



President's Message: The Circle of Welsh-American Life

Since I last wrote, we've all experienced a time like no other. The relentless spread of the coronavirus has brought loss and grief to some, inconvenience and deprivation, both materially and psychologically, to many. As we look to the gradual emergence of better days, we hope that you and yours are coping with your particular circumstances.

We have reflected on past pandemics, the like of which have not occurred in our lifetime, but which left memories and an unalterable heritage in our family and community lives. In my family, my paternal great-grandparents, David and Harriet Davies, passed away within ten days of each other in rural Wales a century ago.

Communal Welsh-American activities have been removed from our calendars. Among other major events, the Ontario Festival in Canada and the Urdd Youth Eisteddfod in Wales were early casualties. Then we found that we would not be going to Tregaron for the National Eisteddfod until 2021, and the North American Festival of Wales, planned for Philadelphia, will now take place in 2022.

In his book *Plagues and Peoples*, the eminent historian William H. McNeill spoke of two kinds of parasitism affecting mankind. Microparasitism is what we associate with invisible infectious agents, such as the coronavirus, while macroparasitism describes the casualties of violent human conflict and invasion. Sadly as I write, Philadelphia is suffering from both. May the City of Brotherly Love recover soon and fully from both afflictions.

As we describe extensively in these pages, 2019 was a banner



Osbourne Roberts medalist,
Dafydd Jones

year for our scholarship program. Our five scholars in Wales are faced with many challenges caused by Covid-19 as they steadfastly plan to complete their intended course of studies. Their response to their challenges is inspirational – Rebecca Blok, Andrew Edwards, Hope Kohtala, Brooke Martin, and Kelsey Weber give us much to admire.

The epidemic has also impacted two other individuals from Wales who were to be prominent participants at this year's NAWF. When Meril and I met Dafydd Jones, Osbourne Roberts medalist, in London at the end of February, he and his family had already made their travel arrangements to come to Philadelphia. This visit will now be planned for Ottawa in 2021. Dafydd is now sheltering in place on the family farm in rural Denbighshire, but is already scheduling activities for his studies at the Royal College of Music in London to where he hopes to return soon.

Our thoughts are also with Edward Morus Jones, our heritage medallionist, whose confinement in Anglesey is particularly acute, since his wife Mary is domiciled in Philadelphia. In a recent email, Edward makes the best of a difficult situation. He said that these could be very difficult circumstances, but he and Mary are making extensive use of virtual closeness through the various electronic devices available to them. They see and speak to each other several times each day!

Here in Scotch Plains, New Jersey, we have made use of the technology to enjoy two virtual services on a Sunday morning: the first by Betty Wyn Evans, the minister of the chapel in Carmarthen, Wales, where we attended services on St David's Day, and then from our local Presbyterian church. The Welsh radio stations available online have a profusion of uplifting music. And then there is Côr-Ona on Facebook with many Welsh friends bringing us much cheer.

We hope that you also have had the blessings of extra communication with family, friends, and community at this time. Our heartfelt thoughts are with those of you dealing with adversity due to ill health or the loss of a dear one. The circle of Welsh-American life remains strong in these trying times. If we as a foundation can be of help to you, please do not hesitate to contact us at nawfcymru@gmail.com, on Facebook, or through our website at www.nawf.wales.

Until next time we wish you safe and healthy passage.

Philip



Restored township hall, Arvon, Kansas

NAWF Grant Helps Historic Arvon, Kansas

By Susan Evans Atchison

[Editor's note: NAWF provided a grant to help restore the township hall in Arvon, Kansas. This is a progress report.]

I took a walk this morning in beautiful Arvon. While on the walk, my thoughts went to what Arvon means and has meant to me. Up until 11 years ago, it was a place to come and visit my great aunt and uncle for lunch and a place for family gatherings. Ten years ago when I moved to Arvon, it became that and much more. Arvon became my home and a place of history – the history of my Welsh ancestors and other Welsh people.

