



FACTsheet 15

Mary Howitt

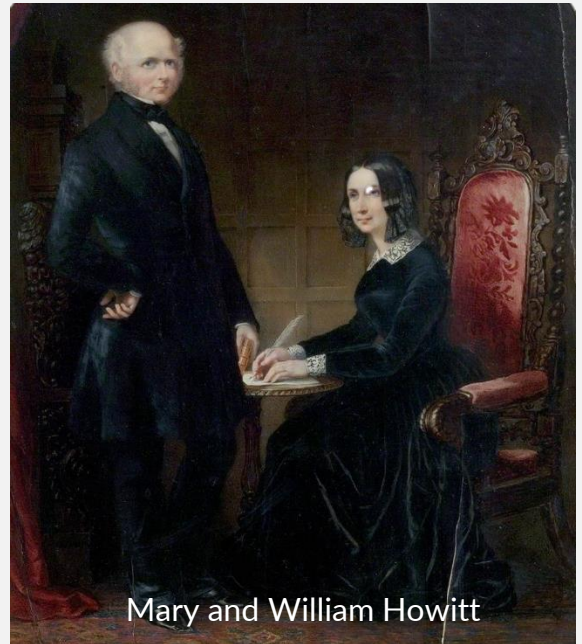
How many of you remember the poem 'The Spider and the Fly'? It was written by the 19th century author Mary Howitt who had a great affinity with Penmaenmawr, to the extent that she wrote a three-volume novel about the town!

Mary was born in 1799 in Gloucestershire. Her father was a Quaker and we think her mother was Welsh – certainly her parents got married in South Wales and it's possibly this connection that gave Mary an affection for Wales and its industrial communities.

Mary married William Howitt in 1821, and together they embarked on a lifetime of joint authorship, writing over 180 books. They mixed in eminent literary circles, counting Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Browning, William and Dorothy Wordsworth and Elizabeth Gaskell among their friends.

Mary and William holidayed in Penmaenmawr often. They made friends with residents and they took an interest in local education policy and the lives of the farming and quarry families.

Mary's letters and journals were published as an autobiography in two volumes by her daughter in 1889. The journal entries give us a fascinating glimpse into the social activities in Penmaenmawr in the mid 19th century.



Mary and William Howitt



journal entries

October 6th, 1861

Yesterday was a busy day to me, in this way. I had been very anxious to write the poem I had promised Adelaide Proctor for the 'Victory Regia.' I was afraid I could not manage it. However, in the night my mind was filled with a subject which came very clearly, and yesterday I wrote it. I hope it is good, for I have a great desire to stand well amongst the women.

October 13th, 1861

We have had a wild, bright autumnal day, clouds scudding over the mountains, the tide very high, the sea the colour of bottle-glass, ruffled and created over with spray. I have such pleasure in watching the features of the sea....

May 23rd, 1862

...We went back, therefore, to another favourite haunt, Penmaenmawr, and took up our quarters in Plas Isa, a new house, loftily situated, where we had the unmarried sister of Charles Darwin for fellow-lodger, and where we enjoyed a glorious view of open sea, the fine promontory of the Great Orme's Head, rocky Puffin Island, and the flat, wooded shore of Anglesey.

October 1st, 1869

I write at the Pater's dictation the following: There has been a great excitement amongst us today. This morning Mr George Mackarness went with his brother, the vicar of Honiton, to bathe. On their way they called for their letters; and the vicar of Honiton, opening his in the bathing-machine, found one was from Gladstone wishing to make him Bishop of Oxford. After breakfast the brothers John and George Mackarness started off to discuss the proposal on a walk around the Great Orme's Head. Mrs George Mackarness came to us, and we celebrated her brother-in-law's promotion by an afternoon's excursion together to Aber.

On the Penmaenmawr platform, as we were just getting into the train, all in the midst of a crowd of tourists, going and coming, an elderly clergyman burst out of a carriage, followed by two stylish young ladies. Mrs Mackarness caught sight of him, and there was a cordial greeting. He was on his way to Ty-Mawr to call on the two vicars of Honiton and Ilam...



Mary Howitt

Mary's description of the quarry workers in her journal, detailing their appearance and admiring their religious conviction, is on the wall of the museum gallery:

How I respected the grave, earnest quarrymen, clad in buff moleskin waistcoats and trousers, similar in colour to the outer coating of the rock, and in blue and white striped shirts of the same tone as its freshly-hewn inside; often with splendid faces of the rough, stony kind, and hair and beards like rock-growths of the gold-brown hue of late autumn ferns and heather!

Men of fortitude and piety these miners, who to the utmost of their ability support the temperance movement, their schools, chapels, and ministers; the latter belonging to their own class, and often dating their spiritual vocation from early work-days in the quarries!

How deeply, too, was I thrilled and affected by the grand, inspirational sound and the rhythmical cadence in the minor-key of the Welsh praying and preaching in the chapels!



Around 1861/62, Mary discussed her idea for a novel about Penmaenmawr with her publishers, Hurst and Blackett. They supported the idea and she set to work researching the content for her novel, along with her research assistant 'Meggie' (this may have been a nickname for her daughter).

