



Elorgarreg

Kevin Dyer, July 2023

Elorgarreg in north Wales, seems to take its name from a particular geological feature of the surrounding landscape: a large stone (*garreg*) that once served as a brief, resting stop for coffins (*elor*) transported by foot to the chapel in the nearby village of Cerrigydrudion. Lying somewhere between truth and fiction, Kevin Dyer's below piece recounts different stories morphing around this stone over time, illuminating how places are sculpted by the elusive narratives they themselves generate.

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Below the upland farms, scattered across the forgotten moors of North Wales, lies the coffin stone, Elorgarreg.

This isn't mountain land, there is no jagged rock breaking through the grass and scrubby patches of heather and gorse. But it's high. Too high for crops of any sort, except a few potatoes or turnips maybe. The soil is either thin dirt-like stuff spread thin between shale, or black sodden peat.

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In that olden time, the time before wealth of any sort, all thoughts up here were on surviving the winter, keeping the unstoppable damp out of the bedsheets, and stopping the dog from being so hungry it would eat the lambs. Each farm was a thick stone rectangle with a pigsty and tumbledown barn, the heavy slates always falling through rotted roofs.

The moors are a place of beyond beauty; a million acres of broad folds of green and brown turning to the blackest of black in the dips and hollows. In the spring snow still comes. In the autumn it's back again. The wild daffodils are still yellow when June is here. Summer happens on a Tuesday, morning or afternoon, never both. On that day there are white tufts of bog cotton and stone chats clack and rattle on the sedge tops.

The stone, Elorgarreg, sits just off the track that leads down from the upland farms to the villages in the valley. The track is a single meandering now, but once was wide enough for two men and their dogs. It wasn't the broad track that shouldered the high ground, the one people would take to get to market or the summer gathering down in Cerrigydrudion. The track past Elorgarreg was the short cut, not easy, but a good half mile less than the other route. And saving half a mile when you're carrying a corpse is a very good thing.

Before the new road came, with a surface good enough for two-wheeled carts and gigs, the carrying was a job for the men usually. But not always. There was a time when physical strength was split pretty evenly across genders. Men and women both did the hard graft; both lifted, shoved and hefted, both had muscles and grips of iron, and the Elorgarreg job went to anyone who could do it.

Nowadays the bearers of a coffin take it from the shiny black hearse to the crem door, then between a dozen rows of chairs and onto the rollers by the curtain, usually 20 metres max. Sometimes they don't even carry it, they put it on a foldable cart with wheels, a shameful object reminiscent of a hostess trolley.

Before the chapels, death had other customs, and the hills are still topped with mounds where a king or queen was buried three thousand years ago under 10,000 barrow-loads of earth. Most, of course, were not given this courtesy and effort. In the time from then to the 1700s, it was a straightforward thing: the day after the death they'd wrap the body in a cloth, if they had one, and lay it in a shallow trench. If they had a pair of horses or an ox they'd roll a stone over, less to mark it but more to keep the foxes out. No one wants to wake up next morning and see half-eaten human scraps scattered round the yard.

If they had the wood they'd build a box and bury them in that – it saved rolling the stone over and deterred the foxes. But trees were a rare thing up here, the sheep saw to that. Here and there a goat willow pushed up from a cleft, but nothing grew straight or broad enough to make planks for a coffin box. Sometimes, they'd fetch up sawn wood from the vale, but more often than not there was a greater need – to make a door to keep the weather out or a pen to keep something in. In better times, they'd keep some timber dry for the task. If the woman died, the man would make the box – in the small barn if the rain was coming, out in the yard if it wasn't. If the man died, then the carpentering would be hers. The more she loved him, thinking of the foxes again, the more nails were used to fasten down the lid.

Later, putting an end to the burying in ditches, came that brief thing called the chapel movement. It still clings on in most Welsh towns, but where there were once half a dozen chapels in a small community – named Bethel, Zion, Hebron, Jerusalem, Horeb, Gilead – now there is just one. The rest are holiday homes or projects for the local builder or places where the bats roost and locals don't even notice anymore.