I learned of how Arvon had once been a thriving community and of events that happened here. I found that descendants of Prince Owain Glyndwr had owned land in our community. I learned the history of the school and church. Last year Arvon celebrated its 150th birthday.

Our restoration began in 2011 when the cupola of the school started to lean and immediate action was needed. We were able to get the school and church on the Register of Historic Kansas Places and the National Register of Historic Places.

An organization was formed to help make decisions, events and raising funds. This group decided that we also wanted to promote the Welsh culture and history of the area. We started working on getting funding for the historic buildings through grants, donations, and fundrais-

ing. The restoration of the school and church is now complete.

We have had amazing support from across the nation and Wales from people with an interest in Welsh and in Arvon. We were able to purchase the township hall several years ago and started raising funds for the restoration of this wonderful building. The North America Wales Foundation was one of our first contributors to this project and we received a grant from them. We are grateful for their support and others who have helped make this project possible.

The interior restoration of the township hall is now complete. Windows and plaster were restored. Doors replicated. Plumbing, septic, heating, and air were installed. The electrical system was updated. All this was completed in time for our 150th celebration. The building was rented out for the first time a few weeks ago. Family and friends raved about how wonderful it was.

Being able to share our heritage and the history of our community with others has been so exciting. Local school children have come for the last couple of years. It is one of their favorite field trips and they look forward to coming each year. A favorite activity in the township hall is acting out nursery rhymes on the stage. The building was also great for entertainment during our Arvon Day. The kitchen also allows us to serve meals.

A special thank you the NAWF for their assistance in funding this restoration.

Christine Williams Penn, Our NAWF Secretary

Christine Penn joined the Board of Directors of the North America Wales Foundation in 2008 and now serves as secretary.

She was born in Sellersville, Pennsylvania, and lived most of her early life in Montgomery County. She married Robert H. Penn in 1964 in Philadelphia and they have three children and two grown grandchildren. Everyone lives in Pennsylvania. In addition to raising a family, Chris had her own insurance career as a Nationwide Insurance Agent.

Her husband's insurance career took the family to a number of states, including New Jersey, Rhode Island, and Connecticut. But the family eventually returned to her home state. While she now resides in the Lehigh Valley, her earlier Pennsylvania adventures included living for a number of years in Bangor, Northampton County, another Welsh stronghold.

After moving there, she met many people of Welsh heritage, including William Pritchard



Christine Williams Penn

Van Buskirk, who was instrumental in sparking her interest in Welsh history and music. He was a member of the St. David's Welsh Society of the Slate Belt as well as a director of NAWF, then called the National Welsh-American Foundation. He introduced her to other St. David's Society members and she soon became an enthusiastic participant in Welsh activities.

Another prominent Welsh-American enthusiast in the Bangor area is John Jones

Reinhart, past president of NAWF.

Her own Welsh roots in the U.S. begin with her seventh great-grandfather, Robert Williams, 1647–1734, from Pembrokeshire, Wales. He married Gwen Cadwalader in 1691, and at William Penn's invitation, they joined the large number of Quakers immigrating to his new colony of Pennsylvania, settling in part of the Welsh Tract – Goshen, Chester County. Chris's Welsh ancestors were mostly farmers and many of her ancestors are buried in Goshen Friends Meeting Cemetery.

Having attended several of the NAWF annual events, she highly recommends this annual event because she has always found them to be a Welsh "homecoming." Chris has also been to Wales and hopes to return one day in the near future. She was also instrumental in reviving the Welsh presence and participation in the annual Celtic Fest in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, a huge success in 2019.

Looking forward to 2021!

We are pleased to confirm that both Edward Morus Jones acceptance of our Heritage Medallion and Dafydd Jones' performance scheduled for Philadelphia will now take place in Ottawa during our traditional joint banquet with the Welsh North American Association on Friday night 3rd September 2021.

How are our scholars in Wales coping with COVID 19?

Despite the many challenges, they are determined to achieve their goals

2019 was a banner year for the NAWF Scholarship Program. Our endowments, together with the generosity of one-time donors to the foundation, allowed us to support five extraordinary students in Wales.

The restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, though, laid their best plans aside. The material and psychological impact on these young individuals is difficult to fully appreciate. Being away from home, unable to pursue their studies, and deprived of activities, which in some instances were critical to meeting their basic financial needs, presented each of them with different challenges.

Fortunately, Hefina Phillips, chair of our scholarship committee, has maintained contact with them, particularly since the impact of the coronavirus on their lives became evident, emailing them to ask about their well-being. Their responses are printed below. Despite the challenges they face, it is clear that they are all determined to continue and complete their various courses of study, regardless of the hardships.

NAWF scholars describe their situations in Wales [edited for space]



Rebecca Blok

Rebecca Blok

My husband and I are, like many of us now, worried, bored, and lonely. But we are also thankful to be sheltering in such a beautiful place as Bangor, which we explore as much as we can with our allotted once-a-day walk. We see the mountains every morning, still misty before the sun has burned off all the grey. We walk through carpets of grass and bluebells down the hill to the shore, where the sea is almost still.

The only sound, most days, is the quiet lapping of the waves and thousands of overlapping birdsongs. The trees are all green now, and covered with ivy. It is good for our spirits. I don't know how to describe it other than to say that it makes me feel more real, somehow. Certainly more real than I feel worrying about how I will begin my dissertation without library resources, what will happen to our savings in the stock market, or who, among our loved ones back home, is most vulnerable.

I sometimes wonder if I will ever be able to be in a crowded

room without health concerns ever again. I sure hope so. It is so good to find kindred spirits who are, as J. R. R. Tolkien put it, "partners in sharing delight," and I look forward to doing so again. If this time is teaching my heart anything, it is how valuable friendship is.

We have stayed and plan to see out my studies through the summer, as planned, and may stay longer (depending on how much I can work on my dissertation and whether international travel will be open).

Currently, you are right, we are unable to work. Michael had been hoping to get a job in the hospital, but disorganization and bureaucracy on the local end caused so many delays that by the time he was about to be hired, the crisis hit. So far, Ysbyty Gwynedd has not been interested in foreign nurses during a time they have much else going on.

In the meantime, we have been living off of only what we already had in the bank, such as it is. We now have been trying to live as frugally as we can to make our savings last.



Andrew Edwards

Andrew Edwards (Hefina's translation of Andrew's email written in perfect colloquial Welsh)

I'm managing well, thank you, as well as anyone else in the present situation. I always appreciate your help and advice. I also am receiving advice from Jerry Hunter [professor at Bangor University and former NAWF board member] and he gave me some ideas on what I can do to prepare for my long essay next year (my final year!) in addition to research that I should do in order to have a wider understanding of the research already done in this field. That is incredibly generous, and I can't adequately express my gratitude.

Perhaps I would be struggling to pay the rent over the summer, but I'm going home on June 1 for better or worse. I know how dangerous this could be for my health, but it will be cheaper to live at home over the summer. I'll try to get any possible work. I'm considering teaching English to children in China.

Hope Kohtala

I have attached my expression of interest for my dissertation and I'm sorry for such a long wait! I am still in Bangor and hoping to continue to live here until at least September. This check-in means so much to me and I hope that you are all well



Hope Kohtala

too! I am currently feeling healthy and also doing fine financially, but will let you know if anything changes. I appreciate your support so much and feel so grateful for you and this organisation!

Policy Brief: Potential Socio-economic Impacts of Holiday and Second homes in the Coastal Communities of Snowdonia National Park, Wales, and Mount Desert Island, Maine

I am planning to conduct a research project that will be both helpful and informative for the local communities within Snowdonia National Park, Wales, and Mount Desert Island (MDI) in Maine. The potential impacts of these holiday homes can be both positive and negative. In some ways, holiday homes have the opportunity to create wealth within a community that would struggle otherwise. However, it could also push local people out of their hometowns due to rising housing costs and a loss of a sense of community and culture.

