

# **The Writer**

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**W. J. GRUFFYDD**

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## From Rhosfach to Prairie Union

### I.

On the northern slopes of Preseli, between the good lands of Meline parish and the better lands of Whitechurch parish, runs a tongue of wild and wet land from the hills to the cairns (and amongst them Carn Goediog where “Y Mochyn Du” was spawned) down as far as the banks of Nant Hyfer (Nanhyfer or “Nevern”).

This is Rhos. On its borders are a number of small houses and among them Rhosfach. It is on the Meline side of Rhos that Rhosfach officially stands, but it is the social life of Whitechurch that the residents have chosen to join since before the memory of man. About six score years ago, when Whitechurch Mansion was at the peak of its glory, Rhosfach and a few bare acres, enough perhaps to keep a cow or two, belonged to the Whitechurch estate. The man of Rhosfach at the time was Bili [Billy] Rees and his wife was Mali [Molly].

Mali, I believe, was a sister of the mother of the Squire’s children; and she was famous for her grimace -- there is talk to this day in the area about “Mali’s grimace.” Bili always claimed that he had a “pedigree” -- some shadow of a distant connection with the family of the Rhys’ of Cil-y-maenllwyd (and perhaps Dinefwr), and they had a coat of arms and a crest, - a black greyhound - and a Latin motto: *Spes Melioris Aevi* -- “Hope for a better time.”

But all that is known for certain about Bili of Rhosfach today is this: he had regular and responsible work on the Whitechurch estate as a carpenter; and although he was proverbially small of stature, he had relatives who were noted for their strength. His cousin was a drover and a famous fighter known as “Big Joe of the Southland” in all the Welsh fairs and markets; and Twmi [Tommy] Rees of Carnabwth came from the same lineage, a man who could deliver a “knockout blow” when it was called for and was the first of all to dress as “Rebecca” and to lead his “daughters” to break a tollgate, namely the Efail Wen gate, near Llandysilio, on the way from Whitechurch to Ludchurch, a place below Arberth from which they used to fetch lime to improve the lands of Whitechurch. It’s not likely that Bili nor his sons -- although the oldest of them at hand was a contemporary of Twmi, who was born in 1806 -- were among the “daughters” attacking Efailwen in 1842. Perhaps their connection with the Mansion made them unfit but they knew to an absolute certainty that Twmi was the first “Rebecca” and that he got the name not on the basis of the verse in the book of Genesis (24:60) that talks about Rebecca’s seed inheriting the gate of their enemy, (Twmi was completely ignorant concerning the book of Genesis and every other book in this period of his life), but on the basis of simple fact that the clothes of a actual Rebecca from Llangolman parish were on him that night, because it was she of all the women of the area who had clothes large enough for him.

In 1826 or 1827, there was born to Bili and Mali Rees in Rhosfach a son who was named Caleb. Caleb was near the middle of a row of 10 children born to them and therefore he was not expected to get work in the Mansion (and perhaps afterward to get hold of a small croft on the estate), like his father and his older brothers, nor either was he expected to get to stay at home like the youngest to cherish his parents in their old age and so take their place finally in Rhosfach. Five of the children (three boys and two girls) succeeded in leaving the Whitechurch area and its vicinity during their lives; one of them went out from Rhosfach on his horse one evening and nothing was seen of him and nothing was heard from him again; and four of them went to Glamorganshire. From there two of them moved to America, and Caleb was one of the these two.

This year (1933), the writer (his grand-nephew) got hold of two of Caleb's daughters, one in Hiawatha, in the state of Arkansas [sic; should be Kansas], and the other in Mountain Valley, near Hot Springs in the state of Arkansas. In the possession of the oldest of them was the diary of their father containing a bit of philosophical and theological poetry from his work on the topic, "Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer," and a history of his journey to America in 1857. The poetry doesn't rise any higher than this:

Awe, glory and beauty  
All the movements of each,  
Nearly raise in me some feeling  
Of worshipping creation itself.

But the history of the journey and the reasons that are given for undertaking it are extremely interesting.

## II.

It is likely that Caleb, like other boys, had some daily school under the sponsorship of "Madam Bifan" in the stable loft of the Church; and he doubtlessly learned to read and write Welsh in the Sunday School of the Congregationalists in Pen-y-groes -- an exceptional school, and that he succeeded in winning after this high approval for a report of "The Treachery of the Blue Books." He certainly learned also a bit of the carpenter's craft from his father.

But his first definite task was serving on a farm. He had a bitter enough experience there. Among the reasons that are given in his diary for turning his back on the land of his birth, this is found:

I once served on a farm where I got nothing but one little cup full of tea for supper, and I was to walk two miles as a watchman that evening through the night in their service and came back the next morning two miles without one bite.

A short time after the breaking of the Efailwen gate (but not perhaps directly because of this) he was driven by the *Spes Melioris Aevi* to work in a coal pit in Aberdare. He remained there until he was thirty. In Aberdare he certainly came under the influence of poets, for, although the Whitechurch area had already produced an number of preachers and had driven another Caleb, namely Caleb Morris, to the pulpit of Fetter Lane in 1827, it was not very famous for the composing of poetry.

