Aberdaron III

Read parts I and II here and here.

by Theodore Dalrymple (January 2025)

St Hywyn Old Churchyard in Aberdaron, Gwynedd

The entrance to the church and churchyard of St Hywyn is about fifty yards from that of the hotel in Aberdaron where we stayed. The churchyard extends up a hill and is full of graves. Mostly, their tombstones are inscribed in Welsh and date from the nineteenth century. The most famous churchman associated with the church was the poet R.S. Thomas, who detested his own churchyard and its monuments.

The Welsh, though, have always liked a good funeral and, impoverished as they may have been in life, they liked a monumental tombstone in death. In Aberdaron, the tombstones

are mainly of heavy black slate, and rather surprisingly, given the less than aesthetic aspects of much of Welsh existence in the Victorian era, are carved in an elegant and classical font. Moreover, slate resists the depredations of time better than any other memorial material known to me, so that the inscriptions are as fresh (physically) as the day nearly two centuries ago that they were carved.

The French sociological geographer, Jérôme Fourquet, takes the decline of burial in favour of cremation as another sign of the decline—almost the disappearance—of religion in France, or at least of the Christian religion, and there is no reason why it should be any different elsewhere in the western world. Of course, where burial is concerned, there is the problem of space, and increasingly cemeteries resort to the reutilisation of old graves, which rather vitiates the attraction of being buried rather than cremated.

For myself, I favour burial, for some obscure reason buried (so to speak) deep in my unconscious. I knew a Church of England vicar who preferred burial because, he said with less than a hundred per cent seriousness, that he did not want to give God any more difficulties than necessary on the day of resurrection, and that He would be saved some extra work if a person's skeleton still existed. I think I want to be buried so that there will be some permanent stone to commemorate me; a desire which I know to be irrational. I have long frequented cemeteries and know that tombstones also go the way of all flesh, though it takes them a little longer to do so.

For R.S. Thomas, who was not one to make allowances for human foibles, the desire to be buried and have one's grave marked with a stone was an impure one, the sign of at best a lack of imagination about the nature of future or post-mortem existence, at worst a sign of disbelief in the reality of the spiritual. Less purist persons would think of Aberdaron churchyard as an ideal place to be buried, overlooking as it does the sea with the restful sempiternal sound of the waves

below. As the inscription on many of the tombs puts it, *Hedd parfaith hedd*—peace perfect peace. (The Welsh word for police, by the way, is *Heddlu*, *llu* being the word for force, that is to say the force for peace.) But of course, those who care about where they are buried seem to imagine death as a restful immobile state with an attenuated state of consciousness, an awareness of where they are.

We were fortunate in the weather: the sun shone brilliantly and the clouds, such as they were, were feathery. But where the climate is not to be relied upon to be other than overcast or rainy, a beautiful day is doubly beautiful and induces a state of gratitude. Sunshine is not here to be taken for granted.

As you enter the churchyard, there is to your right a granite stone cross with one of the few inscriptions in English:

In loving memory of Joan Abbott Parry

Daughter of Judge Parry of Manchester

Born September 19th 1888

Drowned near St Mary's Well

September 6th 1904

St Mary's Well is a rocky freshwater well, near the sea and difficult and dangerous of access, at the end of the Llyn Peninsula which faces Bardsey Island, once a place of pilgrimage, famed for its monastery, where 20,000 saints were supposedly buried. It is called St Mary's well because it was supposed to have been visited by the Virgin Mary, and it therefore brings luck or absolution to all who likewise visit

it.

Joan Abbott Parry was washed away to sea at high tide and drowned as she tried to reach it. A reward of £20 was offered for the recovery of her body; and when she was found, she was buried in Aberdaron churchyard.

Judge Parry of Manchester was Sir Edward Abbott Parry (1863 – 1943), a man of Welsh descent, who was not only a notable judge but an author on various subjects. He wrote popular children's books with titles such as *Katawumpus: Its Treatment and Cure* and *The Scarlet Herring*. (Katawumpus was a term used for the state of grumpy and disobedient children.) He wrote historical studies of Mary, Queen of Scots and the Overbury case (Sir Thomas Overbury, thrown into the Tower because he refused to go as James I ambassador to Muscovy, was supposedly poisoned there). He wrote memoirs both of his professional and private life, as well as a manual for advocates and books with dry titles such as *The Law and the Poor* and *War Pensions Past and Present*. But I imagine that to have survived his daughter by 39 years after such an accident was to him a permanent source of pain that no amount of eminence or subsequent work could quite assuage. I imagine also that he did not so much forget the tragedy as not remember it, in the sense of not keeping it constantly in the forefront of his mind. This is what millions of people have to do; it is the instinctive wisdom of those who have suffered, and the very contrary of what so many psychotherapists insist upon doing, that is to say dwelling endlessly on the pain of the past as if to do so were curative.

I suppose it might be regarded as morbid also to dwell on tombs in cemeteries, and self-indulgent to feel emotion for those completely unconnected to yourself. What was I to Joan Abbott Perry or she to me. or to Judge Parry? Even had she lived her normal span, say seventy-five years, and survived well into my own lifetime, I should not have known her.

