ANNE PETRIE

A Light for Iorwerth

My great-uncle Iorwerth went away to war as soon as he could, in October 1914. He and two pals went down to Ponty and stood up tall as they could, which was not so very tall, for the recruiting sergeant, who somehow measured them all at over five feet three inches, and signed them up for the Welsh Division. They raised their right hands and swore to serve their king and country, though coal was the only king they knew and Wales the only country, and went home cock-a-hoop to tearful mothers and sweethearts and fathers proud in spite of themselves.

Digging and blasting was what they were good at, though they were perhaps not so good at shooting or bayoneting their fellow men, for the army set them to tunnelling, so they could set mines under the Hun's trenches and blow him to kingdom come instead. Tunnelling in the coal pits in the Rhondda is grim enough work, but at least everyone there is on your side. Tunnelling in Northern France had an extra danger — Germans who wanted to blow you up, too.

And that is what happened to so many of our boys. The enemy would appear at the mouth of the tunnel, grenades in hand. They rolled them in, and ran. The explosions brought the tunnel down, entombing the men forever in mud and rock.

Iorwerth was one of those who did not return.

But his Mam, *Myfanwy, never gave up hope that someday, somehow, he would come home. They told her that she must accept God's will, but would not. Every day, when it grew dark, she set a lamp in the window, in case he came in the night. Otherwise, he might think the old house*

deserted and go away again. For twenty-three years, she kept the faith, until, in September 1939, a man came to her door and told her to put it out. 'Blackout regulations, Missus,' he said, then repeated it louder, as she seemed to be deaf. She was not, but sometimes she happened to forget her English. Cerys was living there; it was after she'd been widowed, and she translated.

So, the lamp was put out, and the blind put up, and Myfanwy went to bed. She would not leave it the next morning, nor the next, and three weeks later she was dead. Iorwerth's photograph, him so proud in his soldier's uniform, hung on the wall opposite her bed, so haply his face was the last thing she saw as her broken heart stopped beating.

This was the story that Cerys, my Mamgu, *told me.*

I put a fan letter in the book as a marker and closed it. On the back cover, the author looked out at me with intelligent, shrewd eyes—Megan Griffith.

Lifelines was the latest in her accounts of her family, published eighteen months ago, but it was her novels which had made her name. They drew on her childhood in a Welsh mining village in the 1950s, stories of hardship and hard work and of love and families. Television adaptations brought more acclaim and her appearances on chat shows, which she cleverly rationed, became eagerly awaited and often repeated. She was a dream interviewee, a natural raconteur, possessed of a self-deprecating sense of humour and with a real interest in her fellow guests. A Liberal, with and without the capital letter, she espoused the causes of the marginalised and the dispossessed and became, in short, the nearest thing to a still-living saint that Wales had produced in modern times. The compassion of her more recent stories of her family's real-life struggles had only enhanced her reputation. Too good to be true? Some thought so.

This story of Iorwerth's lamp, charming as it was, did not bear scrutiny. During the Great War, families were not informed how their loved ones had died, nor what duties they undertook at the front. The tunnelling, I also knew, was very hush-hush. The tale could stand investigation, and investigation was my speciality. Educated as a historian, a journalist by trade, I had achieved a modest celebrity with my radio programme, *Family Matters.* I had created it, and it had proved one of the station's most popular. Recently moved from

an afternoon slot to early evening, its listening figures were soaring. The premise was simple: listeners contacted me with a puzzle from their family's past and I tried to unravel it. I did most of the research myself, although I now had a part-time assistant, Joolz. Over the thirteen months the show had been on air, we had dealt with tales of bigamy, clandestine births, missing aunts, secret millionaires and, the one that really paid off, a purported connection to royalty which actually turned out to be true. Now I wanted to extend the scope of the programme, bring in some mysteries of my own.

