

## ‘FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD’: A MONTGOMERYSHIRE LADY IN LONDON\*

by Sioned Davies, DPhil

There is many a ‘Montgomeryshire lady’ about whom one could write at length. Gwerful Mechain, from the fifteenth century, composed not only religious and prophetic poems, but also ones that have been termed ‘erotic’. Her work is particularly interesting in that it often gives voice to female experiences, and gives a female perspective on life.<sup>1</sup> The renowned eighteenth-century hymnwriter Ann Griffiths, from Dolwar Fach in the parish of Llanfihangel yng Ngwynfa, is a ‘Montgomeryshire lady’, as are Malen and Ann, daughters of Dafydd Manuel of Trefeglwys, who composed poetry at the end of the seventeenth. One could write about Jane, daughter of Gwallter Mechain, Elizabeth Breeze, great-grandaughter of William Jones, Dolhywel, or Jane Hughes, Pontrobert. Montgomeryshire is certainly a remarkable, if not unique, county as regards women’s contribution to Welsh literature.<sup>2</sup>

The ‘Montgomeryshire lady’ under discussion here, however, is none of the above. Rather, she is Mair Richards of Darowen, near Machynlleth, or to be precise, Mair Richards of Darowen, Llangynyw, Meifod and Llanerfyl. Mair was daughter to Jane and Thomas Richards, rector of Llanymawddwy before he moved to Darowen in 1800. The father, and his five sons in their turn, were members of the circle known as the *hen bersoniaid llengar* (‘the old literary clerics’) – a group of Anglican clergymen who fostered Welsh culture from

---

\* The June Gruffydd Memorial Lecture, delivered to a joint meeting of the Cymmrodorion and the Montgomeryshire Society in the British Academy on 15 Feb. 2006, with John Jones, Chairman of the Montgomeryshire Society, in the chair. As will become apparent, this lecture would have been impossible to research without the generous help of Mrs Mari Ellis. Not only has she published extensively in the field, but she also allowed me to read transcripts of invaluable papers that are now lost.

<sup>1</sup> See Nerys Ann Howells ed., *Gwaith Gwerful Mechain ac Eraill* (Aberystwyth, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> See E. Wyn James, ‘Ann Griffiths: Y Cefndir Barddol’, *Llên Cymru* 23 (2000), 147–170. For a discussion on Welsh women’s writing in the period, see Jane Aaron, *Nineteenth-Century Women’s Writing in Wales: Nation, Gender and Identity* (Cardiff, 2007).



about 1818 to 1858,<sup>3</sup> doing so in the face of stern opposition from their anti-Welsh superiors within the Established Church. They helped safeguard the nation's literary and cultural traditions by collecting and copying manuscripts and printed books; they would compose poetry and promote literature, while an important part of their agenda was to organise local eisteddfodau which served as a means of setting competitions on historical, linguistic and literary topics. All five sons, like their father, entered the Church.<sup>4</sup> After a period in Cardiganshire, Richard moved to Llanbryn-mair in 1811 setting up a school there; in 1816 he moved to Caerwys, and then in 1848 to Meifod. David (Dewi Silyn) eventually became rector of Llansilin, in 1819. He was well-known for his warm welcome to poets and musicians; indeed, he himself composed poetry. He died in 1826, leaving a widow, a daughter Elen and a son, Thomas Cynddelw. His wife, originally from Llanrwst, had been a maid in a tavern in Oswestry. This initially caused a rift between him and his family, but they were later reconciled, and after his death, his children went to live with their uncle Thomas in Llangynyw. Thomas had earlier been a curate in Llanymawddwy; in 1813 he took charge of Berriew School before moving to Llangynyw in 1826. He again would welcome poets and writers to his home; indeed, the Gorsedd of the Bards was held on the vicarage lawn in 1827. The remaining sons, John and Lewis, also settled in Montgomeryshire: by 1825, John was curate in Llanwddyn while Lewis became rector of Llanerfyl in 1837. Much less is known of the sisters Elizabeth and Jane. It seems that they both spent much time in Berriew and Llangynyw with their brother Thomas, Jane taking responsibility for bringing up Dewi Silyn's children after his death. She, too, had literary interests, and the rank of *ofyddes* ('ovate') was bestowed upon her in the Gwent Eisteddfod of 1826.<sup>5</sup>

Mair, the oldest daughter and the fourth child was born in 1787 in Llanymawddwy, and educated at a private school for girls in Meurig House, Dolgellau. She was extremely musical: she played the harp, clarinet, and flute, and trained a choir in Darowen, and subsequently in Llangynyw. In 1821, she was made an Honorary Member of the Cymmrodorion Society 'as an acknowledgement of [her] zeal in the cause of Welsh Literature',<sup>6</sup> while in the Welshpool Eisteddfod of 1824, she, like her sister, was ordained in the

<sup>3</sup> These included men such as Ifor Ceri, Gwallter Mechain, David Rowlands and Carnhuanawc. Associated with them were a number of lay people – Lady Llanover, Maria Jane Williams of Aberpergwm, and Charlotte Guest. For a general discussion, see Bedwyr Lewis Jones, *Hen Bersoniaid Llengar* (Penarth), 1963, and Mari Ellis, 'Rhai o Bersoniaid Llengar Maldwyn' in *Bro'r Eisteddfod (Cyflwyniad i Faldwyn a'i Chyffiniau)* (Swansea, 1981), 85–116.

<sup>4</sup> For an extremely detailed discussion of the family, see Mary Ellis, 'Teulu Darowen', *Journal of the Historical Society of the Church in Wales* 3 and 4 (1953 and 1954), 120–39 and 58–88.

<sup>5</sup> She adopted the bardic name Enid Mathrafal.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Ellis, 'Teulu Darowen', 77.

Gorsedd of the Bards, adopting the name Mair Darowen. She died in 1877, documenting much of her long life, and the life of her family, through copious letters, notes and a diary.<sup>7</sup> She, like her sisters, remained a spinster; indeed, as noted above, only one of the Richards children got married, and that marriage was not without its problems. As a result, a very close relationship developed between the siblings and they depended on each other throughout their lives. Jane kept house for Thomas, firstly in Berriew and then in Llangynyw; Mair nursed her parents in Darowen until her father died, then, aged 50, she and her mother moved to live with Thomas in Llangynyw where Elizabeth lived, too, together with Elen, daughter of Dewi; when Thomas died Mair, Jane and Elen moved to live with Richard in Meifod (the children's mother, and Elizabeth had by now passed away), and on his death they moved to live with Lewis in Llanerfyl; sadly, he died within a few months, and for the first time in their lives the three women moved to live in a private house rather than a vicarage – Bryntanat, Llanerfyl. So, aged 73, Mair Richards had a place she could finally call her own.