By analyzing both the pros and cons of the impact in both locations, I will create a report that helps all parties understand the changes that are occurring within their local areas.



Brooke Martin

Brooke Martin (message written in Welsh and translated by Hefina)

I am still in Bangor and doing as much research as possible on line. I'm fortunate that there are plenty of resources on the web at the National Library. Also I am happy to live in Bangor now, as I can go out for a walk in the fresh air every day. Recently the weather was lovely, but today it has changed and it's raining. Never mind, we need rain occasionally. To be honest, I am worrying somewhat about next year's fees. NAWF has been so immensely

generous and I would like to thank you all for this.



Kelsey Weber

Kelsey Weber

I am fortunate to still be in Aberystwyth. It is so beautiful up here and reminds me of Maine. The Cardigan Bay air is certainly a relief during these uncertain times.

My plans for the future are down to one day at a time. I intend to stay in Wales as long as I can, but this is uncertain because my degree has been delayed, likely for a year. We do not know for sure yet, but the most likely scenario is that we will resume where we left off this year in spring 2021. As my degree is an MA in ceramics, it revolves around being in the studio making, which cannot be completed online.

At this point the Home Office is being reasonable about visas. This is good news because it allows me to stay in the country at least for the moment, but it doesn't change that I had budgeted for one year and now, completely out of my control, the timeline has been doubled.

I am able to work part-time on this visa, and, if things return to some semblance of normal, I will gladly look for work. I am concerned that finding a job will be difficult and that my funds will run out before I am able to secure a steady income. And that is only if the Home Office continues to be reasonable by letting international students work while studies are delayed.

Needless to say, I am extremely stressed about the many variables. What hasn't changed is my commitment to finishing my master's degree with top marks. Thus far my work has been well received by professors and my grades have all been firsts. The prospect of halting this momentum for a full year is upsetting and challenging on its own.

Returning to the states is not a realistic option for me. The travel costs money; it would

increase risk of infection; I don't have a place to stay upon arrival; and most importantly I would be worried I wouldn't be able to return to complete the degree. I am absolutely happy to be in Wales another year, however, the current circumstances are daunting.

I have confidence in my ability to make the best of the situation and to find solutions to the challenges. I am so grateful for the assistance and support already provided by the foundation. Checking in on us is so considerate of you.

In the meantime, I am still moving forward with project ideas, and am working on another piece in relationship to the scholarship I received from you. It will be a porcelain sculpture to hang on the wall of a ship with a white pine tree for a mast. White pines are Maine's state tree and grow all over New England. The tall, straight, old growth pines were perfectly suited for the masts of British ships. Thank you so much for everything. It is a strange time to be on earth, that's for sure.

NWAF Board – How do we respond?

These messages were shared with the NAWF board at its recent April meeting. Philip Davies noted an April WalesOnline article written by its Education Editor Abbie Wightwick [also a columnist for the Western Mail and a director on the NAWF Wales board] that highlights the uncertainty that COVID-19 is having on higher education and on international students in Wales. He agreed to contact each of the scholars and sent the following message:

"You have been very much in our thoughts as we hear and read your individual stories via Hefina. Our concern for you is matched by our admiration for how you are handling the uncertainties and deprivation which you face. We wanted to let you know that we are actively discussing how we can help you."

Summaries of the conversations by Philip Davies follow:

Rebecca Blok

Rebecca, with her remarkable conversational skills, depicted her challenges and steely determination to complete her MA by the end of 2020, when her current visa expires. Ironically, her main concern is for her husband Michael, a trained nurse, who has been prevented from taking a position within the NHS in Bangor. Rebecca has completed her course work, but her papers required for marking are sitting on her professor's desk – to which he is not allowed access! In the meantime, she is writing her dissertation, which she hopes to complete by the end of 2020 and then return to North America. As with the other students, it was remarkable to listen to her discuss her work with such enthusiasm and focus.

Andrew Edwards

He has a remarkable command of idiomatic Welsh, in which language we conducted our entire conversation. Presumably, he will not receive unemployment benefits if he fails to find work in Michigan.

