

Why Translate a Victorian Novel about Mold?

I was born into a world dominated by three sisters, the children of Caroline Blackwell. Annie (born 1888) was the eldest, Jenny (1890) the most adventurous, and Sophia (1894), the youngest, was my maternal grandmother. The three, all born towards the end of the nineteenth century in the Welsh border town of Mold, were brought up speaking mainly Welsh. The Welsh word for grandmother, *nain*, is the only name I ever called Sophia.

Their father, Joseph, was the eldest of eleven. In 1878 he was working as a tinplate roller at Alyn Tinplate Works on the Denbigh Road when he met Caroline Griffiths (born 1862). As a girl Caroline had lived with her father John Griffiths and her mother Ann at 34 Maes-y-Dre, Mold. There they were neighbours of Daniel Owen and his family, who lived at No. 53. They attended the prayer meetings he held both in Maes-y-Dre and later in Pownalls Row.

Caroline met Joseph Blackwell when she went to work as a tinplate polisher at the Alyn Works, fell in love and married him. They moved into a two-up, two-down terraced house in Pownalls Row and had five children. Their elder son George (born in 1886) became a tinplate cutter at Alyn Works. Annie married Joseph Tarran, a miner from Buckley, while Jennie and Sophia joined a small Welsh diaspora in Higher Broughton, Salford, near Manchester, and went into service before they, too, married; Jennie married a tram-driver called Jack Duckworth, and Sophia a railway worker called Harold Woodcock, and they both settled in Salford. Joseph and Caroline's younger son, Teddy Griffiths Blackwell was born in 1897.

Both George and his father Joseph died in accidents at the tinplate works, leaving Caroline a widow with four surviving children. In those times, before the introduction of Social Security, Caroline had only one asset – the two-up, two-down terraced house which she rented – and somehow she had to use it to keep the whole family.

She made it work for her by turning her front room into a shop. She bought groceries in bulk and sold them on in small quantities to the families living around her, including Daniel Owen, whom she described as a kind and God-fearing man.

Looking back at what she achieved with her family, her strength and tenacity amazes me. She had major disadvantages: she was illiterate and she spoke no English, so she couldn't even read the Welsh she spoke at home. She had never been taught arithmetic and knew nothing of book-keeping, yet she succeeded in running a successful local shop for the next forty years. As she had never been taught how to write, she invented a system of picture writing for herself, and used it to keep track of her business activities. It was a system of notation that she alone could read, but it did everything she needed. She earned enough to bring up her children and live to the ripe old age of 86. Caroline Blackwell died in 1948 when I was one year old, and unfortunately I have no memories of her to visit. But I remember her daughters well, they all still live where I wander in the fields of childhood memory, where they remind me about her, her life and her pride in the success of her childhood neighbour, Daniel Owen.

When I was a child I stayed with my *nain* in her little terraced house in Salford every Friday night, while my mother and father went to the cinema. I loved those cosy evenings sitting in front of the open fire with her. She sang Welsh nursery rhymes to me and told me tales of her childhood and the hard life of Nain Blackwell in the little market town of Mold.

The three sisters all kept in touch, writing to each other and visiting when they could. Annie or Teddy would read out their letters to Caroline, who never learned to read anything other than her own system of notation, the secret of which died with her. When the Great War came, Teddy, Jack and Harold served in France, Jack and Harold with the Manchester Pals, and Teddy with the Flintshire Regiment. Jack returned safely but died in the terrible 1918 flu epidemic; Teddy was reported missing in action but eventually came back shell-shocked; whilst Harold developed Parkinson's disease, returned to Salford an invalid, never to work again, and died young. Soon after the end of the Great War both Jenny and Sophia were widowed. And each had a young child to support.

Sophia, who inherited Caroline's flair for business, got a job in a bakery and confectioners on Great Cheetham Street, Salford. She went on to become manageress of that shop and bought a house close by. And my great aunt Annie still lived near Mold when I was a child, and I visited her and great uncle Joe regularly. I spent every childhood school holiday in and around Mold, where I had many relatives

who Auntie Annie took me to visit, and I got to know the places and characters that had shaped my family.

Despite being an author with many best-selling books to my name, I am dyslexic. It is a gift I have learned to manage, nurture and use to advantage, since it encouraged me to become a physicist. As a young-ster at school I was constantly told I was thick and didn't pay enough attention. I failed the eleven plus and was sent to a secondary modern school in Prestwich, Manchester, where my family, including Nain, was then living.

I was extremely lucky to be taken under the wing of John Hywel Roberts, a young Welshman who had just qualified as a teacher and at one time had struggled with his English, being a native Welsh-speaker. I was educated long before dyslexia was identified and so didn't expect, or get, any special treatment, but John Roberts noticed a considerable mismatch between my verbal reasoning and musical ability on the one hand and my written work on the other; he also quickly picked up that I had a basic grasp of Welsh. He encouraged me to develop my music, which later translated into making the leap from reading and playing a piano score, to learning how to type out the shapes of words I could not spell. He inspired me with a love of history by his beautiful storytelling during history lessons, and he took it on himself to teach me how to read Welsh. (I couldn't really read English at that time, so this was a great act of faith.) He taught me how to relate the shapes of Welsh letters to sounds and helped me to read the words like a music score. He kick-started my academic career and gave me a new perspective on the technique of reading that I adopted and developed. He also encouraged me to think about going to college, and in time I went on to university, where I earned a B.Sc. with first-class honours in electronic engineering and then a Ph.D. in solid-state physics.