Mary had also developed a long-term friendship with Esther Lloyd Jones, the 5th child of William and Gaynor Jones of Brynmor. Mary's correspondence with her, and notes in her journal, indicate that Esther had an office in Penmaenmawr (perhaps in the family home) from which she organised tours for 'well-heeled' visitors:

"Very gratifying were the courteous attentions of English and native residents, the occupants of pleasant villas and cottages studded over a fertile region in the lap of the hills. Very enlivening, also, did we find the intercourse with the little community of visitors, which often numbered bishops, deans and their families, and who, brought together in rambles and picnics by the ready offices of bright, energetic Miss Lloyd Jones, parted after a few weeks' acquaintance with mutual good wishes."



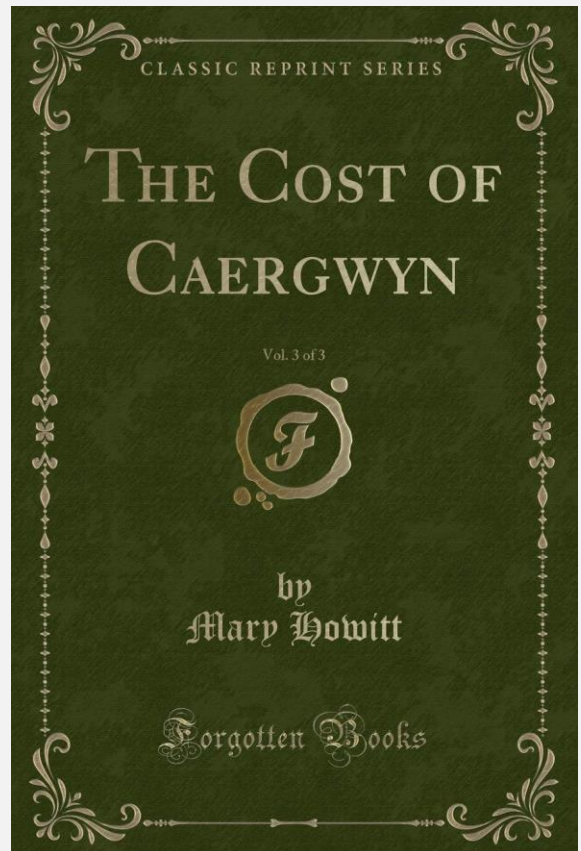
Mary Howitt

In 1863, Mary was still working on her 3-volume novel about Penmaenmawr, and she wrote to Esther for some information to help her finish it:

"Thank you for your kind note, with its news about yourselves and dear old Penmaenmawr, of which I am so fond. Once more I have begun my work (the novel laid in the neighbourhood of Penmaenmawr and called "The Cost of Caergwyn"), and I hope now, with God's blessing, to bring it to a speedy conclusion. But I still want your help, and am more obliged to you than I can tell for the aid you have given. I wrote to Mr Newman Hall, when he was at Llandudno, to ask Mr Parry some questions for me, as I think he told you; and after all, it seems I was indebted to you for the answers. Please tell me how the announcements of preachers at the chapels are headed. I need this in Welsh in the true form. I have seen such placards, which seem to me to begin, 'Y Parch Silas Richards,' and so on."

'The Cost of Caergwyn' was published in 1864. Mary changed most of the place names, including the name of the town, but Penmaenmawr and its surroundings is distinctly recognisable through her descriptions and cultural references.

Without giving too much away about the novel, in case you want to it, we'll just say it's very much 'of its time'. However, it offers an insight into the landscape of this area as well as socio-cultural practices and experiences in the mid-19th century. In many ways it's quite depressing – the lack of agency that women had during that period really comes to the fore.



Mary Howitt

What's also interesting is how Mary picked up other nuances such as acrimonious relationships between Welsh and English speaking colleagues in the quarry, resentment of the quarry owner, the quarry owner and gentry's attitude to the Welsh language and Welsh-speaking people, and angst between church and chapel goers in the community. In some parts, it is quite uncomfortable reading. Nonetheless, it may be one of the best examples of contemporary narratives about the lives of 'ordinary people' in what was then a rural and industrial community, that we have seen to date.

The three-volume 'Cost of Caergwyn' is not widely known and it is not a work that is often quoted with Mary's long list of literary achievements. It's likely that many of those who have read it around the world are not aware that it is based on real life in Penmaenmawr in the mid-19th century.



"Penmaenmawr, where we stayed until the hills were sublimely white, had never lost its stimulating effect on me. How I loved the rugged sea-washed mountain – the natural beacon and name-giver of the district – which, overshadowing the long, stony village, is being blasted, undermined, and hewn into blocks, to be shot down long tramways to the jetty, and then borne slowly through the water in little vessels to England!"

Mary Howitt

Mary visited Penmaenmawr, and indeed North Wales, for the last time in the autumn of 1869. Mary and William moved to Tyrol (then part of Austria) and planned to spend their winters in Rome. But just a year later, William died.

The couple had been inseparable throughout their working and social lives, and Mary was very affected by William's death. She divided her time between Rome and Meran, publishing a further six books before her death in Rome on 30th January 1888.