Hope Kohtala

She is still in Bangor, living in a flat, and working on her

(continued on p 23)

Hywel M. Davies, Founding Treasurer of the NAWF

Hywel Davies, born in 1938 in Loughor (Casllwchwr), the westernmost village in West Glamorgan, South Wales, grew up speaking Welsh. His wife Mari (nee Phillips) also grew up in Wales, and both moved to the US in 1966 when Hywel took up a work appointment with a computer software company in Bethesda, Maryland.

In Britain, he was a member of Peniel Welsh Baptist Chapel, educated at Gowerton Grammar School, and graduated Glasgow University, Scotland, in 1961 with a degree in electrical engineering. His career as a computer programmer and systems analyst started at the Steel Company of Wales and continued with Elliott Automation in the UK and Israel.

Shortly after arriving in the U.S., he and a few colleagues formed their own software company, leading to contracts at the World Bank in Washington DC, and eventually to employment at the Bank for a 27-year career in various advisory and managerial positions.

Within a year of arriving here, Hywel got involved in Welsh-American activities and was elected president of the St. David's Society of Washington DC, holding that position many times since. He is a past president of the Welsh North American Association, and was the founding treasurer of the National Welsh-American Foundation (now the North America Wales Foundation).

In recognition of his work for the Welsh in North America, Hywel was awarded the NAWF Heritage Medallion in 2000, and was also inducted as a white-robe member of the Gorsedd of Bards at the National Eisteddfod in Swansea, Wales, in 2006.

In the late 1970s, under the leadership of John (Jack) K. Evans [see *Ninnau*, No. 45:4], the Washington society undertook a number of major initia-



Hywel Davies relaxes after a long day at the 2019 North American Festival of Wales

tives: an attempt to charter a Welsh School of Business in Cardiff; the establishment of a high school choral eisteddfod for the capital area; and the formation and incorporation of NAWF in 1980, with the original officers Jack Evans, president, Dr. P. Howard Patrick, secretary, and Hywel M. Davies, treasurer.

Jack's enthusiasm and liberal financial support of NAWF, together with the "sweat equity" provided by Hywel and Howard, further supported by Gilbert Hsiao and attorney Thomas Roha, saw the foundation come into existence in a remarkably short period of time.

Most of Hywel's efforts helped Jack assemble an initial board of directors for both North America and Wales, with the first board meeting bordering on the miraculous. Little wonder that there was a "mild"

lack of understanding on the objectives of the organization at that first meeting.

Jack's main thrust was to build the financial strength of the foundation, while expecting the other individual directors to come up with the funds, either directly or indirectly through soliciting others. The initial board meetings were very interesting, given Jack's impatience with what he considered idle chat with no cash forthcoming!

It is, however, a testament to the original vision, recorded in the founding documents, that, for many years now, the foundation has accumulated a substantial corpus of funds, and is able to pursue a broad spectrum of initiatives supporting Welsh-American goals (to be described in a future article).

Mari was the rock supporting

Hywel while he pursued all of these activities, but she still found time to earn a doctorate in English literature from the University of Maryland, while teaching at American University in D.C. Their two children, Trystan and Catrin, were born in the US, and both graduated from McGill University, Montreal, Canada.

Trystan pursued a career in medicine, and is currently an ER doctor at Lancaster General, Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Catrin pursued a master's degree at Oxford University and two advanced diplomas in voice, one from the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, Cardiff, and the second from the Peabody Conservatory, Baltimore, Maryland, where she now works.

Trystan is married to Minnie and they have two children, Rain, ten, and Micah, eight. Catrin is married to Robert Jenkins, also of Welsh descent, and they have a two-year old daughter Teleri. Catrin is enthusiastic about all things Welsh, as is her husband Bobby. She has an extensive repertoire of Welsh music and songs, and

also won the mezzo-soprano solo at the National Eisteddfod of Wales in 2012. She is well-known to North American-Welsh audiences, having been the soloist at many Welsh events, including the North American Festival of Wales.

