

e-Keltoi: Journal of Interdisciplinary Celtic Studies

Volume 1 *Diaspora*

Article 3

7-9-2009

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Recommended Citation

Lublin, Geraldine (2009) "The War of the Tea Houses, or How Welsh Heritage in Patagonia Became a Valuable Commodity," *e-Keltoi: Journal of Interdisciplinary Celtic Studies*: Vol. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://dc.uwm.edu/ekeltoi/vol1/iss1/3>

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The War of the Tea Houses, or How Welsh Heritage in Patagonia Became a Valuable Commodity¹

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Abstract

The present article will explore how globalization and its economic implications have resulted in the commodification of Welsh heritage in Gaiman, a small town in the Argentine province of Chubut, with a special focus on the collectivity-defining custom of 'Welsh Tea' as offered by the local tea houses. After providing some background on the history of the Welsh community in Patagonia, the discussion will consider how the surge in heritage and culture tourism and tourism-related services has added new value to Welsh Patagonian culture and encouraged the positioning of Welsh cultural products and other aspects of heritage as marketable commodities, and how the struggle to control a particularly lucrative heritage experience unleashed the so-called 'War of the Tea Houses'.

Keywords

Welsh Patagonia; identity commodification; heritage tourism; globalisation; material culture; 'Welsh Tea'

Introduction

They knew very little about their destination when on 28 July 1865 a group of more than 150 Welsh settlers sailed from Liverpool to Southern Patagonia aboard a ship called *Mimosa*, adding a new chapter to the history of overseas Welsh settlements previously headed for North America, Australia and Brazil. As so many before and after them, most of these emigrants were in search of better economic prospects than the grim reality of post-industrial Wales. Nevertheless, one of the distinct characteristics of the Patagonian pioneers was the concern of their leaders to preserve Welsh culture (especially the Welsh language and religious Nonconformism), and this objective partly explains their choice of such a remote location for starting what they envisaged as 'A New Wales in South America' (L. Jones 1898: 1): *Y Wladfa*,

from the Welsh *gwladfa*: colony, settlement (*Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* 1950-2002: 1677). The strong determination of the promoters of the migration may be the reason why the Welsh language can be heard in Patagonia to this day, almost 145 years after the arrival of the first contingent of Welsh settlers in New Bay, Puerto Madryn.

By the mid 1860s, the Eastern Patagonian region was under the (nominal) jurisdiction of the Argentine Republic, whose independence from Spain had been declared in 1816. Although internal divisions were still rife and the country would take some time to acquire its present shape, a National Constitution had been approved in 1853 and Buenos Aires had been designated as the capital city in 1862. In order to solve what Argentine statesman Domingo F. Sarmiento identified as the main issue beleaguering the vast and purportedly empty country, namely 'the problem of the extension' (1874: 22), political theorist Juan B. Alberdi suggested in what was to be the basis for Argentina's first Constitution (*Constitución de la Nación Argentina* 1853) that 'In America [i.e., the American continent], to govern is to populate' (1915: 217). Nevertheless, Alberdi had a clear—if politically incorrect from a twenty-first century standpoint—idea of the targets and exclusions of his suggested settlement policies:

It is advisable to increase the number of our population and, moreover, to change its condition in an advantageous sense to the cause of progress. With three million indigenous peoples, Christians and Catholics, you would certainly not achieve the republic. You would not achieve it either with four million peninsular Spaniards, because the pure Spaniard is incapable of achieving it over there or here. If we are to compose our population for the sake of our government, should it be more possible for us to tailor the population for the proclaimed system instead of the system for the population, it is necessary to promote in our soil the Anglo-Saxon population. This people are identified with the steam [i.e., with progress], commerce and liberty, and it will be impossible [for us] to root these things among us without the active cooperation of this race of progress and civilisation (1915: 216).²