So, when the chapels came, the burying of the dead was institutionalised: now it had God mixed up in it. God said that if you died in Hafod Bach, seven miles away from the chapel up in the hills, you had to somehow get the body in a proper coffin, bring it down, talk and sing over it, then bury it six feet deep in the little rectangle out the back.

Also, you had to pay two shillings to the minister for the pleasure, and then the headstone would be thrice that. Problem: if you were a Williams or a Morris or an Evans that had lived up top in a long line going back thousands of years and there was no pasture for a pony, it meant the only way to get to God was to carry the coffin. All the way in one day, do the business, then get back before it got dark.

Elorgarreg, the coffin stone, is halfway.

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Some folk say the stone was put here by an ogre, and the ogre used to sit on it to get the stones out of his shoe. The pile of boulders twenty yards off are the offending stones, or so they say.

Then, when the chapels came, and pagan tales were a distraction, the story was changed and the local minister said Elorgarreg was put there by the Lord as proof of his care and love for all, because it was the resting stone for the coffin carriers as they came from the hills to the valley. But not on the sabbath, of course. On the sabbath, up in the hills, the body would have to wait, laid out on the kitchen table, for first light on Monday.

Both are better stories, perhaps, than to tell was dragged from the west by a huge ice sheet and then dropped by the final melting of the last glacier of the last ice age 12,000 years ago.

The minister was clear on many things. (That is the certainty God offers, and bringing certainty in a chaotic world is the reason we have such dog-collar men.) You had to be a virgin to marry; you had to put a penny every week on the collection plate; your kids will go to Sunday school from the age of three; it is a sin and a discourtesy to both God and the deceased, to get dirt on the bottom of a coffin.

That's why God put Elorgarreg there. In fact, when the coffin of Aron ap Lewis was brought into the top Chapel in Cerrigydrudion in May 1846, the Reverend Jenkin Thomas wiped his hand under the coffin to check it was clean. Elorgarreg did a great job as the half-way place to rest the coffin and save the bottom boards from dirt (and the carrying folk from Rev Jenkins' condemnation.)

Coming from the top, a tiny place with no glass windows, just sack and willow branches, it was nearly three miles to Elorgarreg. That is a long time to carry. Eventually, the four would see the stone, as long as a horse and as wide as two, from nearly a mile away.

'Come on boys,' would say the front pair, and they'd all, in step, lengthen their stride to reach the goal.

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When they got to the stone they'd carefully lay the pine box on top. They'd take a breath, bend over, the sweat dripping, their hands on their knees, then soothe their sore hands on the nearby moss, damp as a sponge, before having a bite of whatever they'd packed. Some dark bread, an onion, or a carrot maybe.

As they sat and took fifteen, they were all thinking how glad they were when a thin one passed. None of them were fat, but better to carry a scrawny old thing than some young bloke thick with muscle who'd pegged it sudden for God knows why.

On the way back, funeral done, coffin six feet under, songs sung, a drink taken and a bit of fine ham, they retraced their steps. They'd tip their caps when they reached Elorgarreg, and hope death didn't touch the farm again any time soon.

Merfyn Edwards was a famed coffin man. He'd fourteen times carried a body in a box from Fferm Uchaf (High Farm) down the coffin track, passing each time Elorgarreg. He's gone now, of course, carried by his three sons and a niece called Bethan. He's now resting behind the chapel with a thin vertical slate, engraved in Welsh, to mark the spot.

Now, in the new century, there is none of all that carrying. The farm closest to Elorgarreg has a Facebook site and can be booked for parties of eight. All the farms above it lie drowned under the massive Brenig reservoir, the families moved on to elsewhere, the stone buildings and walls made over millennia still there but now the home for fish and fat black eels. All gone so that they can drink pure Welsh water in Birkenhead.



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Elorgarreg, the stone, still stands, unchanged, and always will. It's half a mile below the huge earth dam. It's mostly unseen, sheltered by a small gathering of sycamore trees. It is patterned, dark and slate purple, scarred where the glacier dragged it, but smooth on top. The coffin track still exists as a path on the OS map but is rarely walked.

Now the stone, however, has another use. To a lost rambler it is a convenient place to rest a Thermos cup. For the locals it is now not a death stone but a stone of life, a fertility stone.

It seems that once a place has a story it must always have a story – even if the original one won't work anymore.