Evidence of tragedies such as hers are to be found in every churchyard and cemetery. I contemplate that evidence with a mixture of sorrow, gratitude and guilt that I think is salutary. Through no merit of my own, I have survived to live much longer than the victims of tragedy. For this I am grateful, though I cannot say to whom or for what, exactly. My survival has seemed perfectly normal to me, unexceptional and almost my due, or at least only what was to be expected (albeit that I have brushed with death more than once). My guilt is that I have not acknowledged my good fortune, but rather the reverse, complaining of trifles and treating small reverses or inconveniences as if they were of tragic proportions. Then I am ashamed and resolve henceforth to put things more in proportion, a resolution that never lasts long, of course, but probably tempers my self-absorption by comparison with what it might otherwise have been had I never made such a resolution.

Such, at any rate, is the moral benefit I tell myself that I derive from walking in cemeteries.

A few yards from Joan Abbott Parry's monument is another such:

In memory of the crew of

MV SWANLAND

Captain Yury Shmelev

Chief Officer Leonid Safonov

Chief Engineer Gennadiy Meshkov

2nd Engineer Mikhail Starchevoy

Able Seaman Sergey Kharchenko

Cook Oleg Andriets

Lost off Bardsey Island

Whilst on passage from

Llanddulas to Cowes

27th November 2011

That those who are safe on land may

ever remember and pray for the many

who go down to the sea in ships

The MV Swanland was carrying a cargo of 2730 tons of limestone when it sank off Bardsey Island, where the sea is notoriously rough, and whose eleven inhabitants are often cut off from the mainland for months at a time. Apparently, a huge wave broke the 32-year-old ship in two: it sank in 17 minutes. According to the official report afterwards, the MV Swanland, which was registered in the Cook Islands in the South Pacific, presumably to avoid certain expensive regulations insisted upon by other jurisdictions, had been loaded badly and had not been maintained properly. The cargo had not been distributed throughout the hold and therefore created stresses on the structure of the ship which meant that it could not withstand high seas with waves whose troughs were as long as the ship itself. A great deal of maintenance had been done on the ship, but piecemeal, so that the possible weakening effect of the repairs on the overall structure had never been considered.

The crew was Russian, recruited through a Latvian agency. The master was 44 years old. In the official report, there is a transcript of his last conversation with the Holyhead coastguard. One reads in it the last words of a fit and healthy man who is soon to die. This is always affecting.

Six of eight crew, two of whom survived, are memorialised in

the churchyard, and the body of only one of the six men who died was ever found. Post-mortem showed that he had died by drowning, and that he was not under the influence of drugs at the time.

Reading this memorial, I could not but recall one of R.S. Thomas's poems. *The Island*, which seems almost an indictment of the God whom Thomas supposedly served:

> *And God said, I will build a church here*
> *And cause this people to worship me,*
> *And afflict them with poverty and sickness*
> *In return for centuries of hard work*
> *And patience.*
> *And its walls shall be hard as*
> *Their hearts, and its windows let in the light*
> *Grudgingly, as their minds do, and the priest's words be drowned*
> *By the wind's caterwauling. All this I will do,*
> *Said God, and watch the bitterness in their eyes*
> *Grow, and their lips suppurate with*
> *Their prayers. And their women shall bring forth*
> *On my altar, and I will choose the best*
> *Of them to be thrown back into the sea.*

When you look at the memorial to the seamen, this hardly seems an exaggeration, more like a literal description. Thomas's biographer, Byron Rogers, suggests that the poem is meant ironically, but I cannot myself detect the irony, rather the bitterness. I am reminded of the passage in John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography*, with which the poem is consonant, about his father's aversion to religion (which I do not share), saying that it was inimical to true morality because it insists on doing the will of a being upon 'whom it lavishes indeed all

the phrases of adulation, but whom in sober truth it depicts as eminently hateful.’

The hatred that seethed in Thomas was far more powerful than any love he ever expressed, apart from a poem of great tenderness after the death of his wife.

He would have hated (I suspect) the pile of pebbles at the entrance to the churchyard with the following notice:

A Cairn for Everyone on Life’s Journey

We build a cairn to show The Way for those who come after us.

We place a stone from the beach as a mark of our own lives now

& for those who have shared and shaped our lives along the way.

The Stones are our Prayers.

On the last Sunday in October they are returned to the sea;

Symbolic of the cycle of life and death and life in God.

Apart from the walk-on part accorded God in the last line, this seemed to me to be pure New Age spiritualism, more joss-sticks and healing chakras of the earth than Christ who died on the Cross for our sins.

I was irritated by the shallowness of it, until I looked on the messages painted on the pebbles. They were simple and sincere:

Tony, taken far too soon

My beloved brother (1977- 2023)

Robert 2001 – 2023, loved and missed

To my daughter, who decided to leave us 5 years ago. We love you and miss you so much

To Jo, 1.4.67 – 22.12.10. Until we meet up I love you every second

And there was one in Spanish:

Amis padres Maria (52) y Manolo (94)

y a la vida

Gracias

And what could be more sincere than the stones with little drawings of dogs—Chester, Lilly, Dulas—the last of them 'never forgotten, always loved'?

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are *Neither Trumpets nor Violins* (with Kenneth Francis and Samuel Hux) and *Ramses: A Memoir* from New English Review Press.

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