So, a Welshman called Iorwerth, son of a woman named Myfanwy, may or may not have died in France in about 1916. Iorwerth who? I did not know his surname. Perhaps it was not Griffith. I searched back, then forward, through the book, which was not arranged chronologically, but in themed chapters, with titles like *Hope, Grief,* or *Retribution.* Teasing out the relationships of the family members was like untangling a pile of spaghetti, but finally I thought I had it right. Iorwerth was the son of Myfanwy and Arthur Morgan, Arthur having died before his only son went to war. Iorwerth had a sister, Cerys, who was Megan Griffith's grandmother, her *Mamgu,* the original teller of the tale.

This was the information I gave to Joolz to work on while I went to Wales, to the village in the Rhondda that Megan Griffith had written about for so many years.

Sunshine turned to showers as I drove westward from the Midlands, and it was drizzling when I arrived in Maes Newydd. I parked in the village centre and looked up: there was nowhere else to look in this steep-sided valley. Rows of terraced houses stretched in parallel lines along the hillside, crouching under the scarred terrain. In the little square were a tea room, a fish and chip shop, a small supermarket and a tourist information kiosk with a 'closed' sign. Two squat chapels faced each other across the road. One had a placard outside announcing auctions every Friday morning; the other was boarded up. I had hoped to start researching at the library, but could not immediately see it. I went into the tea room to ask.

The little café was warm, and the windows misted. I ordered tea and a slice of bara brith and asked the woman who brought the teapot and cake to the table about the library. She told me that it

was in the next street, parallel to this one, a little way uphill.

"It's in the same road as the house with Iorwerth's light. I expect you'll be looking for that, too. Most folk do, since she wrote that book," she said.

I was taken aback. "A light? Really? Who put it there?"

"The owners. They read *Lifelines*, well, we all have, and it turned out that they knew, somehow, that theirs was the right house. I think someone in their family knew someone in Megan Griffith's family. It's like that in the valleys. So, anyway, they thought it would be fitting to put the light back in the window. As a remembrance, see, as he's not on the war memorial."

That was interesting, but maybe not critical. There were idiosyncratic omissions and additions on war memorials across the country.

The tea was strong and the cake sticky and thickly buttered. Fortified, I made my way to the library. It was in a grey brick building which had two doors, one with 'Girls' and one with 'Boys' carved in the stone lintels: the old village school. I started with the microfilmed copies of the local newspaper, the *Herald*, and struck gold straight away. Thursday, October 15, 1914, under the headline *Patriotic Maes Newydd Men Join Up,* a grainy, black-and-white photo of a group of young men, waving their caps in the air, grinning. Underneath, a list of names including Iorwerth Morgan. Which one was he? There was no hint. His family would have known, would have clipped out this picture and kept it in a scrap book for him to show his grandchildren.

I ploughed on through the reels for 1915 and 1916, looking for the report of his death. There was nothing. Other losses were mentioned, of young men, and older married men leaving widows and orphans and, once, a young woman who had gone as a nurse, but no Iorwerth Morgan.

My mobile, switched to silent, vibrated. Joolz. I rang her back from the street outside, dry now, taking the opportunity to stretch my aching back.

"Well, he certainly existed," she said, "but as for the rest, I'm not sure." The censuses, she explained confirmed his parents' and his sister's names, all living in Maes Newydd, but Iorwerth's service

records were gone, burnt with many others when the War Office took a direct hit during the London Blitz. "Myfanwy did die in 1939," Joolz went on. "I've ordered her death certificate, so we'll have more on that tomorrow. Cerys died in 1980, so there was plenty of time for her to tell her stories to Megan Griffith, who was born in 1950, according to her publicity. I'll check out the War Graves records next."

We arranged to speak when she had more information. I went back into the library and checked through the microfilmed papers for the years before the war for any mention of the family and printed out some articles which had some background information. As I left, I asked about the house with a light for Iorwerth.

"It's just three doors along," the assistant said, "number seven. It's a lovely idea, isn't it? And it's catching on. I've got one in my house."

