



Although, the Second World War had been over for several years, rationing of most commodities was still in place. Petrol was provided only for essential services , such as Tomos Thomas the Coal, and Jones the Milk, who had acquired an ex-Army Bedford, replacing his redundant wooden cart, after his horse Ned had died. Indeed there were only a few owners of private cars, like the Doctor and none amongst the workers, who rented homes on the terraced streets. The empty streets allowed the children to use the middle of the road as their football field, their bundled jerseys acting as goalposts.

Eric and Alwyn, two young friends had decided to go fishing, down on the Slate Quay, which lies between the ancient Caernarfon Castle and the harbour. They were intrigued to see a Rolls Royce parked there, it's polished surface and large chrome plated headlights, mirroring the striking suns beams. Tempted as they were to step up onto the footplate, their hands remained garaged in their grey hand-me-down trousers, very aware of the 'do not dare touch' look, cast directly towards them by the uniformed chauffeur, polishing rag in hand. The registration plate SMD, identified the privileged person, who was also the owner of the stacked slates and indeed the Slate Quay the Rolls was parked on.

Above them, standing on the bonnet, the Spirit of Ecstasy, wings unfurled looked down on the boys, somewhat disdainfully. A silent reminder that her owner, Sir Michael Duff of the Faynol Estate, owned 30,000 acres of land and buildings which also included the ownership of one of the largest slate quarries in the world. Dinorwic, where Alwyn's father Will worked and whom also rented his terraced home from the Estate.

Later that evening after eating their lob scows (stew) which had been simmering on the frugal coal fire most of the day, the parents and sons sat huddled closely together closeting the orange glow. No T.V. existed and Will on learning of his sons experience, decided to enlighten his children of his family's history and how the Estate influenced their lives.

"Soon after the ending of the First World War, my parents your grandparents, had died from the Spanish flu and my Auntie, had taken our family of five children under her wing. Her husband's meagre wages, was not enough to feed and cloth us all, and as I was the oldest, I had no choice but to leave school. I was thirteen, and I remember my anxiety, as I walked the 3 miles to the quarry, with my swag bag swinging by my side, containing a hunk of bread, a boiled egg and a small piece of cheese and two Welsh cakes. The Dinorwic had given me a job, in part, as I was young fit and cheap, and because Uncle was a hard worker. The Great Depression was looming, and however miserable the reward it would help towards paying the rent of the small holding and keep our family together."

"According to Welsh tradition, my grand parents, had built Cartref (Home) a ty un nos (one night house) on the common, providing smoke was seen coming out of a gap in the roof in the morning, they were then, allowed to claim the land and house as their own. However, during the late eighteen hundreds, the ownership of the common land was transferred to the wealthy land owners, of the Faynol Estate. On receiving the Royal favour, the Estate decreed that the squatters should pay a nominal rent, several of the Welsh refused. My Grandfather who was also a quarryman, agreed to pay, for fear of being sacked, as the income they derived from farming of the shared land, would not have supported his family." The boys were fascinated, as Will continued "The rental demand again underlined the way the estates extended and imposed their power and influence over the 2000 men they employed at the quarry. Such was the strength of the powerful landowners, such as those at the Faynol and Penrhyn estates, it was futile for the workers to protest at the dangerous working conditions and poor pay."

"Indeed" said Will "in the Summer of 1900 men at Penrhyn, had gone out on strike for over two years, the sacrifice, had gained them little and their village of Bethesda, had suffered badly, whilst hundreds of the men and their families left to seek work in the coal mines of the South. Even today, 46 years later, he said (as his lads listened attentively) angst still prevailed between the families of the strikers and the bradwyr (traitors) who had returned to work prior to the end of the strike. Those men, had received a 5% increase and a gold sovereign and helped Lord Penrhyn break the strike, but they also broke up many a family, with brother fighting brother and no improvement in working conditions were gained. Written on one of the placards, waved, during the strike was "you can be hanged for stealing a sheep but for stealing our mountain, you will be made a LORD?"

"It is a hard tough life, boyo, being a Quarryman, it means starting at 8.00 and finishing at 5.00, no allowance is made for the lack of public transport or that you have had to walk half way up the mountain, to clock in on time. Neither is the weather an excuse sun, sleet, snow or rain makes little difference. The men working on the galleries, after dynamiting, clamber and dangle 60 feet below the edge of the step on the cliff-face, swinging like a pendulum. No safety harness, just a rope twisted around their leg, with one cold hand holding onto the rope, whilst balancing and levering a heavy long iron bar with the other hand, in an attempt to prise free the hanging grey blue slate. The inherited danger, is even greater during the winter, wet surfaces turn to slippery ice, whilst the men edge further, prodding the iron bar in between gaps in the rocks. Sometimes tons of rock will give way, suddenly, to be followed by more from above and lucky indeed is the worker if he escapes, without loosing his cloth cap or indeed his life.