Despite their own *creole* (i.e., mixed Spanish-indigenous) origins, the makers of modern Argentina largely despised the potential of not only America's original peoples but also of full-blooded Spaniards to shape their desired Republic, and longed for the progressive and civilized Anglo-Saxon contribution whose fruits they had admired in their travels to Europe and the United States.³ The national government in Buenos Aires then considered Welsh migrants not Celts but Anglo-Saxons and even '*ingleses*' (English)⁴, who would not only populate the supposedly deserted country but most importantly guarantee an exceptional input to the national type resulting from the melting pot.⁵

However, their being perceived as 'English' both opened the doors for the *Fenter Fawr* (the 'Big Enterprise', as the migration was subsequently called in Welsh) and doomed their plans to a certain degree: given the contested status of the Patagonian territories, the Argentinean authorities were disinclined to allow Protestant and 'English' immigrants to settle so close to the British-occupied Falkland Islands (Dumrauf 1996: 151-7). Though the Argentine Interior Minister Guillermo Rawson had suggested that the Welsh settlers would be granted not only religious freedom but also most importantly a high level of administrative autonomy as a Welsh province within the larger Argentine Republic, the Argentinean Congress rejected the relevant project in August 1863 (Dumrauf 1996: 145-60; G. Williams 1975: 30-3). As a result, the special terms promised by Rawson never materialised⁶ and the planned *Gwladfa* had to adjust to the general 'Law of Public Land' passed in 1862 regulating the settlement of any migrant group in the whole of Argentina (Dumrauf 1996: 158-9).⁷

The colony thrived despite the initial hardship and some 2,000 Welsh migrants made their way to Patagonia (R. B. Williams 1962: 297)—settling in the Chubut Valley first and then at the foot of the Andes, in Western Chubut—until the last organised group arrived in 1911. The Welsh aspirations to full autonomy were short-lived; the central government in Buenos Aires made its presence increasingly felt and the Argentinisation policies implemented since the turn of the nineteenth century gradually weakened the Welsh community as such, causing their language and culture to suffer a steady decline. The role of the state school in fostering the casting off of ethnic traits in favour of embracing the Argentine civil religion cannot be understated (Brooks 2008; Lublin 2006). The 1930s bade farewell to the settlement's golden years to mark the beginning of the downfall; Welshness was to be kept rather quiet in the following decades of autocratic governments and great nationalist sentiment (Brooks 2006; G. Williams 1991).

Winds of change

The wind would change when Chubut went from being a so-called 'National Territory' to a proper province in the Argentine Republic in 1958. In the quest for symbols and icons for the new province, the Welsh pioneers were chosen over Patagonia's original peoples as representatives of the nation and 'founders' of Chubut. The nineteenth-century settlement was adopted as a cornerstone of the incorporation of the frontier territories of Patagonia into the

Argentine Republic (thus representing the victory of civilisation over barbarism⁸). From then on, school textbooks downplayed or directly silenced the old conflicts between the community and the central government in order to hail Welsh pioneers as emblems of Argentineness and to highlight their endeavours as a 'feat'. As their ancestors gained official recognition, Welsh descendants started to regain their pride.

The somewhat 'whitewashed' new image was brightened further when 1965 was decreed by a provincial law as 'the Year of the Centenary' as a result of the efforts of a group of Welsh descendants who set out to 'revive' Welsh culture in Chubut. Contacts with Wales were re-established, and a bi-national committee was summoned to organise the centenary celebrations of the Landing (Brooks 2005; MacDonald 2006). While the more than seventy 'Welsh Pilgrims' who flew from across the Atlantic marvelled at the survival of what they regarded as a piece of Wales at the other end of the world, Patagonians realised that Wales was a modern, thriving country (Brooks 2005; MacDonald 2006). A range of various commemorations was held, such as official ceremonies, concerts, sports competitions, and a bi-national exchange programme.⁹ The Chubut government bestowed gold medals upon the descendants of the *Mimosa* settlers and official recognition reached its peak when the President Arturo Illia himself travelled all the way down to Puerto Madryn to join the celebrations and unveil a monument in memory of the Welsh pioneers. In such an auspicious and undeniably Argentinean atmosphere, a Welsh-Spanish bilingual version of the main Eisteddfod—the traditional Welsh competitive festival of music and poetry—was launched in October 1965 after 15 years of inactivity and silence.¹⁰ The opening up of the Eisteddfod to the Spanish language attracted the younger generations who, though increasingly less fluent in the language of their forefathers, showed a renewed interest in rekindling the cultural tradition brought by the pioneers (Brooks 2005; Brooks and Lublin 2007).

