The Welsh in Patagonia

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Each year in late July and early August, flights arrive at London airports carrying people from South America. Many of these visitors experience some difficulty in understanding the English spoken to them at passport control, however once they have travelled along the M4 motorway and crossed the border into Wales, destined for Swansea and the National Eisteddfod, they find that they can communicate fluently.

The visitors in question have travelled 8,000 miles from the Welsh speaking outpost of Patagonia, on the southern tip of Argentina. The fascinating history of how these visitors from an essentially Spanish speaking country, also come to speak what the Welsh describe as the ‘language of heaven’ dates back to the first half of the 19th century.

In the early 1800’s, industry within the Welsh heart lands developed and rural communities began to disappear. This industry was helping to fuel the growth of the Industrial Revolution, with the supply of coal, slate, iron and steel. Many believed that Wales was now gradually being absorbed into England, and perhaps disillusioned with this prospect, or excited by the thought of a new start in a new world, many Welshmen and women decided to seek their fortune in other countries.

Welsh immigrants had attempted to set up Welsh speaking colonies in order to retain their cultural identity in America. The most successful of these included ‘Welsh’ towns such as Utica in New York State and Scranton in Pennsylvania.

However these Welsh immigrants were always under great pressure to learn the English language and adopt the ways of the emerging American industrial culture. As such, it did not take too long for these new immigrants to be fully assimilated into the American way of life.

Michael D Jones, a Welsh non-conformist minister and the principal of Bala College, who was an ardent and staunch nationalist, recognised this pattern amongst immigrants to the United States and decided to do something about it.

Initially, he organised societies to help the Welsh retain their identity, but rapidly realised that the forces for assimilation were too strong and proposed that only a unified Welsh colony could preserve the Welsh language and culture.
The first choice for the new colony was Vancouver Island, in Canada, but Michael Jones had been corresponding with the Argentinean government about settling an area known as Bahia Blanca, where Welsh immigrants would be allowed to retain and preserve their language, culture and traditions. Granting such a request suited the Argentinean government, as this would put them in control of a large tract of land which was then the subject of dispute with their Chilean neighbours. So the final destination became Patagonia, Argentina, which seemed to have everything the colonists might need.

A Welsh emigration committee met in Liverpool and published a handbook, *Llawlyfr y Wladfa* (Colony Handbook) to publicise the Patagonian scheme. The handbook was widely distributed throughout Wales and also in America.

The first group of settlers, nearly 200 people gathered from all over Wales but mainly North and mid-Wales, sailed from Liverpool in late May 1865 aboard the tea-clipper Mimosa. Blessed with good weather the journey took approximately eight weeks, and the Mimosa eventually arrived at what is now called Puerto Madryn on 27th July.

Unfortunately the settlers found that Patagonia was not the friendly and inviting land they had been expecting. They had been told that it was much like the green and fertile lowlands of Wales. In reality it was a barren and inhospitable windswept pampas, with no water, very little food and no forests to provide building materials for shelter. Some of the settlers’ first homes were dug out from the soft rock of the cliffs in the bay.

Despite receiving help from the native Teheulche Indians who tried to teach the settlers how to survive on the scant resources of the prairie, the colony looked as if it were doomed to failure from the lack of food. However, after receiving several mercy missions of supplies, the settlers persevered and finally struggled on to reach the proposed site for the colony in the Chubut valley about 40 miles away. It was here, where a river the settlers named Camwy cuts a narrow channel through the desert from the nearby Andes, that the first permanent settlement of Rawson was established at the end of 1865.

The colony suffered greatly in the early years with floods, bad harvests and disagreements over the ownership of land and the lack of a direct route to the ocean from which they could bring in supplies.

History records that it was one Rachel Jenkins who first had the idea that would forever change the history of the colony and secure its future. Rachel had noticed that on occasion the River Camwy burst its banks; she had also considered how such flooding could bring life to the arid land that bordered it. So she designed a scheme of irrigation which saved the Chubut and its tiny band of Welsh settlers.

Over the next several years new settlers arrived from both Wales and Pennsylvania, and by the end of 1874 the settlement had a population totalling over 270. With the immigrants painstakingly irrigating the Chubut valley by hand, a patchwork of farms began to emerge along a thin strip on either side of the River Camwy.
But their trials were not over. A continuation of problems with floods, etc. made life very difficult.

Many decided to move to other areas to try their luck and as a result the population at Rawson decreased. One of the settlers went back to Wales and the United States and recruited new settlers for the colony.

As a result, a small vessel called the Electric Spark carried 33 new settlers from Pennsylvania in 1874 and joined a group of 49 settlers who had come from Wales. By the end of 1874 the settlement had a population of 273.

In 1875 the Argentine government finally granted the Welsh settlers official title to the land, and this encouraged people to join the colony.

Over 500 people from Wales - mostly from the South Wales coalfield, which was undergoing a severe depression - made the journey to Chubut from 1875-1876. A further 27 settlers arrived from New York.

By 1876 the population numbered 690. Of these, 135 were second generation Welsh and 35 were non-Welsh settlers.

The influx of willing hands meant that plans for a major irrigation system in the Lower Chubut valley could finally go ahead. The new irrigation system revolutionised agriculture in the area and contributed greatly to its rapid expansion and later success.

However, other nationalities were also beginning to settle in Chubut in greater numbers and the colony's Welsh identity began to be eroded. By 1915, 50 years after the original settlers landed at Port Madryn, the population of Chubut had grown to 23,000 with about half of these being foreign immigrants.

The Lower Chubut valley - so inhospitable and barren when they landed 50 years previously - had been transformed by the Welsh settlers into one of the most fertile, productive agricultural areas in Argentina, and they had expanded the territory into the Andean foothills into the settlement known as Cwm Hyfryd.

The turn of the century also marked a change in attitude by the Argentine government who stepped in to impose direct rule on the colony. This brought the speaking of Welsh at local government level and in the schools to an abrupt end. The Welsh utopian dream of Michael D Jones appeared to be disintegrating.

Welsh however remained the language of the home and of the chapel, and despite the Spanish-only education system, the proud community survives to this day serving bara brith from Welsh tea houses, and celebrating their heritage at one of the many eisteddfodau. So the community still survives. It has recently been the subject of a coordinated attempt by the Argentine government and the National Assembly of Wales to promote and maintain its distinctly Welsh heritage and identity.

*Welsh Ladies Group founded by Ceinwen Thomas Samuel, seated far right, in 1948. Photograph taken by Rev Harri Samuel, minister at Trefelin at that time.*