Since retiring from the World Bank in 1998, Hywel has not been idle. He chaired the Facilities Management Committee, Fourth Presbyterian Church, in Bethesda, Maryland, that resulted in a \$16 million expansion – a seven year effort. He became the chief financial officer of the non-profit Evermay Society, which had the intriguing by-line "A Living Room in the Nation's Capital hosting conversations of enduring consequence." And he has served 12 years on the board of WNAA, returning for another three-year term in 2019 ("you ain't heard the last of him yet!").

He is now part-owner of *Ninnau* and currently co-chairs the building committee at Mariners Bethel United Methodist Church, Ocean View, Delaware, where he and Mari have lived since 2016.

North America Wales Foundation

2020

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NAWF Scholars in Wales (continued)

dissertation, delayed until the end of the year, determined to finish before coming home to Maine. She has applied for stimulus money, but has not received any yet.

Brooke Martin

Brooke remains in university housing and is self-isolating – in Welsh *human ynysu* – "self-islanding." As with Andrew, our conversation was in Welsh, as she has a remarkable command of the language. She has remote access to the National Library of Wales, which she hopes will reopen soon to allow her full access to source documents for her doctoral research. Even with COVID-19, she aims to complete her doctorate by the end of 2022. She is animated as she speaks of her work and in contact with leading scholars in her field, including Dulais Rhys and Mari Morgan.

Kelsey Weber

She is sheltering in place in Aberystwyth but hopes to leave for Portland, Maine, on June 1, since her host institution and studio in Cardiff is closed until April 2021. She needs, however, to get release from her apartment rental in Cardiff. She is intent on returning to Wales to complete her studies. We look forward to the completion of her work, so we may see firsthand examples.



Michael and Rebecca Blok with Mari Lwyd

NAWF Board conclusions:

The board has approved modest additions to the initial awards made to the scholars and will continue to remain in close contact with each of them. They all face considerable uncertainty regarding the timing of returning to their studies. We hope that you join with us in our admiration of these young individuals.

If the spirit moves you, the foundation will gratefully accept any financial support that you may wish us to pass on to ease the circumstances of these wonderful young people, who we feel will remain an active part of Welsh-American life long after they overcome their

present challenges and succeed in achieving their goals in Wales.

Donations can be sent to our Treasurer:

Mr. Warren Watkins,
301 Stone Avenue,
Clarks Summit,
PA 18411.

A Look Back at Grenville Thomas, Heritage Medallion Honoree, Calgary, Alberta, 2016

Four years ago at the Calgary, Alberta, NAFOW, Dr. Grenville Thomas received the NAWF Heritage Medallion “for services to the Welsh-American community” from NAWF secretary Philip Davies. Ninnau recounted that celebratory day in its year-end issue.

Grenville spoke briefly on his evening after Merlyn Williams, his childhood friend from Wales, introduced the honoree with “with flair and humor, permeated by the deep sense of admiration and community that they had shared over the years.” Thomas had already that day given a wonderful seminar and slide presentation, regaling the audience with his life story.

He was introduced at that presentation by another good friend, Brian Lewis, and then, surrounded and prompted by his Canadian Yellowknife friends, he entertained the audience with the enormous achievements and contributions that he has made over the years. “A life worthy of a biography and a movie.”

The following is from the honoree page from the 2016 NAWF Souvenir Journal produced for the Twenty-ninth Annual Heritage Award Dinner for “Dr. Grenville Thomas, loyal, passionate, and generous Welsh-Canadian, explorer, prospector, discoverer, and entrepreneur.” He was honored most of all for so much that he has given back to his Welsh communities, both in Canada and Wales.

Ed. note: The accompanying photos are taken from his 40-slide seminar presentation. We wish we had room for more (perhaps in a future issue).

