

Literal Review

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Literary Review on Penrhyn Quarry

During the height of the Industrial Revolution, North Wales was the largest global producer of slate. With quarrymen working long hours to provide one of the highest quality of slate in the world. Looking at the overall view on The Penrhyn Strike in 1900 - 1903 which is located in a small village named Bethesda in North Wales. Researching into how the workmen had dissatisfaction, the working conditions affected the community and the overall quarrying industry in Ogwen Valley. This **literary review** will focus on how the workmen were treated, the effect poverty had within the community, workplace and on the families, as well as drawing upon previous research which has been done on this topic. From the 1900s to the modern day we have seen a drastic change in the working conditions and the overall view on Quarrying itself and can now look back on how the conditions have changed for the better in previous years.

Physical conditions in the late 1800s were harsh and involved a high degree of danger in the workplace. The workers would dangle on ropes from the top of the quarry and would use tools such as hammers and chisels to hack away the slate from the inside of the Quarry. As stated by 'Heritage roofing group' "The slate was nearly always damp and slippery, there could be rock falls and the ropes often broke." This shows that working conditions for quarrymen were treacherous and posed a risk to their safety and wellbeing, which clearly wasn't a concern to their employers and Lord Penrhyn himself. If any accidents occurred in the Quarry they would be dealt with by an on-site medical facility which was run by volunteers, with the majority being miners. This suggests that employers didn't care about the wellbeing of their workers as they would have hired professionals and clearly only cared about what the workers were producing for the company. In relation to this, 'Slatesite' conducted research which looked at the number of deaths relating to danger in the workplace at this time. The evidence shows that during 1880-1910, 10,000 men and boys were killed in the workplace due to dangerous working environments. Both articles have shown a relation in how poor the working conditions were for the quarrymen and demonstrated that things needed to change, prior to the strike. In addition to this 'Lagan Building Solutions' who took over The Penrhyn Quarry Estate in 2007 has produced a video stating how the Quarry has changed in the past decades and how it has evolved from what it used to be. Showing clear evidence on how the workplace and the Quarrying industry has changed for the better. One example is that Penrhyn Quarry used to provide slate that could be up to 38 inches long that would be dealt with by hand by the quarrymen which made it very difficult to handle. Nowadays the standard size of a slate would be 20 inches by 12 inches which is much easier to handle. Penrhyn Quarry still does provide a larger slate but is mostly handled by bigger machinery to ensure the best quality slate is produced. By researching 'The Lagan Building Solutions' it is evident that the workplace is a much safer and happier environment for the workers and still providing the same quality slate as they did hundreds of years ago.

By researching into the community of Bethesda it was clear that the living situations for the quarrymen were not adequate for the work they were doing. Most of the houses in Bethesda

were built by the quarrymen on land which was owned by Penrhyn Estate, meaning that they had to pay rent to live there. As there were over 1,600 quarrymen living in this estate it meant that if the quarrymen left to work elsewhere they would automatically lose their homes, as the landlord would take ownership back of the property. This left the quarrymen in a predicament of either living with the conditions of the quarry and keeping their homes or alternatively leaving and therefore becoming homeless. This resulted in the workmen having no choice as they had to provide for their families in such tough conditions. Tecwyn Parry, an old quarry worker for Penrhyn Quarry once said "the oppression of paying £120 ground rent and then when the lease comes to an end the landlord claims everything as his own property; and there is all his labor and pain gone to enrich the landlord." This quote shows that the quarrymen were working their hardest in order to provide for their families but ended up with all their hard earned money going straight back to the corporate, therefore making the Penrhyn Estate richer than ever. Compared to modern society it is evident that the living conditions in this community have changed drastically with most workmen not relying on The Penrhyn Estate for their housing situations. In the modern day Penrhyn Estate does not provide a housing benefit system anymore for their workmen but I believe this is much better and works in the communities favor as the workers can now benefit from working in the Quarry without having to worry about their living situations coinciding with their jobs.

Prior to the Strike as said by a thesis written by the University of Warwick 'the slate quarrymen dominated a cluster of communities in North and West Wales; stamping them with their own distinctive marks.' This suggests that most of the villages near the Quarry were in fact populated by the Quarrymen and their families due to Penrhyn Estate owning most of the land in Bethesda which is spoken about in more depth in the previous paragraph . This gives the impression that the workers were living a life of constantly stuck in their workplace, meaning that their whole life revolved around the Quarry and were suggestively trapped in that environment. As said in the thesis "The slate Quarries themselves were responsible for forging much of the quarrymans identity" this suggests that the quarrymen had no choice when it came to working under these conditions in the Quarry due to the Penrhyn Estate basically owning their entire lives such as homes and the village, Bethesda. This gave the community a meaning but also a struggle as everything they knew was down to The Penrhyn Estate.

A piece called 'The Art to help heal Penrhyn Castle's skate strike pain' was written by The BBC News in 2017 showing the dark past of Penrhyn Castle and Quarry. As stated 'thousands of men were locked out of Penrhyn slate quarries in Gwynedd after a mass walkout in 1900.' BBC also stated that 'Records show that George Sholoto Gordon Douglas - Pennant earned £133,000 in 1899 from his slate quarry operations' which is about £13.5 million in today's value' showing a clear understanding that Pennant was living a very luscious life while his workers were living in the slums after barely earning enough to feed their families after paying their rent and taxes back to Penrhyn Estate. As a result of this it caused a great walk out where around 2,800 workers in Bethesda left the workplace on a strike due to working conditions and wanting pay rises. This divided the community as half stayed working and others refused. Those who refused to work would display a placard outside their homes declaring "does dim bradwr yn y ty

hwn" meaning "there are no traitors in this house". After the ongoing dispute between Lord Penrhyn and the workers for years on end, the strike finally ended in 1903 with a failed dispute as Lord Penrhyn refused to amend the workers demands. Most of the men returned to work with nothing different to how they left causing the community to break even further as most families relied on Penrhyn quarries work that they offered to provide for their families. As said by members of the local community in modern day "The pain from over 115 years ago is still felt within the community, it really tore this community apart through the suffering and the deprivation". This statement is evidence that the community of Bethesda and other quarrying communities are still suffering and talking about this event decades later and shows how much it did affect the communities years down the line.