Of course, such a dependent status was not unusual for unmarried women in this period, and although they had legal rights, indeed more so than married women, putting those rights into practice was a different matter. They formed an important minority group, and many of the women, like Mair, Jane, and Elen in turn, were chiefly responsible for running the home. Yet, the norm was to be a wife and mother – being unmarried was regarded as a temporary state. An unmarried woman was a social failure – very often, families did not want to draw attention to such individuals, and they would live, like Elizabeth Richards, in the shadows. If a woman had no income at all, then she would become the 'aunt', the nurse, a useful member of the family with no personal responsibilities, someone on whom the family would call in times of distress.<sup>8</sup> There is no doubt that this was Mair's role. When nursing her father in his last days (November 1837), she writes to Thomas, Lewis and Jane, giving them a bulletin regarding his health: 'Y mae fy Nhad weithie yn well a thro arall yn waeth. Ychydig iawn y mae fy nhad yn ei fwyta... nid yw fy Nhad yn

---

<sup>7</sup> For further details, see Mary Ellis, 'Mair Richards Darowen (1787 – 1877): Portread', *Yr Haul a'r Gangell* (1977 and 1978), 21–25 and 28–34. Most of the Richards family manuscripts are in the Cwrtmawr collection in the National Library of Wales.

<sup>8</sup> For a general discussion see, for example, Bridget Hill, *Women, work and sexual politics in eighteenth-century England* (London, 1989); Joan Perkin, *Victorian Women* (London, 1993); Siân Rhianon Williams, 'The true "Cymraes": images of women in women's nineteenth-century Welsh periodicals', in Angela V. John ed., *Our Mother's Land: Chapters in Welsh Women's History 1830–1939* (Cardiff, 1991), 69–91.

gwellhau...'<sup>9</sup> She had a very close relationship with her father, as reflected in Richard's letter to his brothers following the death of their father:

My mother is pretty well, but sisters are very low particularly Mair; they have not come down to the Parlour yet... Mair will feel it more than us all: she will be for some time before she will recover it: she was always here, has known no other home. Well we must make her as comfortable as we can. Thank God we have it in our power to do so.<sup>10</sup>

In 1851, there were more than a million unmarried women in Britain (over the age of 25), and the 'problem' was attracting attention, with articles in the press such as 'What shall we do with our old maids?' and 'Why are women redundant?'<sup>11</sup> These unmarried women were a challenge to male authority and a threat to the status quo – this is why they were so often the butt of so much ridicule, hate, and malice. The problem intensified as these women became old and a burden on their family, no longer able to contribute to housework – they then became completely dependent on the generosity of their male kin. Sometimes, however, an unmarried woman would step out of the shadows and prove herself to be different. This is certainly true in the case of Mair Richards. Rather than remain within the confined roles designated for women, she encroached on her brothers' sphere, within reason, of course – she could not become a curate or rector; she could not even go to university; but she could certainly contribute to their world of literature, music and culture. In this, she had several role-models to hand, women such as Angharad Llwyd<sup>12</sup> and Jane Davies (daughter of Gwallter Mechain), both unmarried woman who had keen literary interests. In the same period, too, we see the exceptional contributions of married women such as Lady Llanover, and Lady Charlotte Guest.<sup>13</sup> Their conditions, of course, were completely different for they had status, money and plenty of free time.

As becomes apparent from a study of the many manuscripts in the Cwrtmawr collection of the National Library of Wales, Mair Richards was

<sup>9</sup> 'My Father is sometimes better, and other times worse. My Father eats very little... my Father is not getting better...' [Cwrtmawr 285B]. I have punctuated all extracts to facilitate reading; otherwise no editing has taken place. The linguistic forms and the dialect features should be of particular interest.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Ellis, 'Teulu Darowen', 130. Note that he writes to his brothers in English.

<sup>11</sup> Bridget Hill, *Women, work and sexual politics*, 222.

<sup>12</sup> See Mari Ellis, 'Angharad Llwyd, 1780-1866', *Taliesin* 52 and 53 (1985), 10-43 and 20-31.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Maxwell Fraser, 'Lady Llanover and Lady Charlotte Guest', *Anglo-Welsh Review* 13 (1963), 36-43; Mair Elvet Thomas, *Afaith yng Ngwent:Hanes Cymdeithas Cynreigyddion y Fenni 1833-1854* (Cardiff, 1978); Sioned Davies, 'A Charming Guest: Translating the *Mabinogion*', *Studia Celtica* 38 (2004), 157-178.

obsessed with copying. She would copy anything – family letters; letters written by various people to her father and her brothers; *plygain* carols<sup>14</sup> composed by local poets; Welsh airs and tunes, hymn tunes, anthems and psalms; *cywyddau* and *englynion* by well-known medieval poets such as Tudur Aled, Tudur Penllyn, Huw Cae Llwyd, Dafydd ab Edmwnd, Sion Tudur, Dafydd Nanmor, as well as the work of local poets. Most of her time was spent copying the work of male authors although, like the poet and copyist Marged Dafydd (Margaret Davies) from Coedcae-du near Trawsfynydd<sup>15</sup> – another unmarried woman – she did copy some poems by women. Examples of the work of Mary Watkin (Moelcerni) can be found among her manuscripts, including a poem on the death of the Reverend Lewis Evans, vicar of Llanfihangel Genuu'r Glyn, a poem describing the poet's grief on the death of her mother, and poems such as 'To the mother as a Widow', 'To A. Whitney on her marriage' and 'On a birth of a little girl':

Welcome welcome little baby  
All here greet thee with much joy  
And no one either disappointed  
At not seeing a bonny boy. [Cwrtmawr 277]

At first glance, therefore, it could be argued that Mair Richards was afraid of using her own voice: she would hide behind the words and thoughts of others, mainly men, imitating them, literally, on the page. In this way she could be compared to women such as Charlotte Guest in the world of translating – translating, and copying, gave women the opportunity to be part of a literary culture without challenging male dominance over that culture. The manuscripts themselves are also revealing. Paper was expensive, so she would often copy on the (sometimes) blank pages of her brothers' account books.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, almost each one of her manuscripts began life as a book that belonged to her father or one of her brothers – they were the 'hand-me-downs' of the paper world. Yet, she went about collecting books and taking ownership of them in no uncertain terms: sometimes she would simply write her name on them, other times a printed label bearing the words 'Miss Richards, Bryntanad, Llanerful, Welshpool' is glued to the cover. Sometimes an *englyn* is added:

<sup>14</sup> The *plygain* service was a very important part of her calendar – she would stay up all night on Christmas Eve, a custom she practised all her life.