As part of my undergraduate engineering course at university I had to study either Russian or German. By that time I had developed a system of reading using symbol recognition (a strange echo of Nain Blackwell's solution to the problem of reading), although, unlike her, I used a system of shape-to-sound reading that relied on the standard-ized symbols of written words. The shapes of German words looked so similar to the shapes of English words that I thought it would cause me confusion with my English reading. Russian words were quite different in shape, so I opted to study them. My Russian tutor was a charming woman who approached her task with great pragmatism. Her students didn't need to learn how to speak and write in Russian; they were going to be examined in translating Russian technical papers. To achieve this she taught us a system of translation she called boiler-plating. The idea is simple: you first look up the meaning of every word from the dictionary and write it above the Russian word. Next you sort the order of the words, using the rules of grammar to sequence verbs, nouns, adjectives, etc. This results in a clunky but sensible rendering of the text. Finally you rewrite it in more fluent English. I can still read out Russian text, as I have occasionally demonstrated at literary festival events in support of PEN International, and I can even produce read-able translations, given enough time.

When Nain died I inherited her few books. Among them was a copy of *Rhys Lewis* which I have kept on my bookshelf ever since. When I inherited it I believed it to be a first edition. Then, in 2013, I went to the Welsh National *Eisteddfod* in Denbigh with my old teacher and friend Dr John Roberts, who had recently retired from Glasgow Uni-versity. As we walked around the *Eisteddfod* field (*y maes*) and went to see the award of the Daniel Owen Memorial Prize to Bet Jones, I told John of my interest in Daniel Owen and how I regretted not being able to read the book I inherited from Nain.

John told me he'd heard about a modern English translation of Daniel Owen's *Tales of the Fireside* (*Straeon y Pentan*) that I might enjoy. We went along to the Welsh Books Council shop and found a copy, which I bought. I did enjoy it, and found the tales of Victorian Mold took me back to childhood Friday evenings, listening to Nain's fireside tales.

As I drove John back to his Welsh home we talked about Daniel Owen and his writing. I asked if there was a modern translation of *Rhys Lewis*, as I had the copy which had belonged to my Nain but had never been able to read it. He said he didn't know of a modern translation, but then he asked me:

'Why not sit down with your dictionary and read it?'

'I struggle with dictionaries. I don't know the English, Welsh or Rus-sian alphabet, and, being dyslexic, I can't learn them.'

‘But you can use a computer,’ John said. ‘Have a look at Bangor Uni-versity’s Online Dictionary, which lets you search online. You’ve told me how you do boiler-plate translation. Boiler-plate it and read it. You can if you want to.’

I realized he was right: I did know how to read *Rhys Lewis*. So I went home, downloaded the iPad app from Bangor University and was able to find the words I didn’t know and set about boiler-plating.

If I wanted to read that book I would have to translate it myself – but I didn’t want to subject the precious copy I inherited from Nain to the severe manhandling my mechanical method of translation required. I needed a less precious copy to work with, so I went to my favourite second-hand book shop, at the Old Post Office in Blaenau Ffestiniog. I consulted the charming woman who runs it, Ms Elin Jones, and asked if she had any early editions of *Rhys Lewis*. She came up with a Hughes and Son first edition published in Wrexham, like Nain’s copy. Then she said, ‘I think I’ve got an earlier edition, if you’re interested.’

I didn’t know there had been an earlier edition, and was amazed when she produced an edition that had been published by J. LL. Morris of New Street, Mold. I bought both copies. Then I started to research the publication history of *Rhys Lewis*, which I have outlined in the Preface to this book.

The Morris edition has a list of subscribers’ names and addresses added as an appendix, so I checked it, hoping to find Joseph Blackwell. But I should have realised that he couldn’t read and write, and certainly couldn’t have afforded to spend four weeks wages on a single book. I did, however, notice that Mr David Davies, Manager of the Alyn Tin-plate Works where Joseph worked, had bought a copy. I now know that Nain’s copy is not a first edition, and she probably bought it second-hand, after becoming established in Salford.

I decided that if I was going to read *Rhys Lewis* I would make sure I read its earliest version, the Morris edition. Then, having painstakingly boiler-plated the text, I was so impressed by the story that I decided to rewrite the boiler-plate translation into modern English. Throughout the four years the whole process has taken I have tried hard to stay true to the story and to the spirit of Mold that I learned from Nain Woodcock and Nain Blackwell. Translating this important novel has been a labour of love to celebrate the memory of my family roots in the town of Mold and to enable me to pass on part of our family history to my children and grandchildren.

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