Despite the renewed prestige of the community, the 1960s and 1970s were a difficult time for Welsh culture in Chubut (MacDonald 2006: 140-2), and the Falklands War in 1982 dealt a severe blow to the incipient confidence regained, compelling Patagonians of Welsh descent to voice their support for Argentina against Britain while attempting to emphasise the separateness of Wales from England (I. Roberts 2003). However, as the return of democracy in 1983 chaperoned an atmosphere of increasing openness and tolerance that proved conducive to the appreciation of cultural diversity, Welsh Patagonian heritage in Chubut regained prominence (R. B. Williams and Griffiths 2000: 68–72).¹¹ Bi-national contacts thrived with the advent of new

technologies, and a number of Welsh descendants in both the Chubut Valley and the Andean foothills started exploiting their ethnic background in order to attract national and international tourism to the area (MacDonald 2006: 143–6).

Following a decline that many deemed as terminal, the Welsh language and culture are experiencing a significant revitalisation in twenty-first century Chubut (Johnson 2007; R.O. Jones 2005, 2006; Trosset et al. 2007). Favoured by the significant changes at the national level discussed above, globalization and thriving transnational links have modified the comparatively static panorama of a large part of the previous century. After decades of stigmatisation, Welsh descendants are in the limelight and the bilingual Welsh-Spanish *Eisteddfod* is now promoted not as a community-specific event but rather as an asset of the province of Chubut. A number of thriving 'pillars' (cultural institutions and practices) could be identified as readily recognisable (stereo)typical representations of Welsh Patagonian identity in Chubut: the Chubut *Eisteddfod*, *Gŵyl y Glaniad*, the Welsh language, the 'epic' of the pioneers, religion and the chapel, singing and music in general, Welsh folk dancing (*dawnsio gwerin*) and 'Welsh Tea'. Moreover, the Welsh language is no longer limited to after-hours classes; it has become part of the official curriculum in some educational institutions within the province and a Spanish-Welsh bilingual primary school (*Ysgol yr Hendre*) opened its doors in Trelew in 2006.

On the economic front, the valley where Gaiman stands has reoriented its productive activities and is now combining the traditional rural fares with an unexpected surge in national and international heritage and cultural tourism, and tourism-related services that has brought new life to a formerly withering economy. The new dynamism brought about by the 'tourist gaze' (Urry 1990) has been tapped by both institutional and private actors, and the government of the province of Chubut has not been slow to recognise its great economic potential, turning from bemused spectator of the growing attraction of Welsh heritage to active promoter. Indeed, one of the aims of the *Memorandum of Understanding* recently signed between the Provincial Government of Chubut and the National Assembly for Wales is 'to seek to help each other develop [their] tourist potential, through sharing experiences and research, particularly in the fields of cultural and activity tourism' (*Memorandum of Understanding* 2007).

The strategic importance of Welsh culture as a tourist appeal within Chubut emerges clearly on the official website of the local government of the province http://www.chubutur.gov.ar/htm/productos_cultural.htm. Except for the various museums in the

province, all the 'products' of 'Turismo Cultural' [Cultural Tourism] marketed on the website are directly related to the Welsh community. In the first place, 'Cultura galesa' [Welsh Culture] as such, is represented by the Chubut *Eisteddfod* (i.e., the Patagonian version of the traditional Welsh festival) and the so-called '*Té Galés*', and then one of the two links offered in the open-up menu under 'Cultural Tourism' is 'Capillas Galesas' [Welsh Chapels]

(<http://www.chubutur.gov.ar/hm/productos-cultural-capillas.htm>), a page that gives details about the eighteen Welsh chapels that are still standing in the whole of the province of Chubut, both in the Chubut Valley and in the Andean region. These chapels are undergoing extensive restoration (mostly funded by the local government) and are promoted as a heritage corridor (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1. Welsh Chapels Heritage Corridor. (Reproduced by kind permission of Secretaría de Cultura del Gobierno del Chubut, Argentina).