<sup>15</sup> See Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, 'Oral composition and written transmission: Welsh women's poetry from the Middle Ages and beyond', *Trivium* 26 (1991), 89-102 (pp. 97-99); Nia Powell, 'Women and strict-metre poetry in Wales', in Michael Roberts and Simone Clarke (eds), *Women & Gender in Early Modern Wales* (Cardiff, 2000), 129-58, esp. 141, 144-6.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Cwrtmawr 284. The names Thomas and Richard Richards are written on the cover; inside the book are pages of their mathematical calculations over which Mair has written.

Myfi, Mair, llon air llunïaf, – yw perchen  
 Y parchus lyfr meddaf;  
 Heb ludd i ni, blwyddyn Naf,  
 Hyn ydyw, mi a'i nodaf. 1826<sup>17</sup>

The manuscript layout is also revealing. Sometimes she copies clearly and succinctly, especially when copying poetry. But more often than not, the format is extremely untidy, with no forward planning whatsoever. There is no chronological order to the copying, so it is almost impossible to date the manuscripts. Most of Cwrtmawr 271B, for example, was probably written between 1808 and 1849, but short personal comments have been added, up until the year 1875, that is two years before her death. And this is no exception. She often writes personal notes at the end of a page – a reference to the weather, or to a particular *plygain*.<sup>18</sup> Other times, pieces of paper have been glued to the inside covers of the manuscripts, so that Cwrtmawr 269, for example, is an eclectic scrap-book rather than a scholarly manuscript.<sup>19</sup> She was certainly copying in the hope that others would read the work, referring to herself consistently in the third person by her bardic name – Mair Darowen.

But during her lifetime, Mair Richards certainly found her own voice. In 1818, at the age of 31, she went to stay in London for six months. In November, she wrote a letter home to her family in Darowen. And for the first time, indeed perhaps the only time in her life, she is given blank pages:

Pan ydoedd Mair Richards Ofyddes Darowen yn Llundain yn y flwyddyn 1818 dywedodd cyfaill iddi sef John Jones, neu John Morgan Morfa Mowddwy, 'Rhoddaf papurlen i chwi na ysgrifenwch byth ddim o honi i gyd'. Derbynys y rhodd a dechreuas ar lythyr i fyned i Darowen at fy Nhad ai gyfeillion, y rhai a oeddynt yn llawn amynedd a chyfeillgarwch.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> 'I declare that I, Mair, who pens a cheerful word, am the owner/of the respectable book/without any impediment, the year of the Lord/is such as I note. 1826' [Cwrtmawr 285].

<sup>18</sup> For example, at the end of one page in Cwrtmawr 289, she has written: 'Y nosadwrn dywaetha or flwyddyn un fil wyth cant ac un a thrugain' [The last Saturday night of the year eighteen sixty one].

<sup>19</sup> On the back cover is glued a picture of a tiger taken from a newspaper, together with a printed report about the 'Cader Idris Cymmanfa'.

<sup>20</sup> 'When Mair Richards, the Ovate of Darowen, was in London in the year 1818, a friend of hers, namely John Jones, or John Morgan Morfa Mowddwy, said, 'I will give you a sheet of paper that you will never fill'. I accepted the gift and began writing a letter to send to Darowen to my father and his friends who were full of patience and friendship' [Cwrtmawr 284]. Note that this is a copy of the original letter.

She accepted the challenge and set about writing. The nineteenth century was a period of great change. By 1861, Elen, Mair's niece, would be travelling to London by train; people from London would be visiting Montgomeryshire regularly. But when Mair Richards went there in 1818, it was a huge adventure. Her response to the big city is reflected in the long letter sent to her father, written in an informal style, peppered with dialect features and colloquialisms, so very different to those formal letters she loved copying. But this is her true voice reflecting the worldview of a unique young woman.

At the beginning of the letter, Mair Richards can hardly contain her enthusiasm: 'Dyma lythyr o Dre Gaerludd – pwy fuase yn meddwl, ie, ie, ie',<sup>21</sup> and after a few sentences of a religious tenor, the grand tour begins:

Wel i ddechre mi es i'r Missionary Meuseum [sic]; mi weles lawer iawn o hen ddolwaur cenhedloedd; y mae nhw y pethau hylla ac eill fod – plu bach cochion a melyn ac wedi cwneud geg lydan a dannedd gwynion, hen llygaid rhyfedd...<sup>22</sup>

Here in the Missionary Museum she also sees artefacts made by the Indians, as well as shoes belonging to the Chinese, a letter written by the king of Tahiti, bows and arrows, stuffed birds, a stuffed camel and leopard. She mentions visits to Brixton, Charing Cross, Clapham Common, Dulwich, a church in Camberwell, where the singing was 'quite good'! One of the highlights is Westminster Abbey where she sees artefacts belonging to Nelson – his 'sane, ar yscidie, y clos ar waistcoat... ar het... ond nid oedd geni ddim parch iddo fo achos mi ddygon wraig i berson'.<sup>23</sup> Then, having stolen some silk thread as a memento, she and her friends leave the Abbey, amazed at what they have seen. Mair Richards truly succeeds in communicating the thrill which she experiences, and shows how perceptive a tourist she is, especially when describing the luxurious fabrics and their colours. The embroidery makes a great impression on her: 'roedd gwaith edau a nodwydd... mae rhaid bod y merched yn fwy diwyd yn yr hen amser nag y mae nhw rwan'.<sup>24</sup> But the most terrifying place in the building is 'y lle y byddai brenhinoedd yn arfer a thorri

<sup>21</sup> 'Here is a letter from the town of Caerludd – who would have thought, yes, yes, yes'. Caerludd (the Fort of Lludd), is the traditional Welsh name for London, named after the eponymous founder Lludd. See Sioned Davies trans., *The Mabinogion* (Oxford, 2007), 111.

