robert Williams, 'Hunangofiant Chwarelwr', *Cymru* 1899-1901.

¹⁸ This, and the other information about the quarry's development, is taken from National Library of Ireland IR 553 M2.

¹⁹ Reproduced from George Wilkinson, *Practical Geology and Ancient Architecture of Ireland*, London 1845, plate 2.

from a Welsh context in the 1790s, though they were not, so far as is known, ever used at Penrhyn nor at Llechan.²⁰ The Mining Company of Ireland proposed to employ the 'Welsh system of dressing the slates' but a reference of June 1834 to the use of a water-wheel for dressing the slates - the term normally used for trimming the edges of an already split slate to form a neat rectangle - makes one wonder if the Carter dressing knife had been introduced from the Cornish slate industry.

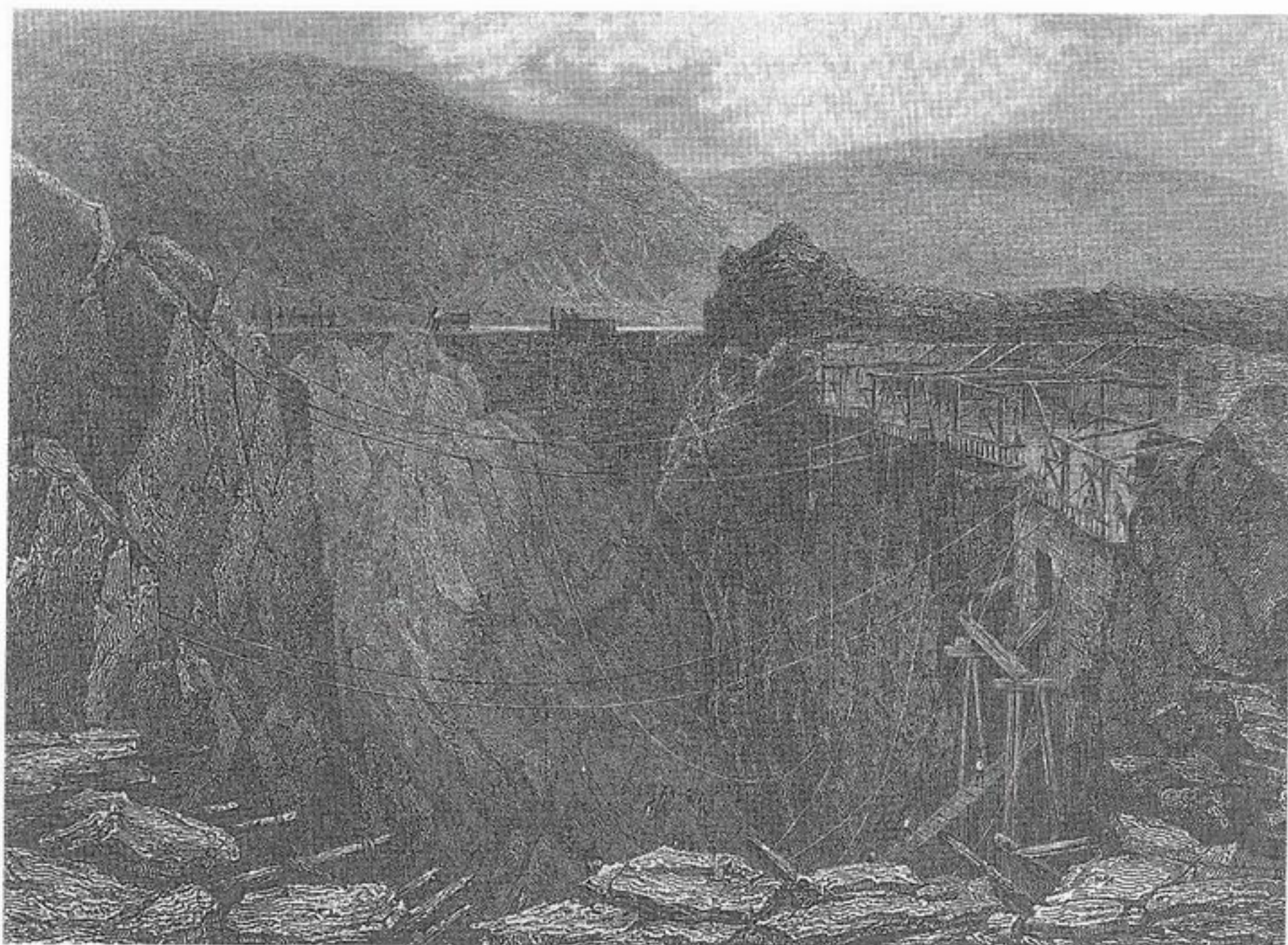


Plate 1 The Curraghbally pit in 1845 showing ropeways similar to those then operating in Welsh slate quarries

