

## **A brief history of Henry Hughes**

We are fortunate that Henry, at the age of 63, decided to write his life story in a little "school tablet", naming it 'byr Hanes' Henry Hughes. The word "hanes" in Welsh means history, but also story. I think Henry meant this latter, more, humble, meaning. He gives good detail of schooling of that period; he comments on domestic life and describes religious life in Tredegar in great detail too. There is tremendous accuracy in his account, probably because of his well-trained memory - a skill learned in home and the chapel of his youth. However, we realise that when he reached America, he kept a great deal of the letters and documents that his family accumulated. Despite the poor state of the cabins in which they lived, most of these are readable. He wrote his story in a fluent eloquent style, with a sophisticated vocabulary. An amazing feat for one who left school at nine.

## **Summary of his life**

Today I shall deal with his life by considering the women who had a profound influence on him.

### **Mam**

A Madonna figure - pretty, cultured, musical, devoted to Henry. She had been the only daughter of her family. She was eager to give Henry a good education and a thorough knowledge of the Bible. She taught him a verse from the bible every day, taught him to sing Hymns and other Welsh nursery rhymes. (Family Bible and birch cane kept together!) She was a noted singer both in Penuel and in Saron. Henry also loved singing and later led the singing in both Minersville and in Cambria. This early training in memorising hymns and scriptures was to be useful to him in the isolated communities where he settled in America. His mother's early death before his 6th birthday, probably from puerperal fever, meant that she was idealised in his mind, and this is encapsulated in a poem he wrote in this book. His mother obviously set great store by academic study and music. His father was about ten years older, and they appear to have been comfortably off by the standards of the day, so maybe he indulged her. Her death was followed by a very turbulent time for the family. An ineffective housekeeper was employed and both children caught scarlet fever. Father seems to have fallen out with his in-laws, moved to Sirhowy, and found a solution to his childcare problem by remarrying!

## Stepmother

Thomas Hughes could not have found a woman more unlike his first wife. Elizabeth Griffiths was an older woman (older than Thomas), a widow with six children, three of whom were married. Her husband had recently been gassed in his level in Sirhowy. She and Thomas Hughes evidently pooled resources to finance, first a small mine in Sirhowy, and later, a larger mine. To do this Thomas sold property in Tredegar (which he had built in collaboration with the Williams' - his former in-laws) and bought horses to work the mine.

On the morning his father married Elizabeth, the maternal grandmother turned up at the house to persuade Henry and his sister to go to live with her and their grandfather. Henry refused, but his younger sister, who was only 3, went.

Elizabeth could not have been more different from Mary, Henry's mother. She was antagonistic towards education, only attended chapel to keep up appearances, and was illiterate. However, Henry's father continued in his chapel activities, and to school Henry in religious matters.

When Henry was nine, he was taken out of school and put to work in keeping the doors in his father's mine, so that his father could save the 5 shillings which he would have had to pay another to do the work. Henry implies that this was applauded by his stepmother, whom he describes as 'Ariangar' - avaricious. A major blow came when, at the age of 45, Thomas Hughes suffered a chest infection and died.

The mine was now entrusted to Henry's stepbrother Abraham, but he also fell ill and died. Then it was managed by Elizabeth's son-in-law Lewis, but he was an idle and careless fellow. Finally, it was reduced in size and entrusted to Elizabeth's oldest son, John, but again, this was a failure.

On the death of his father, Henry lost all incentive to study and to further his religious education - he strayed - going to the pub after chapel on Sundays with his stepbrother Abraham. The pub was the Sirhowy Arms, only recently demolished, and it was here that he had a vision of the devil when a band of players staged a drama in the pub's "function room". This caused great mental turmoil to Henry, and after several weeks, he turned to Ebenezer to re-establish his faith, and from then on, he never wavered in his commitment. It was his guiding principle throughout his life, and wherever he went he was involved in establishing and promoting independent chapels.

We have a detailed account of the way that Ebenezer controlled the huge congregation and the way in which he was promoted to Sunday school teacher of young men. This was useful experience when he found himself in the pioneer communities and had to lead worship in the absence of trained ministers.

With the eventual failure of the business, in 1851, Elizabeth decided to emigrate, rather than face shame at home. One of her married daughters was already in Minersville, so she sold all her possessions and took her daughter Eliza, Eliza's fiancé, David Evans, the lodger Watkin Thomas and Henry to America with her, paying for all their passages. We have the impression of a headstrong wilful woman, of whom Henry is often critical, but something must have induced him to go to America with her, despite all her faults, education, reading matter chapel attendance etc.