<sup>22</sup> 'Well, to begin, I went to the Missionary Museum; I saw very many old tribal idols; they are the ugliest things that can be – little red and yellow feathers, with a wide mouth and white teeth, funny old eyes...'

<sup>23</sup> 'stockings, the shoes, the breeches and the waistcoat... and the hat... but I had no respect for him because he stole someone else's wife'.

<sup>24</sup> 'there was embroidery work... the girls in the old days must have been more industrious than they are now'. We know that she loved to sew – two large patchwork quilts made by her have survived, one dated to 1808. See Mary Ellis, 'Mair Richards, Darowen', 34.



ei henwau wrth y papur pen y byddent yn rhoddi rhai i farwolaeth; y mae o yn edrach yn lle sobor ond y mae allan o drefn y rwan; wel gweled mawr oedd gweled y diwrnod hwnnw.’<sup>25</sup>

Many more wonders await her in the White Tower. She marvels at the axe that chopped off the head of Anne Boleyn – ‘mi gydies yn ei choes hi; mae pryfed yn ei choes hi’,<sup>26</sup> while the urge overcomes her, yet again, to acquire a ‘souvenir’: ‘ni galles i cael dim ond tipin bach o hen wlanen ond ni ddyges i mo hwnnw achos mi gwelodd yr hen ddyn fi yn ei godi o’.<sup>27</sup> One of the highlights is seeing the crown:

mi fuon yn aros tipin wrth y drws tan ddedon ei bod yn barod ac wedin fe agorson ddrws mawr cry ac eithon i fewn lle tywyll ac y roedd yno lle ini eistedd ac on blaenen ni y roedd rails haiarn a chanwylle tu fewn i rhyppy ac wedi(n) dyma ryw ddyn yn agor ryw box bach ac yn hwnnw yr oedd coron y deyrnas...<sup>28</sup>

Her genuine interest in antiquities and relics becomes evident as reflected further in her many visits to the British Museum. The kleptomaniac urge is still evident: she sees ‘dau ddwsin o byst Marble wedi dwad o Garthage – mi ddyges dipin bach ohonin nhw’;<sup>29</sup> she sees Roman pots, and mummies – ‘y mae nhw wedi cadw yn bur dda. Y mae gwydr rhyngthyn nhw ac allan, dim lle i cael tipin bach’;<sup>30</sup> she sees the Elgin Marble, the Portland Vase, ‘hen wyll yn perthyn i'r hen Gymru rhai'r un fath a rheiny sydd gen i... a hen bedolau go debig i'r rhai a ddaeth gen i o hen gastell Cae'r Berllan Talyllyn’.<sup>31</sup> And then the climax:

... y mae drws ar y fan honno ai hanner o yn wydr; ond o gwenwyn, gwenwyn imi beth bynag, o ie, yr hen fechgyn; wel i mae

<sup>25</sup> ‘the place where kings would sign their names on the paper when they executed people; it looks a sobering place but it's untidy now; well, the sights we saw that day were amazing’.

<sup>26</sup> ‘I took hold of the handle; there's woodworm in the handle’.

<sup>27</sup> ‘I was only able to get a bit of old cloth, but I didn't steal that because the old man saw me pick it up’.

<sup>28</sup> ‘We stayed by the door for a while until they said they were ready and then they opened a big sturdy door and we went into a dark room and there was a place for us to sit there and in front of us there were iron railings and candles inside those and then some man opened some little box and in it was the crown of the realm...’

<sup>29</sup> ‘two dozen Marble columns that have come from Carthage – I took bits of them’.

<sup>30</sup> ‘they've kept pretty well. There's glass between me and them, no way of getting any’.

<sup>31</sup> ‘an old axe that belonged to the ancient Welsh, just like those that I have... and old horseshoes quite similar to those I got from the old fort of Cae'r Berllan, Talyllyn’ [i.e. Castell y Bere].

tu hwynt i'r drws hwnnw shambar, ni wn i faint o hyd, yn llawn o lyfre o bob math – o gwenwyn etto ond y mae clo ar y drws.<sup>32</sup>

Mair's frustration is unmistakable – she would have dearly loved to get her hands on those books. On another occasion she climbs to the top of the Monument, and carves her name on the stone; then on to Guy's Hospital to visit an old woman, to Whitechapel, and to the West India Docks where she sees a hundred caskets of rum in underground cellars – the narrative truly takes one's breath away.

During her stay in the capital, Mair Richards visits many from the Llanymawddwy and Darowen area who have settled in London. She describes the hours spent drinking tea, and sometimes something stronger, at the homes of women such as Hana Tyn Llechwedd Darowen, Anne Jones Maes Machreth, and Nelly'r Bryn. Indeed, the juxtaposition of the personal names, linked with their Welsh homes, and the urban context is quite incongruous. She enjoys her visit to John Jones Glan y Gors' tavern, where she sings and plays her harp for him; however, she thinks it improper for her to visit such places too often. The Lord Mayor's Parade, with hundreds of spectators, is clearly impressive, as is the chanting in St Paul's, although she prefers the bass singing in the synagogue in Holborn. One disappointment is the lack of a Welsh church in London, and therefore no official *plygain*. This does not deter her; she organises an informal service with the help of her friend Martha Matthews, and they stay up all night, singing carols. Her overall impression of London is that it is a wicked place; 'deded pawb beth a fynon, drwg sydd ar llaw fwya yma, ie ie ie, dau nage wneuff un ie, medd Sion Mowddwy, am hynny mi ros dri'.<sup>33</sup>

As she draws the letter to a close, her thoughts turn to Darowen:

fy nhad, ydyw'r croccusus ar tulip yn dechreu dwad trwy'r ddaear...  
ydyw corn carw yn para yn fyw... rhaid cymerid gofal at y cwningod  
rhad iddi nhw fwyta y croccusus.<sup>34</sup>

and the circle is complete: 'wel, ar ol y cyfan dymar papur mawr wedi mynd; ni fyw i neb geisio nghorchfygu i'.<sup>35</sup> After copying the letter, she adds,

---

<sup>32</sup> '... there's a door there and half of it glazed; but oh envy, envy on my part anyway, oh yes my dear boys; well, beyond that door there's a chamber, I don't know how big, full of all kinds of books – oh more envy but there's a lock on the door'.