There was indeed an old-fashioned oil lamp in the window of number seven, though unlit in daylight. On impulse, I knocked on the door. A dog barked inside, a voice shouted "down" and the door was opened by a youngish woman. I had thought, illogically, that the owners would be old. I had my radio station ID out ready for her and by luck she was a listener and more than happy to talk.

In her neat sitting room, I shared a sofa with a sad-eyed lurcher.

"The lady in the tea shop told me you knew about Iorwerth because of a family connection. Is that right?" I asked.

"Yes. *Mam* Ellis, that is my mother-in-law, told us when we bought this place, that she had known a woman who lived here years ago, Cerys Griffith. She used to run errands for the old lady so she remembered coming into this room. She, Cerys that is, had lived here since before the second world war. Then we read *Lifelines* and realised that Cerys was Megan Griffith's *Mamgu* and that this must be the room where Myfanwy kept her light for Iorwerth. Anyway, we found out he hasn't got any other memorial, no gravestone or anything at all, so we decided to put the light in the window for him. Now other folks are doing the same."

"Here in Maes Newydd?"

"Yes, and other villages in the Rhondda. Several houses in this street have them, not just for Iorwerth, but for all the soldiers who didn't come home."

"I don't suppose you know anything else about him, do you?"

"No, but my mother-in-law might. I'll call her now, shall I?"

A half-hour later, I was sitting in another neat front room in another little house, further up the hill. This, too, had a lamp in the front window, but thankfully no dog.

"I didn't know Cerys until she was in her seventies," Mrs Ellis told me. "She'd been widowed very young. Her man died in a pit accident before the war and left her with a little lad. He was Megan Griffith's *Tad*, her father."

"Did she talk about Iorwerth?"

"Only the once. It was Remembrance Sunday, and my *Mam* had sent me to ask if she wanted us to take her down to the memorial for the service. When I got to her house she had her hat and coat on and her poppy, but then she started crying. Oh, it was awful. I was only thirteen, I didn't know what to do, so I just gave her my nice Sunday hanky. After a bit, she stopped and said she had something for me. She gave me this. I got it out when I knew you were coming." Mrs Ellis handed me a folded fabric square. I opened it, carefully. It was a silk handkerchief, yellowed now and spotted with age. It was embroidered with the dates 1914-1916 and the word 'Remember'.

"She told me that Iorwerth had given it to her during his last leave," Mrs Ellis went on, "but then she said an odd thing: 'I don't want to remember anymore'. Oh, I didn't know what to make of it, so I put the handkerchief away and never told anyone what she said. You have it. I really don't want it, it's too sad."

I put it the handkerchief in my bag. It had little intrinsic value: they were mass-produced in Belgium and France during the war years, but it might be good to put a picture of it on our website. As I walked back to the car I wondered what Cerys had not wanted to remember.

The light was starting to fade, and as I passed through the steep streets I noticed more lamps, lit now, and others as I drove through the valley to Pontypridd, the 'Ponty' where Iorwerth and his pals had persuaded the recruiting sergeant that they were tall enough to die for their country. I stayed there overnight.

Joolz rang soon after nine the next morning while I was at breakfast.

"Ok," she said, "boring stuff first. Myfanwy died of pneumonia, and lung cancer. She must have known she was dying, which is probably why she took to her bed. Cerys died of the same thing. Now, the interesting bit. There is no war grave for a Iorwerth Morgan who died in the Great War, nor is his name recorded on the memorials for those whose bodies were never found, like Thiepval or the Menin Gate."

"And nor is he on the Maes Newydd war memorial, and there is no mention of his death in the local paper. It looks like Myfanwy was right and her son was not killed at all," I said.

"So we don't have a dead soldier, just a disappearing soldier, and a disappearing soldier is..."

