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## Last Shepherd of The Valley

Last updated: 13 July 2007

Hugh Jones memories of his life as a shepherd - Last Shepherd of the Valley - was published in July 2007. Here, the book's editor, Lyn Ebenezer, recalls Hugh's life and times:



"Sixty years ago the Tywi Valley, high above Tregaron, was a thriving community of sheep farmers. Seven farms maintained over two dozen people, and thousands of sheep grazed the mountain slopes. Twenty years later, the valley was empty, the farms and their sheep having been decimated by the snowstorms of 1947.

The story of that great exodus is now chronicled in a short history of the Tywi Valley written by Hugh Jones, the last shepherd to be born there, entitled, 'Bugail Olaf y Cwm' (The Last Shepherd of the Valley).

The book was officially launched at Gwyl Iwan Festival at Ystrad Meurig on Saturday 14 July 2007.

Hugh decided on the venue of the launch because he spent his primary school days at Ystrad Meurig, where he lodged on week days with his maternal grandparents at Bron Llan.

It was the snow of 1947 that was to become the catalyst that would empty the valley of its people. Hugh still remembers that fateful day in January sixty years ago when the time came for him to go back to school.

'The first snowflakes were starting to fall, and I was so happy,' he said. 'I thought that it would prove impossible for the taxi from Bont to come and pick me up. I didn't want to go to school. I wanted to stay at Dolgoch. But arrive it did, taking me back to school. I never dreamt then that I would not see my parents again for three months.'

The snow, the worst storms in living memory, isolated the mountain people. Luckily, they were mostly self-sufficient. They baked their own bread and milked their own cows. But they had to endure the sight of their sheep freezing to death before their very eyes. And there was nothing they could do about it.

'That winter broke our hearts,' said Hugh. 'One by one the sheep farmers sold up to the Forestry Commission and left. The Commission made them offers they could not refuse. Dolgoch, where I lived, is now a hostel. Five of the other farmsteads - Tywi Fechan, Nant-stalwyn, Nant-yr-hwch, Fronhelem and Nantneuadd - are empty, and a seventh, Y Fanog, lies under the water of the Brianne Dam.'

Hugh's mother, Margaret, meticulously kept a diary from 1937 until the autumn of 1995. Her last entry was made on the eve of her death. Her entries for the winter of 1947 are

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included in Hugh's account. Also included is a letter written by a Land Army girl who worked for a while at Dolgoch.

Pat Walters, a girl from Gwent but living in Brixton, spent 1943 at the farm. She was among Land Army girls invited by author Vita Sackville West to record their experiences.

These appeared in the volume 'The Women's Land Army'. The book has long been out of print, but luckily Hugh kept a copy of her original contribution, and this has been translated for inclusion in his book. Her account is a little literary treasure.

Also included is an account of the religious life of the community. They would meet at Soar y Mynydd, travelling there on horseback. Families would take turn in accommodating the visiting preacher. Meetings would also be held at the various farmhouses. At one time, Soar housed a school for the mountain children.

Hugh and his parents left the valley in 1967 to farm Pant-y-craf, nearer Tregaron at Blaencaron. The last of their mountain sheep were driven down from the valley in 2000. Hugh still keeps sheep. And his sheepdogs are still his pride and joy.

'My very first sheepdogs, given me when I left school, were called Toss and Meg,' he says. 'Over fifty years later, I have two sheepdogs. And they are also called Toss and Meg. Things have turned a full circle. It was Toss that helped me bring the last lot of sheep down to Pant-y-craf.'

Hugh still misses the valley and the closely-knit community that existed there sixty years ago. He decided to put his memoirs on paper before the history of the Tywi Valley, like most of its people, are gone forever.

In fact, only four of the valley's previous inhabitants remain. 'I'm still a shepherd,' said Hugh. 'And a shepherd needs three things: good health, good dogs and a good stick. And I have all three.'

Article written by Lyn Ebenezer.

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#### your comments

**Sally Spedding , Bonllwyn**

A very interesting article indeed, fuelling my imagination towards a possible setting for my next novel. I wonder who actually lived at the drowned Fanog Farm and what (if any) descendants feel about the loss.

Sun Apr 26 18:58:42 2009

**Rob from Hengoed**

This seems very interesting, I am researching my family history and found that my ancestors were farming 2581 acres at dolgoch in the 1861 census, I would like to learn more about this place.

Tue Nov 20 14:16:32 2007

**Cara, Welshpool**

This sounds like a really interesting read being a farmers daughter myself, do you know where I can get a copy of this

wonderful book?

Mon Aug 27 18:32:57 2007

**Penny from Clyro**

I'd be interested in reading this in English too. Hope they're going to publish a translation.

Tue Aug 14 12:03:38 2007

**William Williams**

I would like to read it, is it in English or Welsh? Being a newcomer back to the land of my grandparents I have only a small knowledge of the language so far.

Mon Aug 6 09:11:57 2007

**Annie from California**

The article about Hugh Jones' life was most interesting, especially because he mentioned the farms where some of my ancestors had lived once. My family were people of the mountains. I've been there to that country. Is Hugh Jones' book written in the English language? I'm interested in how I could acquire a copy. Thanks for a great story. I enjoyed it very much.

Sat Aug 4 20:13:56 2007

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