<sup>33</sup> 'let people say what they want, evil has the upper hand here; yes, yes, yes – two no's make a yes, according to Sion Mowddwy, so for that reason I've given three'.

<sup>34</sup> 'my father, are the crocuses and tulips beginning to come through the ground... is the stag's horn still alive... you must be careful of the rabbits in case they eat the crocuses'.

<sup>35</sup> 'well, after all that, I have filled the large paper; let no one dare get the better of me'.



in the style of the medieval scribes: ‘felly y terfyna y llythyr daeth i Darowen ac ugain o llythurau yn ei ol; pan yrodd John Jones y papur fel hyn y dywedodd: ‘Rhag ofn nad oes gennych dim bapur i yscrifeni adre, mi rwyf yn eich hanregu ar sheet fach hon’.<sup>36</sup> Our debt to John Jones is great; but what a shame that the other twenty letters have not survived, at least not to our knowledge.<sup>37</sup>

The London letter reflects a confident young girl, happy, energetic, and full of life. She is a country girl, but is in her element in the city. She has a genuine interest in antiquities – her father had a small museum in Darowen (containing stones and pots and bits of metal that he had found locally); she has an interest in books (she compiled a list of the books that were in her father’s library in 1837)<sup>38</sup>; but above all, she is a sociable being with an avid interest in people. In the letter she shows an eye for detail, and presents some vivid, if not unique, descriptions of early nineteenth-century London. The style is informal, the sentences punctuated by ‘oh’ and ‘well’, so that one actually *hears* her enthusiasm; it is writing that reflects her stream of consciousness. We see clearly her strengths as a creative writer; she has an uncanny ability to convey emotion and possesses an impressive command of language and its rhythms, reminiscent of Ellis Wynne’s *Visions of the Sleeping Bard*:

Llew, mi ddywedaist wrthwy am roi hanes yr ystrydoedd; ni wn am yr un heol parchus yn y fan yma rwan; mi welais hen wraig wedi ei gwisgo, a thraed trwy ei escidie a sanau cethin melynion, hen bais ragslyd, hen belise rhuddgoch, a hen cadach am ei gwddf yn debygach i beth wedi ei droi mewn snuff am bythewnos nag i ddim arall, ai phen yn llwyd llychlyd, yn ail i hen cwrldid, ac ar ben hynny basced yn llawn o hen hen bysgod; wel dyna hanes un; wel, am y lleill, y mae rhai mewn yscidie teneuon a sane gwynion a gowne sidan a digon o fuslim or gwaelod ir coryn a digon o blue o cwmpas ei pennau a digon o fodrwyne rhwng ei bysedd ai clustie; nod coch ar ei bochau ac yn llawn frils o ddeutu ei gyddfau, a phob peth or goreu i dynu llygaid y llanciau; dyna fel y mae hi yma, yn ail i sodom a

<sup>36</sup> ‘so ends the letter that came to Darowen, and twenty letters after that; when John Jones gave the paper, this is what he said: ‘In case you have no paper to write home, I’m making you a gift of this little sheet’’. .

<sup>37</sup> The aim is to publish an edition of the letter, together with an English translation.

<sup>38</sup> See Cwrtmawr 275 and 276.

gommara, a miloedd o ddynion yn bur benau gweigion; dyna'r hanes  
sydd geni or trigolion y lle...<sup>39</sup>

A close reading shows that the second description is a series of rhyming couplets, suggesting strongly that the passage, and the letter as a whole, was written to be read out aloud as, indeed, it probably was by Mair's father to his wife, family and friends.

When she eventually returns to Darowen, Mair writes to her nephew, Cornelius Griffydd, who lived in London, describing her journey home<sup>40</sup> with the same energy as we see in the London letter, and thanking her London friends in particular for inviting 'fourteen young men to tea' during her stay. Whether this was an attempt to find her a husband, we can only surmise. But she was clearly a lively, dynamic and popular young woman – her manuscripts contain several poems extolling her harp-playing and her cheerful disposition. There was clearly a close relationship between her and the poet John Blackwell (Alun, 1797-1841) – he sent her a verse in the 1820s, composed by Tegid, 'i brofi i chwi nad ydyw eich enw ach parch wedi gyfyngu i Gymru'.<sup>41</sup> It was intended to be sung to the tune 'All through the night':

Iechyd da ag einioes lawen – ar hyd y nos.  
I Mair o Darowen – ar hyd y nos.  
Caru mae ei gwlad heb flino  
Teilwng yw o gariad Cymro  
I Mair Richards iechyd etto – ar hyd y nos. [Rhydychen, 1824]<sup>42</sup>

She copies one of his letters into her manuscripts; this again has jocular overtones, as Alun claims he is seeking an anonymous girl who is beautiful,

<sup>39</sup> 'Llew, you asked me to tell you about the streets; I don't know of any respectable streets around here; I saw an old woman dressed-up, her feet sticking out of her shoes and coarse, yellow stockings, a ragged old coat, an old red cape, and an old kerchief around her neck, more like something steeped in snuff for a fortnight than anything else; and her head grey and grimy, like an old counterpane, and on top of it a basket full of old, old fish; well, that's the story of one; well, as for the others, some are in pointed shoes and white stockings, and silk gowns with plenty of muslim from top to toe, and plenty of feathers around their heads, and plenty of rings on their fingers and ears; a red spot on their cheeks and plenty of frills around their necks, and the best of everything to catch the eye of the young lads; that's how it is here, second to Sodom and Gomorrah, and thousands of people are mere airheads; that's what I have to tell you of those who live in the place...'

<sup>40</sup> See Cwrtmawr 277.

<sup>41</sup> 'to prove to you that your good name and reputation is not limited to Wales' [Cwrtmawr 274B].