Unfortunately what little documentation survives gives hardly any clue as to the origins of the workforce. The great majority were certainly Irish. The Castletown Field Book, undated but evidently from between 1840 and 1847,²¹ records nine houses, inhabited by Thomas Collins, Robert Proctor, Davey Morris, Patrick Mc---, Griffith Parry, Honora Cahill, Michael Gleeson, Margaret Haskett and Catherine Cavanagh, who paid rents of from 20/6d to 35/- per annum. A row of houses still stands, to the north of the Killaloe workings, and it is possible that the nine dwellings recorded in the Field Book were the original nucleus of these two rows. The Griffith Parry mentioned here is almost certainly our man, and Davey (perhaps Dafydd) Morris may be a relative of the Maurice Morris who died in 1839. Were these in fact the only two Welsh families there? In 1867 an advertisement appeared in the *Carnarfon and Denbigh Herald* for a manager, stipulating a preference for a Welsh speaker.²²

²⁰ David Gwyn, 'Hoisting Systems in the Slate Industry of North Wales, *Transactions of the Newcomen Society* 71-2, 1999-2000, p. 185.

²¹ NAI 4.3284, fol 4r-v. The Imperial Slate Company, which took over the quarry in 1840 (NLI IR 553 M2, entry for December 1835, p. 11), is mentioned in this document, as is Griffith Parry.

²² *Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald*, 22 June 1867.

John, Griffith Parry's son, doubtless began work in the quarry as a small boy, assisting his father and learning to judge whether rock was capable of being worked into roofing slates, how to blast the quarry face so as not to shatter the good rock, and how to split and trim the blocks into roofing slates. Having made his mark at Killaloe and perhaps reached managerial level, he evidently decided to return to Wales. Though in 1843 he was described as 'shop keeper' when he married in Tal y Llyn church in Merionethshire, it is likely that he was also working in one of the slate quarries in nearby Corris. On 23 August 1846, when his son Griffith is baptised, he is described as a 'quarry agent' (manager).²³ By 1861 he was running the nearby Ty'n y Berth Quarry in Upper Corris, as well as farming 150 acres.²⁴ At some stage he kept the Prince of Wales public house in Dolgellau, the nearest town of any consequence to Corris,²⁵ and by 1873 he had taken over the Eagles Hotel in Caernarfon as well as running the Cambria Wynne Quarry in Corris, and quarries in Llanfrothen, Merionethshire.²⁶ It is difficult to see how he can have managed these comparatively far-flung businesses, and, under the circumstances, have fathered sixteen children. When he died in 1897 he was publican of the County Vaults in Caernarfon, but his obituary speaks of him as having had the charge of quarries 'in Wales, Ireland and even in Italy'.²⁷ So far, nothing has emerged of his Italian period, but it is clear that he was an unusually peripatetic individual, and evidently a very busy one. Whilst it was by no means uncommon for slate-quarrymen and managers to run a small farm, it was unusual for them to keep pubs. He is buried in Tal y Llyn churchyard.

When news reached him of his father's accident and death in 1847, it was he, we may presume, who asked Dafydd Thomas of Dolgellau, to produce an appropriate *beddargraff* (grave inscription). Dafydd Thomas, whose bardic name was Dewi Wnion, was a carpenter and poet who belonged to several local Friendly Societies and Temperance groups which used to meet (strangely enough) in another local pub, the Angel Inn.²⁸

Griffith Parry's gravestone is a rare, possibly unique, example of a Welsh-language funerary inscription in nineteenth-century Ireland. As such, when set against the many graves of the American-Welsh quarrymen, with their florid memorials, it may seem of little account. Yet Griffith Parry's travels, his death far from home, and the memorial erected to him, form one element within a pattern of emigration and social trauma which affected Wales and Ireland and beyond.

Acknowledgements

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²³ Dolgellau Record Office, Tal y Llyn parish records.

²⁴ Alun J. Richards, *Slate Quarrying in Corris*, Capel Garmon 1994, pp 61-2; 1861 census entry for Ty'n y Berth, Tallyllyn parish, Merionethshire.

²⁵ Information from Mr H. Parry Jones, Dolgarrog.

²⁶ Obituary of Mrs Anne Parry (John Parry's second wife), *Yr Herald Cymraeg*, 16 June 1873; M.J.T. Lewis (ed.), *The Slate Quarries of North Wales in 1873*, Penrhyndeudraeth 1987, p. 59.

²⁷ *Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald*, 9 April 1897; *Yr Herald Cymraeg*, 13 April 1897.

²⁸ Dewi, like Dafydd, is a form of the Christian name David, and the Wnion is the river that flows through Dolgellau. I am grateful to Dr Dafydd Roberts for information on Dewi Wnion.