Those working above on the galleries are an essential part of the production chain, below their co-workers start by clearing the tons of waste manually, which often amounts to 80 % or more of the fall, in turn the waste is dumped over the edge to the valley below. Meantime the virgin rock is

manhandled onto waiting trolleys and then hauled into the poor lit tin sheds. The men then shift the rocks manually, ready for them to be measured, sawed and split, and later guillotined to the most economic sizes before being stacked by hand onto carriages, which are in turn pulled by small engines along narrow track rails to the nearest export port. During the winter months it is even harder to hold onto the hammers and cold iron chisels, making it difficult to split the slate, as there is no heating. Most of us wear corduroy trousers tied above the ankle, hobnail boots, a Harris tweed jacket with leather patches sewn onto the elbows, a knitted woollen scarf wound tightly around our necks and bedecked by a cloth Dai cap, it is hardly the uniform to keep us warm and safe. There are also several contractual methods of being paid, all in favour of the landowner, one such contract is to be paid for 100 slates but in return the quarryman must supply the owner 130 hewn slates, the balance being claimed as insurance against breakages....

“So you can see now boys, why there is NOT one father working up in those mountains who wants his son to follow his footsteps. Yes, that's right Llewellyn, I have got a new job, as caretaker and gardener of the old manor of Cwellyn, which has been converted into offices. Yes, we will be moving from William Street as we will be housed in the back, in the old servant quarters and yes, Alwyn, you can both share the old spring bed and kapok mattress in the attic, there is nowhere else for you.

Diolch Duw (Thankyou God) I will no longer be indebted to the Estate for my pay, my home, or my family's welfare, ever again. I hope with all my heart children, you will make the most of your education.”

It was 2010, my parents and brother had long passed and I was visiting, Caernarfon from New Zealand, where i had lived since immigrating there as a 21 year old in 1963, I was content to walk around, reacquainting myself with old haunts. The Library, Victorian School and the Seilo Chapel and several streets, had been demolished to make way for a new by-pass through the towns centre, to cater for the excessive tourist traffic. Part of William Street, where I had spent my childhood, had also been demolished and the once empty road, had so many cars parked bumper to bumper along both sides, that even the cats were having to squeeze past sideways. The continuous blue slate roof and redundant chimneys showed no sign of ageing but were the host to a forest of jumbled aerials and satellite dishes. I stretched my legs walked to the square and down past the ancient castle walls and to the Slate Quay, no stacked slate, no Rolls Royce, now the domain of the parked tourist coach and cars and where I caught up with my old friend, Eric.

After a quick chat, he invited me to join him for a drive, with no Spirit of Ecstasy mounted on the front of his car, we proceeded N.W, enjoying the views of the green coastal plains rolling down to kiss the shore and the sand banks, separated from the green Isle of Anglesey by the Menai Straits. After about 5 miles we arrived at the village of Felinheli, the now forgotten defunct destination of thousands of tons of slate, railed along the narrow gauge rail directly from Dinorwic to the small harbour, to be exported and become the roof of many a nation.

The South end of the Faynol Estate borders onto the village, and the fast tidal Straits flows along the entire length of the West side, whilst a seven mile long, twelve foot high stone wall runs North to finish near the Menai Bridge, securing its privacy to the East. Half way along a large Aristocratic Gateway, and a stone Lodge with tall spiral chimneys, greets the visitor.

Eric, drove nonchalantly past the ornate cast iron gateway to continue our drive, along an elegantly appointed driveway, bordered with large rhododendron bushes and a backdrop of tall, long established trees, which gave the impression of welcoming soldiers standing to attention. By now I was very curious, although a poker face smiling Eric had little to say as we entered the car park, to be greeted by a substantial white manor, Y Faynol. Dating back to the Tudor times the three storey manor sits idyllically on the edge of a an expansive man made lake, its fifty large windows overlooking the ducks and white regal swans as they enjoy the tranquil waters. Beyond, deer roam freely over a large green meadow, assigned with rows of aged black oak trees, garnered together to guide the eye to the horizon and the Mountains of Snowdonia and the Quarry of Dinorwic.

Tearfully I looked to my old friend and said in my fathers tongue

Buasa fy nhad mor falch ohono ti Eric

My dad would have been so proud of you Eric

As he invited me in....

Croeso, welcome to our home.

NB I was unable to squeeze this piece into the 2000 words but you might as well enjoy it (hopefully)

Later as we sat reminiscing, the clouds racing over the Miss-ifs of Snowdonia creating a living backdrop to the contoured low lying hills, dotted with ancient white washed stone farmhouses and slate roofs, captured in a cobweb of small checkered fields surrounded by dry rock walls, charged with the impossible task of keeping the long tailed sheep from straying. Eric recalled, that many of the farms used to belong to the estate, but they were sold controversially around the mid-fifties when it and the quarry were put into liquidation.

Generation after generation, had lived in these TY un Nos homes, many of their forefathers had reluctantly agreed to pay the common rent, whilst others had refused. Unfortunately, those homes who had paid the rent were deemed to be the property of the Estate and put up for auction, whilst the homes of those who had refused to pay the levy on principle, were freehold.

It was an interesting reflective evening on how life unfolds and can be so unpredictable, I had left home as a 16 year old to work in London and eventually a reasonable successful career had followed in New Zealand, whilst Eric, had returned to Wales after attending University to create a successful destiny for his loved family..... I only wished that my parents could have lived to share the story....

So the wheels of history turn, turn.....

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