<sup>42</sup> 'Good health and a joyful life – all through the night./To Mair from Darowen – all through the night./She loves her country without tiring/She is worthy of the love of a Welshman/To Mair Richards good health again – all through the night. [Oxford, 1824]'. See Cwrtmawr 274B.

who loves her language, her culture and her God, and who understands poetry, music and harp-playing. He concludes by saying that whoever brings him news of her will receive payment and gratitude, for he loves her deeply [Cwrtmawr 274B]. Alun was ten years younger than Mair; after studying in Berriew with her brother, he went to Jesus College, Oxford, and then to Holywell as a curate before moving to Pembrokeshire in 1833. He was married for a year before he died, in 1841. Alun is particularly remembered for his delightful lyrical poetry, and for one poem in particular, 'Rhywun' (Someone):

Clywais lawer sôn a siarad  
Fod rhyw boen yn dilyn cariad;  
Ar y sôn gwnawn innau chwerthin  
Nes y gwelais wyneb Rhywun....

Pa le bynnag bo'm tynghedfen,  
P'un ai Berriw neu Rydychen,  
Am fy nghariad os bydd gofyn,  
F'unig ateb i fydd – Rhywun!<sup>43</sup>

Was Mair Richards Alun's 'Someone'? Did she ever have an opportunity to get married, or was it her choice to stay single and care for her elderly parents. There is a suggestion in the London letter that she had plans for her future: 'Mi wn am rai yn mynd yn fissionries, ac ni wn a ai i i Assia ai peidio'.<sup>44</sup> As for getting married, she does not discuss the matter, neither does she make any comments regarding any desire for a husband or children.

The vibrant letter sent from London in 1818 makes the rest of Mair Richards' story seem somewhat sadder and more poignant. In 1850, when she was 63 years old, and living by now in Llangynyw, Mair Richards received another invitation to go to London. At the time, and probably for a great part of her life, she corresponded with the Matthews sisters who were originally from Llwyn, Dolgellau. Their friendship began in school, and continued after the sisters had moved to London and got married. Writing letters, of course, was a way for a woman to share secrets, hopes and fears – compare the letters of Charlotte Brontë to Ellen Nussey, or Florence Nightingale to her friend Clarkey in Paris.<sup>45</sup> According to the surviving manuscripts, Mair Richards

<sup>43</sup> R.M. Jones, ed., *Blodeugerdd Barddas o'r Bedwaredd Ganrifar Bymtheg* (Llandybie, 1988), 144. 'I have often heard it said/That pain comes in the wake of love;/I would always laugh at that/Until I saw the face of Someone/... Wherever I am fated to go,/Berriew or Oxford,/If anyone asks me who is my love./My only answer is – Someone!'

<sup>44</sup> 'I know of some who become missionaries, but I don't know whether I'll go to Asia or not'.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Suzanne L. Bunkers and Cynthia A. Huff eds, *Inscribing the Daily: Critical Essays on Women's Diaries* (Amherst, 1996).

copied only two of the Matthews letters (Cwrtmawr 1045E), and both are fairly neutral in tone and content. However, a further nine letters were transcribed some time ago by Mrs Mari Ellis, suggesting another side to Mair Richards' character.<sup>46</sup> These letters reflect her private thoughts and feelings at the age of sixty, and also reveal something of the life of middle-class women in London in the mid-nineteenth century. Rebecca, Martha and Sara Mathews have forgotten their Welsh, although the odd phrase remains with them, for example Martha refers to herself as 'yr hen Martha true am bith',<sup>47</sup> while Sara comments:

I often say I wish you could hear us talking Welsh – you would wonder what language it was, we speak it so bad – still we find it very handy most especially when we say something we don't wish everybody to understand. [March 4, 1850]

Sara is the author of each letter save one. She touches upon a variety of issues – religion (Catholicism in particular), politics:

[Rebecca] thinks it is a great pity women are not allowed to sit in Parliament, for you and herself would soon set matters right. I do think myself that a certain number of women ought to be allowed to sit in Parliament especially as we allow a woman to be the Head of the Nation. [March 4, 1850]

Through Sara's questions we are given an insight into Mair's life in Llangynyw.<sup>48</sup> It is certain that something was worrying her during this period. In May 1848, Sara writes:

I hope that you will not allow any untoward behaviour or language from any one to vex you – while your conscience tells you, your actions and language are devoid of all evil intentions. Why should you be uneasy one moment?

and again in January 1850:

And now once more let me beseech you not to allow any of the frivolous peasant humours of this world for one moment to vex or disturb your peace of mind – mind this, 'tis entirely unworthy of your notice.

and February 1851:

<sup>46</sup> As noted earlier, I am extremely grateful to Mrs Ellis for sharing her transcriptions with me.

<sup>47</sup> 'the old Martha, true for ever' (November 10 1846).

<sup>48</sup> An edition and close analysis of these letters within the context of women's letter-writing would be invaluable, and help ascertain the extent of coded messaging within the correspondence. For example, are Sara's concerns regarding Mair's 'parrot' [January 14, 1850], and her 'poor scalded monkey' [December 20, 1852] to be taken at face value?

let me again entreat you not to allow any of the trivial occurrences of passing days to mar your peace of mind. If I were to reveal to you all that has shattered my peace mind, and frail body too, it would fill volumes – and be so nearly allied to your own care, that it would be one and the same, and the same sure must do for us both.

One wonders what was causing Mair such distress? Were her brothers mistreating her in some way? Were the local people making fun of her, perhaps on account of her appearance? Certainly there is an implication that she felt frustrated because of her dependent status as noted in Sara's letter of 9 September, 1851:

You say "it is the same with you now as when you was at Darowen" my situation is exactly the same as yours otherwise you may depend I should have seen the Exhibition before now'; 'Oh Pall Bach'<sup>49</sup> sometimes I am wicked enough to think that if we were young gay girls perhaps we should be thought worth taking up to see the Exhibition but as it is no one likes to be troubled with a couple of toothless old women. What a pity it is that we cannot put our hand into our own pocket and from thence take out enough to enable us to go where we like, without being obliged to any one – but never mind there are greater evils than this even. – so we must remain passive and enjoy what lies within our reach, you may depend on this that if I could I would certainly see the Great Glass House.