The journey to Minersville took eleven weeks altogether with delays in Liverpool, New York , Pittsburg and Pomeroy. They were seven weeks at sea, Henry using the only reading matter he had, a small testament to pass the time. Stories of friction between the Welsh and English passengers, who had cabins of sorts, and the steerage Irish passengers who were also Catholic, or in Welsh, Papists. Elizabeth was, by this time in her late fifties and was ill on the journey, delaying them further in Pittsburg.

When they eventually reached Minersville, Henry and his stepmother rented a house with a garden? near the river, and Henry quickly got a job underground working for Mr Horton who encouraged and helped him and others establish a small chapel / schoolhouse. He was still a teenager when doing this. When Elizabeth died, he was left very alone, and contemplated returning to Wales, however, he met Eliza Davies and her family, former members of Ebenezer Sirhowy, and he and Eliza were quickly married and settled in Henry's house in Minersville.

### **Eliza**

Henry and Eliza were obviously well suited, she combined the virtue and piety of his mother Mary but was also practical and astute with resources. He seems to have embraced his new family in law - his mother-in-law and her three sons, Thomas, David and Evan. This family had only spent a short time in Tredegar, having fled a violent second marriage of the mother-in-law in Cardiganshire. The whole family were used to farm life, and soon the three boys

were keen to take advantage of the America Govt offer for land at a \$1.25 an acre in Minnesota.

After several attempts, the boys came back with a report of an ideal place - Ureka. Henry despite misgivings about his lack of experience of rural life threw his lot in with them and they started another long journey, mostly by river, to Ureka. There were two steamboat journeys - the first to St Louis was uneventful, the second from St Louis to St Paul was much less comfortable - From Galena on- it was the last boat before the winter, was heavily laden with passengers and dragged several barges with it, so progress was slow, stopping at every landing point.

His brother-in-law Evan was sick with the ague, and everything was very cold. Passengers left the ship at every landing on the Iowa side, and eventually when they reached St Paul there were few left on the ship. It was impossible to travel further on the river and they employed an Irish teamster to take them by cart to Travers de Sioux - an Indian trading post. He refused to take them further, and they lodged in an hotel at Traverse.

The following morning Henry and Evan set off on foot to reach Ureka, probably some ten miles over open country - they completed the journey in a day - all very eventful. At Ureka, expecting a town, they found just one house and a few cabins! but they also found Evan's brother and friends. It was a Welsh community. A few days later Evan and Henry returned to Traverse to bring the rest of the family by oxcart to Ureka, where Thomas had built them a cabin - about the size of a living room in this country, where Henry, Eliza, the baby, her mother and three brothers were meant to live. They immediately built an extra room on the cabin for the Hughes family, and a shelter for the oxen. During that winter, the weather was very hard, and towards the end of the winter, in March another child was born, supplies were low, and Henry tried to go to Mankato get buy tools and food. He was unable to cross the river, so diverted to South bend, where he occasionally worked in the woodmill. There he obtained 12lb flour for a dollar! He returned to Ureka, where his mother-in-law quickly baked it into bread, and the following morning all was well, because his brothers in law arrived by oxcart with all their possessions that they had put in store at Travers the previous autumn and plenty more supplies.

In June of that year, they moved 8 miles northwest to Butternut valley, where Henry having given up his claim in Ureka, took out a new claim at the same price, next to the claims of Evan and David. There he built a new cabin, larger this time, with the help of a Rising Bee and

started farming seriously. All went well until August 1862, where Sioux Indians started attacking the settlers. Henry and the whole community took to crowding into one or two houses at night and harvesting their crops by day. After six weeks of this Henry decided to go home, but that night there was an attack on the house where they had been sheltering and many were killed and injured. Henry and his family fled across the river to hide in the brushes until soldiers arrived from Judson to rescue them. They all decamped to Judson staying with friends - the children all caught the measles - a very unhappy time. Henry and family never returned to the log cabin, moving back eventually to David's more roomy house in the next farm. Here Henry acted as postmaster for Butternut valley. In 1869 David married, and then Henry built a much bigger and more comfortable frame house where he and his family settled in 1870, and remained there for 37 years farming and becoming a prominent member of the community. Eventually his children persuaded him to retire, and his sons Thomas and Evan bought land and built a comfortable house for them in Mankato.

There was a further move to Pasadena where Henry died in 1912, Eliza died in 1915.

There are poems describing how contented he was with his family. He never hinted at any criticism of Eliza or her mother. He and Eliza were soulmates "dau enaid hoff gytun"

There is one other woman hovering in the background - his sister Ann. That's another story!

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