Dr. Grenville Thomas

Welsh-American explorers and innovators are prominent in accounts of American history, as exemplified by John Evans’ exploration of the Missouri and Mandan Indians and David Thomas’ leadership as an iron-



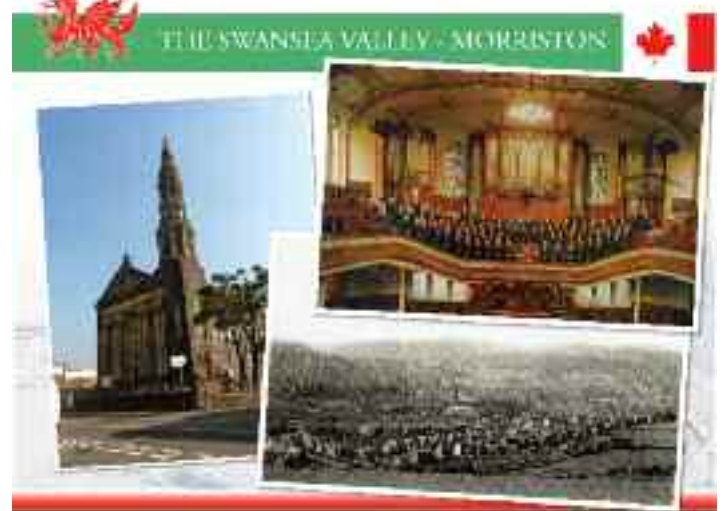
Grenville Thomas with Philip Davies at the 2016 NAWF Awards Banquet in Calgary

master. In contemporary times we recognize leaders such as Sir Howard Stringer (Heritage Medallion recipient in 1990) for his contributions in the news and entertainment media. Grenville Thomas is a contemporary leader in this respect; known world-wide in the business as the pioneer of successful prospecting and development of the diamond mining industry in Canada. Grenville is also known for bringing the nation into the ranks of better known sources of diamonds, such as South Africa and Russia. This was achieved through his role in the discovery and development of the Diavik mine in the Northwest Territories.

Much is written on Grenville’s extensive business accomplishments; however a recent media interview gives a broader and deeper perspective as to who Grenville Thomas really is. Clearly he is passionate about Wales, for he speaks highly of the community of Morriston, where he was born and raised, and its positive influences on his life. A son of the mining valleys, he went down in the mines when he was sixteen and soon was on the path to becoming a mining engineer, first through night

school and subsequently Cardiff University, graduating in 1964. His enterprising spirit and sense of adventure soon brought him to Canada, to the Sudbury nickel camp in Ontario and then to the Giant gold mine in Yellowknife. Here he engaged in his other passion as a self-described “grass roots explorer and prospector.” He followed his entrepreneurial spirit to explore for minerals in the far northwest. This led to formation of Aber (note the Welsh name derived from Abertawe – Swansea), his flagship company, as they say, the rest is history. His vision and enterprise led to the discovery of the Diavik diamond mine in the early 1990’s.

Grenville has remained loyal and generous to his Welsh connections both in Canada and in Wales. Despite his enormous success, he has never forgotten his roots in the Swansea Valley. He returns every year and is very involved in the area’s social and environmental issues, exemplified by his opposition to the erection of a wind tower on the beautiful Mynydd y Gwair in the Gower Peninsula, a place he remembers well from his childhood. In 2014 he was recognized by Swansea University by his



election as an Honorary Doctoral Fellow.

His support of Welsh-Canadian activities is evident as he is presenting the story of his career in the seminar “From Coal to Diamonds” at NAFOW here in Calgary. In the past he has provided consistent material support for Welsh-Canadian Festivals as a life member of the Welsh Society of Vancouver. His passion for rugby, Wales’ national sport, has extended to Canada where he has continued to support the game. Rugby players go the local pub, the Red Lion, in Vancouver after their games. It is a well-known watering hole, built by Gren, which is a replica of the pub that his great-grandmother ran in Wales.