Also in Aberdare, according to all appearances, he became a bit of a nationalist. Until very recently, Whitechurch has been so certain of its essential Welshness so as to not trouble itself with nationalism; but by now it is awakened so much that it is ready to back a "Charity performance" of an English drama in an adjacent village for the sake of making a profit toward the preservation of the Welsh language. A suggestion of Caleb's national consciousness is found when he talks in his diary about the shocking state of the sanitary arrangements on board the ship (the *Circassian*) on which he crossed to America. "It's a pity," he said, "that there had not been some Lingen [one of the school inspectors who wrote the "Blue Books" according to the editor's footnote] on board the ship to poke his nose into the treasures of these places to smell their stench and to open the corner of his eye to have a look at their disorder."

And Aberdare (and a bit of the spirit of Twmi Rees in Efailwen) put the tinkle of Chartism in his principal reason for leaving Wales. He says that

having lived so long under the heavy hands of the iron masters and the masters of the coal fields in Glamorgan . . . The worker gets working through sweat and fatigue, and the perils of the *damp* and the collapses of the *top* and the fear of his godless and superstitious and hard-hearted masters and the fear of their foul-mouthed, drunken, one sided, two faced and hateful stewards and a thousand and more things, until he often feels that he prefers dying to living. And worst of all, his earnings on the night of the reckoning will often be too small to pay his expenses, although his small children of 10 years up earn along with him, without ever having a day of school.

Thus, in spite of all that Aberdare did for him, the “better time” of the motto of Cil-y-maenllwyd avoided him there as in Whitechurch; and finally he decided to emigrate to America. On the 14th of April, 1857, in the registration office in Merthyr Tydfil, he married Rachel James from Cilfach Wen, near Trelech in Carmarthenshire; and after traveling in a local ship from Swansea (for 5/- per head):

We came to Liverpool the last day of April according to the orders that had been given to us, thinking to depart on the 2nd of May according to the advertisement.

### III.

In Liverpool, it cost them “1/6 for carrying the *boxes* to Lamb’s house” (it is spoken of as if James Lamb were in another place), and they got a hotel there for 9c. per night each. But the *Circassian* did not return to Liverpool from its previous trip before the 3rd or 4th of May, and they had to spend five nights instead of two in Lamb’s house, and the total cost came to 7/6.

Then when we were rather “busy” because we had been deceived, we were informed by Lamb that there would be a payment of 2/6 each for each day from the 3rd of May out . . . but by the 4th of May we were informed again that we were only to get payment for the two days and that we were to set out to the ship on the 5th of May. The morning of the 5th of May came. And we went down at a run between 6 and 8 o’clock in the morning but we were ashore on the *dock* until about 3 o’clock in the afternoon before our *boxes* got to the ship. And after they got there it wasn’t possible to have them so that we could go to them, although we had gotten permission for this from some haughty officers ashore on the *dock* when they were measuring them and charging a fee for them.

The fee that was charged them by “the haughty officers” for *extra luggage* in Liverpool was 18/6; and the fee to the shipping company for the trip from Liverpool to Portland, Maine, was £7 each. But it is not completely clear what the payment of 2/6 paid to them on the 3rd and the 4th of May was for, if it was not for some of *demurrage* to the travelers, nor who was responsible to pay the fee, if it was not the shipping company or some company responsible for the care of the emigrants (Was James Lamb a sort of overseer over them?). But it is apparent that Caleb feels that he has been wronged since there was no payment on the 5th of May and they were obliged to wait ashore most of the day.

But his stay on the *Circassian* was worse. His satirical note about the sanitary arrangements on board the ship were already mentioned. Poorer yet is his opinion about the eating arrangements:

While waiting all day to get them loaded we were on the point of starving from want of food and to make this up, meat and potatoes came to whomever was keen enough as to steal them and obtain them by trampling one another, getting their swearing and their

cursing. Therefore, there were many without a bite at that meal and thus was every meal until after dinner time on the 6th of May. . . . But this wouldn't have been so bad if it hadn't been that some of us, especially the Irish, got plenty without fighting for it. Before morning, we saw many of them get the remaining meat while others starved without a bite of anything except hard bread. . . . Yet we could not get hot water to wash our dishes nor to shave our beards. Thus, with respect to the "order" of the ship, our dishes were as the dishes of the Gibeonites and our beards as the beard of Mephiboseth when he was lamenting for David in the days of Absalom's revolt. . . . That's a true sketch of the *good accommodation* and the *rule and order* that was to be carried out on the *Circassian*.

But there was a turn for the better "after dinner time on the 6th of May":

When some of us were empty from hunger and full of indignation, we went to the Rev. S. Roberts to tell our complaints and to receive counsel and direction.

Although the diary doesn't say this, it is likely that "S. R." of Llanbrynmair is the Rev. S. Roberts referred to here; and there is a bit of a mystery concerning his position on board the ship and his relation to the emigrants who paid £7 for *good accommodation*. The Rev. S. Roberts had already done Caleb and his wife a favor in Liverpool.