There is a certain stoicism and poignancy here as both yearn to visit the Great Exhibition in the Crystal Palace. Yet, according to Mair's public records and notes, the period spent at Llangynyw, when these letters were written, was a happy one: poets and musicians would seek out the vicarage, and they were afforded wonderful hospitality; Cantorion Llangynyw, under Mair's baton, were as famous as Cantorion Darowen; the *plygain* flourished and life was good. It is clear that her public side was very different to her private one.

Thomas Richards died in 1855, and in 1856 Mair Richards, Jane, Elen and Hugh Kyffin (Elen's cousin and Mair's ward in chancery) moved to Meifod, to live with Richard. During the year 1857, Mair kept a diary, the only diary of

---

<sup>49</sup> This is how Sara commonly addresses Mair Richards.



hers in existence, or at least to survive<sup>50</sup> – as noted earlier, her normal practice was to insert brief personal comments at the end of her manuscript pages. As usual, she had to make do with what paper was to hand, and the diary is written within the pages of an old Almanac and Diary for the year 1835, so the days of the week had to be changed to concur with the days for 1857. The difference between the London letter and the Meifod diary is remarkable, and in many ways tragic. This is perhaps to be expected for there are almost forty years separating the two periods. The entries are fairly brief, three to four sentences at the most; yet, the old woman's frame of mind is unmistakeable. Her life revolves around the house and the church – she sews, makes rush candles, looks after the bees, puts a hen to sit on guinea fowl eggs. Although she continues with her copying (Lewis Dwnn and Gwallter Mechain are mentioned), she is clearly trying to sort through her papers and letters, and put them in order. People come for tea, visitors arrive from London; in turn, she goes out for tea with neighbours, sometimes as far as Cyfronydd (5 miles away) where she stays for three days. But throughout the diary there is an overwhelming sense of the passing of time, and not only of the changing seasons. The singing in Meifod church compares unfavourably with the singing in Darowen – 'canu canolig'; 'canu symol'; 'ni ddaw byth yn dda nes y caffont ddeall amser'; 'ni ddaw byth yn dda hyd nes y byddo y ledwyr yn well'<sup>51</sup> – while the lack of respect towards the Welsh language fills her with anger – 'mae yn waradwydd ir cenedl bod cymaint o Saesneg yn yr Eglwys',<sup>52</sup> exemplified by a particular communion service held in the English language merely for the sake of three English women, although there were sixty Welsh speakers in the congregation. She is also acutely aware of the effects of immigration – 'chwith chwith iawn bod y Cymru yn gadael ei gwlad ir Saeson'.<sup>53</sup>

There is an increasing weariness in her tone. Sometimes, she has very little to say: 'Dim yn rhyfedd'; 'rhywbeth yn debig'; 'dim yn rhyfedd, pawb yn debig a phob peth yn cyffelyb'; 'dim yn rhyfedd, nid wyf yn cofio ai teg ai gwlaw'.<sup>54</sup> Other times, she looks back nostalgically to the good old days: 'o chwith am yr hen amser'; 'chwith yw meddwl am yr amser a welais, ond nid

<sup>50</sup> Unfortunately, the actual whereabouts of this diary is currently unknown; it seems to have disappeared from the National Library of Wales where it was once deposited. Again, I must emphasise my gratitude to Mrs Mari Ellis, for she transcribed it several years ago, and kindly allowed me to read her transcription. She informs me that the handwriting is extremely untidy and difficult to read.

<sup>51</sup> 'mediocre singing'; 'poor singing'; 'it will never improve until they understand timing'; 'it will never improve until the leaders are better'.

<sup>52</sup> 'It is a shame on the nation that there is so much English in church'.

<sup>53</sup> 'It is very very sad that the Welsh are leaving their country to the English'.

<sup>54</sup> 'Nothing unusual'; 'just the same'; 'nothing unusual, everyone the same and everything similar'; 'nothing unusual, I don't remember if it was fine or wet'.

yw lles achwyn'; 'rhyfedd y newid yn y wlad.'<sup>55</sup> In one of her manuscripts (CM 270), under the title *Teithiau MR Darowen* ('The Travels of MR Darowen') she describes how she climbed to the summit of Aran Fawddwy seven times, the first time when she was about eleven years old, to see the sun rise on Ascension Day. Now, in 1857, she remembers that first time, and dreams of seeing the mountain again – as she is drawing to the end of her life, she wants more than anything to return to her old haunts.

Mair's time in Meifod was therefore not a happy one. She missed the company of poets, the fun of the eisteddfodau – she could see with her own eyes the golden age of the 'old literary clerics' coming to an end. Her only consolation was the church, but even that was becoming Anglicised, and the *plygain* services were deteriorating. No wonder she was nostalgic for the good old days. Even the arrival of the photographer Mr Marpole, does not stir her; she simply notes that he took pictures of 'Mair Ofyddes, Jane, Richard, Elen a Hugh Kyffin, a Sara E a Sara a Mary Morgan'.<sup>56</sup> Nothing excites her any more.

When Richard Richards died, Mair had to move yet again; she went with Jane and Elen and Hugh to live with their brother Lewis, rector of Llanerfyl. Sadly, he died within a few months, and for the first time in their lives, the sisters had no brother to support them. They moved to Bryntanat, a private house nearby, and life improved. The *plygain* was in a healthier state than in Meifod and the neighbourhood was not as Anglicised. But even here in the Banw valley, Mair sees deterioration all around:

Nadolig 1863: ar ddydd Gwener ni bu cwmpeini ond Mrs Price Buarth Bachog trwyr nos; ychydig o ganu; aethom i'r Eglwys o ddeutu 5; canwyd saith o garolau, ond ni chanwyd ar hymnau arferol. Canodd Dafydd Ingram y Clochudd 86 oed chwareuwr y grwth dri thant goreu yn y wlad; aethom i Lan Gadfan yn yr hwyr; lluaws o bobol ond gwael oedd eu hymddygiad – siarad yn uchel ac arferydd ysgafnder yn yr Eglwys. Y mae haint y Saeson wedi ei tywyllu ai twyllo, sef yw hynny capeli y Saeson drwy ein gwlad.