The story goes, Sioned Edwards, childless and hating the fact of it, came to the stone one full-moon night in the spring of 1987. 'Just getting out for a breath of fresh air,' she told her man. They had been sitting there in the kitchen, listening to the clock, no conversation left between them anymore. She loved him, he loved her, but they were childless after much trying and were both worn down by the thought of the two of them, alone, ghosting round the place until their hair turned grey. So she put on her coat and wellies and strode down the track. A Nightjar churred, and the eyes of sheep shone green. As she passed the stone, she brushed it with her hand and felt, inside herself, a tingle, a pang, an urgent fullness coming on. That's how, three weeks later, her period missed, she explained it to Jane, who worked mornings in the old hardware shop. She said also her breasts were sensitive and she felt sick in the mornings.

Jane thought Sioned was going hill crazy so nodded and said nothing. But later, when Sioned started to show, Jane couldn't simply keep the story to herself: a woman out at night, something funny going on with her and a lump of rock, now with child, it seems.

The story got round, people laughed and scoffed. But Sioned's belly grew and grew and nine months later, to the day after the stone was touched, her waters broke and her first was born. The boy was christened Carreg, and now Carreg works for the National Trust putting up fences and repairing old walls. Carreg means stone. His middle name is Gwyrth which means, in English, miracle.

Now, the story is, after a wedding or anytime when a woman thinks it should be happening, when she can't bear the older women asking and hinting any more, she'll come to the stone.

Full moon.

Touch it. Embrace it. Kiss it.

The story has grown. As stories do.

The women, telling other women, talk of the stone holding the warmth of the day, and the little place towards the back where your hand fits as you pull yourself up. They say, when you climb on, the sheep go quiet and the geese grazing the pasture look up and watch.

The story told between men in The White Lion is that women do it naked. They undress, let their clothes fall in the dew, then climb up, and lie on their backs on the cold Elorgarreg. They feel the scratched pattern against their skin, they say, then relax, open, and let the moon enter them.

That's never been witnessed, of course, and never woman-told, but it's more than men talking with the beer in them it seems; the area, according to statistics, has the highest level of fertility by percentage of population than anywhere else in Wales.

It has also become a sort of custom that women in the area tell their good news first and foremost to Jane in the hardware shop. Before their husbands, before their mothers even. Jane loves this, feels sort of blessed, and every time, glowing at her special place in the community, drops a coin in the charity box that sits on the old glass counter.



About the author

Kevin lives in the UK and is Associate Artist for Farnham Maltings, Associate Writer for Theatre Porto, associate for the Welsh Arts Council and Lead Artist for Storm in the North. He was recently digital writer in residence for international writing organisation 'Writing on the Wall'. He has also been resident writer at Queens Uni, Belfast. He works as a dramaturg and writing mentor, and has won or been shortlisted for many playwriting prizes. These include: Winner of 'Inspirational Playwright Award' presented by Assitej International at their World Congress in Cape Town; Winner of 'Best Play' at the UK Theatre Awards for his adaptation of 'The Hobbit'; Winner of the Writers' Guild of GB 'Best Play for Young Audiences' with 'The Monster Under the Bed'; twice winner, 'Olwen Wymark Award' for supporting other writers. He has been long-listed, shortlisted, and published many times as a writer of short prose fiction and as a poet. He has just finished his first novel, 'Marion'. It's about being different and struggling to be free – in a quirky, parallel sort of way – because Marion is a cow. He works internationally, most recently in Canada and Australia.

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About the artist

Ruth Helen Smith is an artist based in Devon, England. As well as painting, she runs a gallery, art residency programme and teaches. Working in the medium of oil paint, she is interested in the relationship between humans and the material world: how we shape matter, write meaning into it and are shaped by it.

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Credits

Opening image: Ruth Helen Smith, Untitled, oil on canvas, 31 x 40cm, 2023

Second image: Ruth Helen Smith, Untitled, oil on canvas, 17 x 25cm, 2023

Third image: Ruth Helen Smith, Untitled, oil on canvas, 25 x 30cm, 2023

Fourth image: Ruth Helen Smith, Untitled, oil on canvas, 31 x 40cm, 2023

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