

FINDING THE LOST CHILDREN OF CRAIG-Y-NOS

By *Carole Reeves*

Craig-y-nos Castle (meaning ‘Rock of the Night’) lays claim to be the most haunted castle in Wales. Perched on the edge of the Brecon Beacons National Park, it was the estate of Adelina Patti, the world famous opera singer, from 1878 until her death in 1919. Within the castle grounds, Patti built an ornate theatre where she sang for audiences of up to 150 guests including British and European Royalty. The Patti Theatre is now a Grade 1 listed opera house and headquarters of the Opera School Wales. On Patti’s death, her third husband, Baron Rolf Cederstrom, sold the estate to the King Edward VII Welsh National Memorial Association, established in 1910, to combat tuberculosis in Wales. As the Adelina Patti Hospital, it served for 40 years as a sanatorium for children and young women, at a time when the incidence and death rate of TB in the industrial areas of south Wales were higher than anywhere else in Britain. TB claimed the lives of 12 young men and 17 young women a year in every Welsh community of 6000 people.



Craig-y-nos Castle as a sanatorium. Children lived all year round on the open-air balconies.

Ann Shaw, an artist and writer now living in Scotland, was a patient in Craig-y-nos from the ages of 9 to 13 (1950-1954), during which time she kept a diary and took photographs on a Kodak ‘Box Brownie’ camera. On a nostalgic visit to Craig-y-nos Castle (now a hotel) at the end of 2006, she was amazed to discover that many of the original wards, although dilapidated, were still intact. All hospital records, however, had been destroyed. So began the search for the ‘Lost Children of Craig-y-nos’ and the construction of an archive that will result in the first ever

collective account by patients and staff of life inside a TB sanatorium. Advertisements in local papers, on the BBC Mid-Wales community history site, and Ann’s daily blog (www.craig-y-nos.blogspot.com) brought forth a deluge of correspondence and memorabilia from around the world. By January 2008, the project had collected over 1200 photographs, most of which were taken by the children themselves recording everything, including bed baths, wards, buildings and staff, improvised fancy dress, pets, concerts and visiting celebrities, streptomycin injections, feeding wild birds from the balconies, and illicitly riding ponies owned by the medical superintendent’s daughters using dressing gown belts as halters. Photographic exhibitions have been held in the heart of the community at Ystradgynlais in the Swansea Valley and at Brecon. Swansea Museum will host an expanded exhibition during the summer. An online version is at: www.childrenofcraigynos.com A reunion held at the Castle on Sunday 9 September 2007 was attended by 120 ex-patients, staff and their families.



Boys on the balcony with Mrs Thomas, the teacher, 1951.

In addition, over 80 oral histories have been recorded and transcribed from ex-patients and staff aged 58 to 99. These cover not only the entire 40-year period of the sanatorium’s existence but Patti’s last decade as resident of the Castle. Many people had never spoken of their experiences until interviewed for the project and it is clear that the Craig-y-nos story is extremely complex with both positive and negative long term consequences for survivors. Deprived of family life (visiting was allowed only once a month, and a number of children were abandoned by their parents), the children looked to each other for emotional support through months of bed rest, traumatic procedures such as artificial pneumothorax and gastric lavages

(to retrieve TB bacilli from swallowed sputum), and the deaths of close friends. Ann Shaw recalls that, 'It was Dorothy (another child) who explained to me that I had TB. I remember her saying, "You've got a hole in the lung and you have got to keep very still. If you move, that hole will grow bigger and you'll die". After receiving that piece of information I lay very still. For 15 months.'



Children at a Christmas party in the Adelina Patti Theatre, 1928.

The Craig-y-nos project is now well-established in the community and has received considerable support from the English and Welsh media. Some of the 'children' themselves, now parents and grandparents, are passing on their experiences to schools and local interest groups as well as collecting further interviews and memorabilia. TB was one of the most feared diseases of the 20th century, particularly in Wales, so it's perhaps not surprising that Craig-y-nos Castle buried its 40-year history as a sanatorium. Its survivors, the Children of Craig-y-nos, are central to a unique new resource for social, medical and family historians, and are in the process of helping to lay their own ghosts.

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Editor's Note

Since this piece was written, the Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine at UCL has received a Heritage Lottery ('Awards for All Wales') grant of £5,000 to create a print-on-demand book entitled *The Children of Craig-y-nos*, to be co-authored by Dr Carole Reeves and Ann Shaw, which will also be freely available as a downloadable .pdf file

from the Centre's website (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/histmed/outreach>). This book will be the first ever collective history of patient and staff experiences in a tuberculosis sanatorium. A photographic exhibition will be held at the Swansea Museum (<http://www.swanseaheritage.net>) this summer, and an online photographic exhibition can be viewed now at www.childrenofcraigynos.com. The Craig-y-nos blog, which now has over 600 pages of text, images, podcasts and videos, can be read at <http://www.craig-y-nos.blogspot.com>.

For more information on the 'Awards for All Wales' scheme, and for details of other groups in the area who have received grants, please contact the 'Swards for All Wales' team on 01686 611740.