Ionawr 1 1864: bu Mrs Price or Buarth Bachog ac un Agnes Llwyd a Mair ar eu traed trwy'r nos; canwyd llawer o garolau; aethom i'r Eglwys am pump; ni chanwyd yr hen Anthem, o achos plentynrwydd

<sup>55</sup> 'I miss the old times'; 'it's sad thinking about the times I had, but there's no point complaining'; 'strange the change in the country'.

<sup>56</sup> See the photograph of Mair Richards, taken in Meifod vicarage on 19 March, 1857 [National Library of Wales: PG 4393/21], reproduced here.

yr hen cantorion yn hoffach o donnau y Saeson na chyfansoddiad ei cenedl ei hun... Cynygiodd Mair ac Agnes canu carol, un yn 77 ar llall yn 17 o oed... ychydig iawn o fobol yn ddau wasanaeth.<sup>57</sup>

On Whitsun, 1862, she says in no uncertain terms:

er mawr o ddianrhydedd in Hiaith in Cenedl a'n gwlad rhoddwyd y Litani a'r bregeth yn Saesneg er mwyn hanner dwsin o Saeson.<sup>58</sup>

Her comments and notes are witness to linguistic erosion in nineteenth-century Montgomeryshire. But even in her eighties, Mair's interest in antiquities persists: she lists fossils and relics that were in her possession in 1863, including a wooden cross that was bought in Jerusalem by Dafydd Jones from Cyfronydd, a large ploughshare found near Sycharth, and an old seal belonging to one of the Welsh princes [Cwrtmawr 298B]. Given her obsession with copying and note-writing, it is perhaps no wonder that, in a macabre way, she records the passing of each year, from 1852 onwards, on the back cover of one of her manuscripts [Cwrtmawr 271B]. The ink changes and the handwriting becomes more frail as the years progress:

Trefnwyd i Mary Richards fyw hyd y flwyddyn 1852 ac os caniatta yr Arglwydd Iessu iddi fwy einioes, bydd yn fodlon iawn... etto 1856 etto 1857 etto 1858 etto 1859 golew hyd Mehefin sef yr Alban – 1860 – 1861 – etto 1862 – 1863 – 1864. etto hyd Alban Hefin 1865 ac etto 1866... etto hyd Alban Hefin 1867. Hyd Mawrth 1868 etto hyd Alban Hefin 1869 – ac etto hyd Alban Hefin 1870. Hyd 1871 ag etto hyd 1872 ag etto 1873. ag hyd 1874 ag hyd 1875 nis gwn pa faint yn hwy y ragor. Cyrhaeddes 1875 ag hefyd 1876. Y mae'r wyth

<sup>57</sup> 'Christmas 1863: on Friday I had the company of only Mrs Price Buarth Bachog all night; very little singing; we went to church around 5; seven carols were sung, but not the usual hymns. Dafydd Ingram the Bellringer sang, 86 years old, the best 3 string *crwth* player in the country; we went to Llangadfan in the evening; many people but they behaved badly – they talked loudly and didn't take things seriously in church. The English plague has darkened and deceived them, namely English chapels throughout our country' [Cwrtmawr 298B]. January 1 1864: Mrs Price from Buarth Bachog and one Agnes Llwyd and Mair were on their feet all night; many carols were sung; we went to church at five; the old anthem was not sung because of the childishness of the old singers, preferring English tunes to the composition of their own nation... Mair and Agnes offered to sing a carol, one 77 and the other 17 years old... very few people in both services' [Cwrtmawr 298B].

<sup>58</sup> 'Resulting in great dishonour to our language and nation and country, the litany and the sermon were given in English for the sake of half a dozen English' [Mary Ellis, 'Teulu Darowen', 84].

yn nesu. Mary Richards wedi cyrhaeddyd 88 ar y 9 o Dachwedd 1875 a chael Plygain hefyd.<sup>59</sup>

She died in 1877, at the age of 89, and is buried with her parents in Darowen, in accordance with her wishes<sup>60</sup> – her brothers and sisters lie in the churchyard in Llangynyw, apart from Dewi who was buried in Llansilin.

A folk memory of the ‘Ladies of Bryntanat’ persists even to this day in the Banw valley, in the heart of Montgomeryshire. In a recent publication of *Plu'r Gweunydd*, the local monthly Welsh paper, we are reminded of the fate of Elen Richards, Mair's niece, a sad footnote to her aunt's life. When she was almost forty years old, Elen ran away from Bryntanat to get married in Tywyn – her aunts Mair and Jane knew nothing. Elen's husband was Francis Griffiths Jones, son of Coedtalog farm, Llanerfyl. He built Pentre Ucha as their future home, but they never lived there. The day after the wedding, the couple set off from Tywyn to Llandrindod for their honeymoon; they stayed the night in Llanbadarn Fynydd, but by the following day Elen had died. Francis Jones never returned to Llanerfyl, and he never re-married. From the bedroom window in Pentre Ucha, Coedtalog (the husband's home) is visible to the left, and Bryntanat (the home of the maiden aunts) to the right, a visual symbol of the two paths that were open to women in the nineteenth century.

Mair Richards was a unique lady. Her life spanned two eras: she was witness to the tension between the old and the new. Her letter from London is a true gem, and reflects how she revelled in city life, in the excitement. However, most of her life was spent ‘far from the madding crowd’, in rural Montgomeryshire where, like Thomas Gray and Thomas Hardy, she witnessed the erosion of an old way of life. Through her tireless copying and writing, not only did she safeguard letters, poetry, carols, Welsh airs and tunes but, like her predecessor Gwerful Mechain, she succeeded in giving a voice to female experiences, and presents us with an insight into the life of a most remarkable Montgomeryshire lady.

---

<sup>59</sup> ‘It was arranged for Mary Richards to live until the year 1852 and if the Lord Jesus grants her a longer life she will be very happy... again 1856 again 1857 again 1858 again 1859 pretty well until June which is the summer solstice – 1860 – 1861 – again 1862 – 1863 – 1864, again until the summer solstice 1865 and again 1866... again until the summer solstice 1867. Until March 1868 again until the summer solstice 1869 – and again until the summer solstice 1870. Until 1871 and again until 1872 and again 1873. and until 1874 and until 1875 I do not know how many more again. I reached 1875 and also 1876. The eight is approaching. Mary Richards reached 88 on 9 November 1875 and had a *plygain* too’.

<sup>60</sup> See Cwrtmawr 285.