He made an agreement on our behalf for the carrying of our *boxes* from Mr. James Lamb's house to the ship and we got them carried *very much* more cheaply than we could have arranged ourselves.

In fact, it only cost them 3c. to carry the *boxes* "from Lamb's house," although it cost them 1/6, as was mentioned already, for carrying them "to Lamb's house."

And now, here's the Rev. S. Roberts again, after listening to their complaints "after dinner time on the 6th of May", saying that he wanted sufficient food for them.

And he went forward to the *chief* and afterwards we had quite good arrangements and plenty of food but it was cooked very poorly. The meat was most often half burned and the potatoes were unpeeled and therefore many of them were bad.

But Caleb was thankful for small mercies:

I have no idea what kind of arrangements for food or anything else we would have had if it were not that the Rev. S. Roberts was with us. I heard that the Rev. D. Price had spoken for us also, but I can only tell my own eye witness of it. Truly, a man *hold fast* (a legend of the people of Glamorgan) is the Rev. S. Roberts.

Isn't there some whiff of sectarian loyalty, a Congregationalist praising a Congregational minister, in that paragraph? Who was the Rev. D. Price? There is room to fear that he was a Baptist or a Methodist.

And there was also improvement of the bargain on the 5th of May, when there was had (again doubtlessly through the intercession and instrumentalities of the Rev. S. Roberts) "2/6 each in wages for it like the other two days."

An end finally came to the uncomfortable trip but not without heavy suffering from sea sickness. After landing in Portland, Maine, he paid £4/14/6 for railway tickets to journey's end within the

borders of Ohio. The *extra luggage* cost him 4/6 in Portland, 4/6 in Toronto and 9/- in Buffalo; and 8c. was charged for transporting the *luggage* from one station to the other in Buffalo. The total price for the two from Swansea to Ohio was thus £21/10/11, or if you take out the delay-payment of 15/- for the three days of expectation in Liverpool, £20/15/11. But no, there is one other quite interesting item of expense: it cost them 10/- "for a hotel over the Sabbath in Suspension Bridge." Did it occur to them to stay there because they believed that they should not travel on the Sabbath, or because there wasn't a train running on the Sabbath in America at that time, or (and I would think that this is the truth) because they desired at least one day of "honeymoon" within sound of Niagara Falls before going on to Minersville and taking up there, as the name implies, the same work, for another eight years, that was left behind in Aberdare?

#### IV.

The time of the Civil War was not a good time to begin living in a new land. But Caleb kept at it diligently working "under the earth," from 1857 until 1865, when the Civil War ended. He rose to be some sort of "gaffer" in the coal mine, and took his oath as a citizen of the United States. By 1864 he had four daughters and on January 20, 1864 (this is the last note in his diary), he had "in the house 435 dollars," and "in pocket-book 5 dollars 15 cents." It is therefore seen that he had been able to save only some 60 dollars a year or 5 dollars, that is, a pound, a month in the new land; and "the better time" was beyond him still.

But after end of the Civil War in April, 1865, the rumor came to Minersville, Ohio, that another new land, "flowing with milk and honey," had been opened in the west, and the land was being offered cheaply or for free by the victorious government to suitable settlers. Caleb decided to give it another try and in September, he set out from Minersville with his wife and his four little girls and his dog and four puppies and his four hundred dollars in a boat on the Ohio river. There is no chronicle of this journey but one of his daughters remembers that the captain of the boat made them drown the four puppies, and they had to hide the dog from him.

Following the course of the journey on the map is easy. They went down about 700 miles along the Ohio before coming to its confluence with the Mississippi. Then they went up along the Mississippi about 300 miles before arriving at the mouth of the Missouri and then ascended the Missouri about 500 miles before coming to the south east corner of the new state, that is, Nebraska.

There were a few people there before them, with some Welshmen in their midst, in some sort of village by the name of Aspinwall on the bank of the river. And there was plenty of land there and that land was good land that had never before been tilled and had all the essential resources in it. The urge for land - better than the land of Whitechurch and more of it, and that land without money and without value - gripped Caleb strongly and he took possession of three parcels, each of them 160 acres, that is, an estate of three quarters of a square mile.

He had not forgotten either what he learned in Rhosfach from his father about the work of a carpenter. He had his carpenter's tools and he went at it seriously without losing any time to raise a wooden mansion for himself and his family on the new estate.

He was at it thus for a fortnight, returning to the village of Aspinwall very night to sleep. On Saturday at the end of the fortnight he was on his way in this manner to the village at dusk when he heard and when he saw that there was a company of high spirited lads on horses on this path -- a company similar perhaps to the company of Rebecca in Whitechurch long ago -- who did not have, having been in the war for four years, much respect for law nor much desire to see the land

divided and settled. He realized from their attitude and the sound of them that it would be wise for him to hide and he attempted to do this in a small wood nearby. But this was the excuse that they needed: they pretended to mistake him for a plains wolf (*coyote*) and they shot him in the back.

He was paralyzed in his legs by the shot, and he died a few weeks later. He was laid to rest in Prairie Union cemetery and thus ended his *Spes Melioris Aevi* on this earth.

*Casnewydd (Newcastle)*

CALEB REES.