

# PLYGAIN CAROLS AT LLANYMAWDDWY CHURCH

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(from the *Cambrian Journal*, 1864, but referring to an event sometime between 1854 and 1862; the service takes place on Christmas Eve through to Christmas morning)

Some have crossed the Bwlch from Llanuwchllyn, some the Dovey from the hill farms on the east side. All are gay and hilarious but without any boisterous merriment...We follow them into the Rectory, where before Ab Ithel's hospitable fires they shake off the midnight cold and mingle with the large company gathered there...

And now all are bidden into the Church...Candles glimmer in the windows and along the seats; wreaths of evergreen mark the season...The Church is filled, for nearly all the parishioners are there, and many belonging to other districts have wended their various way from mountain villages and scattered farms...The old men - and indeed all the men - are clad in a garb without any character save roughness and plainness for the hard uses of life...

And now the benediction is pronounced, and there is a stir among the people, not of departure, but of preparation and expectancy. The carol-singing is to begin. And first Ab Ithel, divested of his gown, standing before the congregation, and his two daughters with him, lead off with a carol, doubly their own in music and words.

This short and simple song over, the old clerk advances, and with him two other singers, a ruddy stripling of twenty, and a weather-bronzed farmer of middle age. They group themselves before the altar steps. The old man, the central figure, bears in one hand a candle and in the other the manuscript carol. The three bend over the paper. Though the voices are unequal and the tune monotonous, a reality of purpose stamps the performance with no common interest. Their carol is a long one of old verses connected and completed by original additions. It tells of the Divine dispensation on earth, from the fall of Adam to the Resurrection of the Messiah. It dwells on the persons, places, and events of Gospel history. It is briefly the universal carol recast into a Cymric mould.

As it proceeds, the singers do not modulate their tone or alter their emphasis. The strain rises and closes throughout stanza after stanza in what seems an interminable flow. There is no attempt at effect or self-

exhibition. It is a duty and a delight, not a task or entertainment. The three stand quiet and patient, the flickering light playing across their faces, and chant to the end the high burden of their song. At length it ceases with a long-drawn Amen.

They glide into their places; but immediately another singer starts up and bursts into vigorous carol, taking a more joyous note than that of his predecessors, but with as little variety of expression or air.

While he sings there is an anxious unfolding of papers and shifting of positions among the audience, and when he subsided satisfied, there is a springing forward of two groups simultaneously, of which one is elected, that of a boy and a girl, and their timid and sweet voices clothe the recurring carol with an interest that checks the longing for the end, inspired sometimes by the male performances.

And now there is again a pause, and again a vocalist rises with a book or manuscript, or with only an exuberant memory; and again, and again, until at last the carol culminates in the votive offering of two stalwart mountaineers, who pursue it in mutual excitement through a maze of amplifications, heedless of passing hours and sleepless eyes.

The winds rising in their strength sweep moaning round the church, laden with the funeral breath of the yews. Cold December darkness is outside, the feeble gleam of a few candles within. Heavy shadows flit along the walls, and over the faces of the people. The chill of the early morning creeps through your frame and a weird restless feeling weighs upon your soul.

But finally the tones fall away from your dreamy ear. The programme is ended. Ab Ithel dismisses the assembly. Then follow greetings and congratulations. All press around their pastor, and with many a *Nos dda!* and heart grasp of the hand, the people separate. The rector and his family go to rest, as do most of his parishioners, but a strong band of all ages, with bosoms yet glowing with Christmas fervour and with feet that spurn fatigue, march towards Mallwyd church, five miles distant, where another *Plygain* awaits them - a service, a sermon, and a carol-singing, as earnest, as consentaneous, and as long.