Stories of Grenville’s explo-

ration and success in business are numerous. He has received many honors including Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada Prospector of the Year in 1999 and his Induction into the Canadian Mining Hall of Fame in 2009. You can get a broader sense of his many accomplishments and contributions by exploring his credentials online. However, a better place will be at his seminar here in Calgary, for not often do we get the opportunity to listen to the life story of a pioneer relayed by the person himself. Please join us in congratulating Grenville as we honor and celebrate the accomplishments of this remarkable leader and hero of modern Welsh-Canadian life.

Eira Thomas: More than “The Queen of Diamonds”

By James W. Thomas

“Dad, there’re no diamonds in Canada – everyone knows that.” Eira Thomas was adamant. Back in 1991, her father Grenville asked his daughter to join him in looking for diamonds in Canada. He was caught in his self-described passion as a “grass roots explorer and prospector” in the Northwest Territories. She started exploring with Grenville at the age of six, which led to her to a geology degree and a post-graduation trip to Africa at age 22, which was cut short by her father’s call.

With his company, called Aber Resources (after Abertawe, Welsh for his hometown of Swansea) behind him, he was looking for more than the gold that built the town of Yellowknife. His company staked a claim 200 miles northeast of there. And in 1992, with her exploration team and her sled dog Thor, Eira found evidence of an “economic deposit,” one rich enough to justify the expense of mining in the north.

Returning in 1994 as Aber’s chief geologist, she led the drilling team that found their evidence within a core sample. She flew with it to Vancouver to meet her father and offered him her hand – holding a diamond. He said, “Is this for real?”

The drilling site is now the Diavik Diamond Mine, one of the world’s richest. Eira became



Eira Thomas

known as “the Queen of Diamonds.” And Grenville now asks for his daughter’s advice, instead of giving it. She also became vice president of Aber Resources.

Currently, Eira is president and CEO of Lucara Diamond Corporation. Reformed in 2007, it is now headquartered in Vancouver but operates in Botswana, southern Africa. In April 2019, a worker at its Karowe mine sorting room saw a stone with a black carbon rind fall onto his conveyor belt. Thomas later said, “The stone looked like an avocado.”

That stone, the Sewelô diamond, is the second largest rough diamond ever found. (The Cullinan, found in 1905, is first.) The lumpy rock is 1,758 carats and weighs 352 grams,

about 12 and a half ounces, or as Ed Caesar put it in *The New Yorker*, just about “the weight of a can of soup.” In the local official language, the name Sewelô means “rare find” in Setswana.

Thomas claimed that the company “got lucky.” But Grenville dismissed such luck because his rigorous scientist daughter had “an unteachable talent for discovery. She has a good nose, as they say in our business.” She also knows when to innovate. Her team decided to use X-ray transmission technology or XRT that scans objects for a specific atomic density instead of weight or luminescence, much like, a Lucara engineer said, “An airport baggage scanner.”

Lucara switched to XRTs in



April 2015. By November, in two days, the Lesedi La Rona (“our light” in Setswana), the third largest rough diamond found so far, and the Constellation, number eight (just ahead of the Koh-i-Noor, now part of the British crown jewels) were found. The sales of these two recent stones are detailed in the 3 February 2020 *New Yorker*.

Thomas, now a divorced mother of two, often brings her daughters with her on explorations, just as her father did for her. “They get experiences other children won’t get, and they’re starting to appreciate that.”

As for the Sewelô, it’s her favorite stone. “It’s an enigma. It’s not as pretty as the Lesedi or the Constellation. But, to me, it’s more valuable.” It can draw attention to wider issues, especially the relationship of the dia-

mond industry to Botswana. She is provoking the traditional diamond business, but makes no apologies. “My view is that the whole industry is going to go this direction.”

Since the 1970s, the Botswana government takes the taxes and royalties from diamond sales to avoid the “resource curse,” the problem of the rulers taking a country’s riches to further enrich the rulers and not the general population. Funding education, infrastructure, and health care, for example, has helped drop the poverty level from well over half the population at independence in 1966 to the current 16 percent.

On handling the Sewelô, John Armstrong, the Lucara geologist responsible for the XRT scanning machines, once said, “It has left. *Life*.” Yes, it has.