"A deserter. I'm going to check the Police Gazette site on my tablet. I'll call you back." Less than an hour later I'd found him, the deserter Iorwerth Morgan, five feet three inches tall, brown hair, hazel eyes, tip of right thumb missing; last seen Maes Newydd, June 1916. I had been looking in the wrong place, searching for deaths in the local papers. His desertion would have been reported with the criminal proceedings. What had happened to him? Where had he gone? Myfanwy could not have hidden him from the police in so small a village. He could have moved anywhere: England, Scotland, even, if he had been clever enough, Australia or America. He probably changed his name. I made a decision and rang Joolz back.

"Can you get the number of Megan Griffith's agent and arrange an interview for me? Tell her it's about Iorwerth."

Joolz said she would. "By the way, check out the BBC news website," she continued. "There's an article about the Light for Iorwerth thing. The idea has spread to Cardiff and Swansea now, and someone has started a Twitter account."

I headed for home, but before I got there, I'd had a text to say that the interview was arranged for three days hence.

Well, Megan Griffith, I thought, let's see how you react when I tell you your hero great-uncle was really a deserter. How will you tell all those people who have a light for Iorwerth in their windows what they are really celebrating?

She met me in the farmhouse-style kitchen of her home near Gloucester. I looked round while the kettle boiled on the Aga:

butler's sink, antique oak refectory table, Farrow and Ball paintwork —she had come a long way from Maes Newydd. She served us mugs of tea and home-made oat biscuits and came straight to the point.

"I expect you have come to tell me that Iorwerth Morgan was a deserter. Am I right?"

I said nothing. I felt winded, as though she had punched me in the stomach.

"Sorry, but you are not the first," she continued. "Maybe a dozen or so genealogists and World War One historians have contacted me with the same message, and I will tell you what I have told them. Another biscuit? No?

"Well now. My *Mamgu* Cerys told me, eventually, that Iorwerth had deserted. She was ashamed of him, you know. She could hardly bring herself to speak of him, but once she told me the story of his last leave. He was changed, she said, not in body but in spirit. He'd gone away a healthy, strong young man, a bit cocky, but cheerful, always cheerful. Now he wouldn't eat, couldn't sleep. She would hear him pacing in his room all hours of the night, or, worse, hear him sobbing for hours on end. The others who came home on leave were not like this. The trouble with Iorwerth, she thought, was that he was scared. He was a coward.

"The day he should have gone back to France, *Mamgu* and Myfanwy found his room empty. He had left his uniform behind, but taken his bed roll and eating things and his revolver. He's run away, *Mamgu* thought. Myfanwy though, said that he was only going to rest for a while. The war and the army had wounded his mind, in the same way that a body could be wounded by a bullet, and that he would come home when he was better. That is why the lamp was in the window. For all those years, she never gave up hope."

"But why did you write that he was dead?" I asked.

There was a copy of *Lifelines* on the table, with a bookmark. Megan Griffith opened it and handed it to me. "Read," she said.

I read the familiar story, and realised what she had done. She had not said that Iorwerth was dead, only that he had not come home. She handed me another book, with a plain cover and the title *Flesh and Blood*: a proof copy. "Page forty-two." The chapter was headed *New Endings*. I read the story she had just told me, but there was

more.

In 1952, high up in the hills above our valley, a little Jack Russell terrier, chasing a rabbit, got himself proper lost. His owners, who had been hiking, could hear his frantic barks but it took some time to trace him to the long-disused adit where he had become trapped, and even more time to find a way through the thicket of brambles to the door. Eventually, they pushed apart the rotting timbers and freed wee Jack, but saw that he had not been alone in his temporary prison. There were bones, human bones, there, too. Men came with cameras and notebooks and took the bones away, together with a military dog tag and a rusted service revolver. Enquiries were made. It was Iorwerth. He had been shot once through the head. If he had left a note, it had perished long ago.

A policeman brought the news to Cerys one morning when she was minding her granddaughter. She did not weep. Iorwerth, she thought, had taken the coward's way out and left his mother never knowing what had become of him. She refused to pay for a funeral, and Iorwerth was finally laid to rest in an unmarked pauper's grave in Ponty.

As I finished reading, my mobile beeped twice. A text from Joolz: 'Found a death cert for Iorwerth in 1952!!! In Wales!!!' I switched the phone off. There was silence for a few moments. Then Megan Griffith brought the teapot and refilled our mugs.

"*Flesh and Blood* will be published next month. Then everyone will know, well, most of the story. You see, I am a storyteller. Storytellers don't give away the end of the tale at the beginning, nor do they necessarily tell everything in the order in which it happened. People buy my books because in real life, as in fiction, there is always a chance of a twist in the tale, a different ending to the one they were expecting. There is no denying that Myfanwy's ending was sad. I can't change that. But Iorwerth's ending has changed. He was a dead hero but now he is a deserter who was dishonoured in death by his only kin." She paused. "Except that the Light for Iorwerth movement is changing his ending again."

"Did you start it?" I asked. "This light thing?"

"Certainly not." She smiled the luminous smile that never failed to enchant her TV audiences. "My word, you journalists are cynical. I really have no idea what Twitter is or does and I wouldn't know a

Tweet if it bit me in the leg."

It was impossible not to smile back. "Do you think it will continue, when people know what really happened to him?"

"Yes. Yes, I do. People nowadays will recognise that he was another casualty of war, as much to be mourned as those whose names are on the monuments and that Myfanwy is as much to be pitied as any of their mothers, maybe even more so. And another thing—remember, you heard it here first, is that what you folk say?" I was caught again in the radiance of her smile. "*Mamgu's* ending will change, too. When she was quite old, in her seventies, she read about shell shock in the novels she liked, though not in my stories, I'm afraid. She went to the library and looked in the encyclopaedias and finally she understood what had happened to her brother. She stopped being ashamed of him."

I dug in my bag and, pushing aside the envelope of newspaper articles I had printed out, which could wait, I found Iorwerth's gift to Cerys, the silk handkerchief. I gave it to Megan Griffith and told her about my meeting with Mrs Ellis.

"Remember," she read. "We will, won't we?" She handed it back and looked at me, with those clever, perceptive eyes. "I have a confession. I agreed to meet you for a reason, and part of the reason is that my own ending will not be too long in coming."

I started to say I was sorry, but she cut me short. "I have had time to come to terms with it. What matters now is making the most of what is left and making it an ending that I can be content with. I like your work, I never miss a show, and you are the one, I think, to highlight the forgotten ones, like Iorwerth, the ones who suffered from shell shock, or were shot for so-called cowardice, or who deserted because they couldn't cope. Will you do that? For the centenary of the Armistice in a few months? And we mustn't forget those who came after, in the second war, and Palestine and Korea and all the other conflicts. Look you, if it will help and if you'll have me, I'll come on your programme."

We both knew it was a bribe, but what a bribe. Megan Griffith on my show: my own happy ending. We talked for hours, over more tea, a bread-and-cheese lunch and yet more tea. By the time I left, we knew how we could use the Light for Iorwerth campaign to

illuminate the lives of men and women maimed in mind or soul by war, and how we would commemorate them.

I drove home through the fading glow of early evening. As I passed through towns and villages, lamps shone in the windows of houses and bungalows and flats, in farmhouses and cottages, restaurants and cafés, in corner shops and petrol stations. More and more lights would be lit, even in castles and palaces, I thought, until by November every home in these islands would honour not just the fallen but the lost as well.

That was the ending Megan Griffith wanted and I could make it happen. Or I could provide another ending, the one where I used the newspaper articles I had about Iorwerth's life before the war. The ending where I shed light on yet another Iorwerth: the petty thief and drunk who only got off a charge of rape because his frightened victim refused to testify. The one where the Light for Iorwerth is snuffed out and Megan Griffith is exposed as a very selective teller of tales. She would never know. She would be as dead as Iorwerth and Cerys and Myfanwy, but I would still be alive, with a glittering future ahead of me if I chose right.

What to do?

I would sleep on it and decide in the cold light of morning.