Figure 2. Brochure promoting the Moriah Chapel, Chubut Valley. (Reproduced by kind permission of Secretaría de Cultura del Gobierno del Chubut, Argentina).

Below the government level, the private sector is also tapping into the revival of interest in Welsh culture. Quoted below is an extract of just one of the many commercial websites touting Patagonia to potential visitors:

Maybe like no other Argentine province, Chubut received a strong Welsh migration towards the end of the [nineteenth century] [...] the place where they managed to preserve their traditions to a greater extent was Gaiman. [...] That is why for those wishing to see a Welsh village almost frozen in the past, with language, architecture and customs of that origin, visiting Gaiman is a must. If they wish to learn about Welsh culture in depth, they can visit the Welsh Regional History Museum, [...] the Tunnel, [...] and the old chapels [...]. And, of course, after a stroll along the picturesque streets of Gaiman and the bank of the river, visitors can enjoy the famous Welsh tea, prepared following old customs that confer to it a unique taste and perfume[,] everything accompanied by delicious cakes.¹² ('Gaiman: Costumbres galesas en estado puro', *Patagonia.com.ar*, <http://www.patagonia.com.ar/chubut/gaiman/infogral.php>).

Side by side with the natural wonders that Chubut offers to tourists, the paragraph above highlights Welsh Patagonian heritage, and the town of Gaiman in particular, as an instance of old and picturesque preserved traditions, 'almost frozen in the past'. Among the praised customs whose allegedly unblemished endurance is emphasised in the title of the piece—which could be translated as 'Gaiman: Welsh customs in a pure state'—the so-called 'Welsh tea' plays a central part.

'Welsh Tea'

As part of the tourist package offered to visitors to the Chubut Valley, 'the famous Welsh tea' in Gaiman is advertised in the press as unmissable. Since there is no special tea-drinking tradition in Argentina, the Welsh Patagonian penchant for the dark infusion provides a unique heritage selling point. Despite its resemblance to the traditional cream tea offered in British tearooms in the United Kingdom, 'Welsh Tea' has emerged as a significant collectivity-defining behaviour, and it has by now developed into a lucrative business which attracts national and international tourists and travellers to the various tea houses scattered along the Chubut Valley or at the foot of the Andes.¹³ As the heartland of Welsh Patagonian culture in the Chubut Valley, Gaiman attracts small crowds who almost unfailingly flock to one of the currently six tea houses after a brief tour of the quaint village (which includes the sight of a chapel or two) as a sweet indulgence after an exhausting day trip that may have included watching the penguins or the whales in the nearby Valdés Peninsula. Though Gaiman can boast of an excellent Regional History Museum, only a small minority of visitors make their way there.

There are no comprehensive official statistics of visitors to Gaiman, but an informal survey carried out by the local tourist office among those who walk into their bureau provides

telling details (*Estadística enero a marzo de 2008 Oficina de Informes Turísticos Gaiman*).

According to data gathered between January and March 2008 (the survey only covers the local summer high season), less than 9% (646) of the 7,526 visitors who made enquiries at the Gaiman tourist office during the aforementioned period were classified as 'foreigners'¹⁴, while a massive 91% (6,880) were Argentinean—and more than half of those (4,634) from the province of Buenos Aires. When consulted on the reasons for their visit to Gaiman, two aspects emerge as prevalent: the tea houses (almost 30%) and an enigmatic 'other' category (about 59%). Other sources of interest include 'historical tour' (almost 10%), and 'chapels', 'farms/agrotourism', 'former railway tunnel' and museums (all less than 1% each).

Two considerations should however be borne in mind when considering these data. Firstly, only a comparatively small proportion of visitors to Gaiman tend to resort to the local tourist office, since a substantial majority of tourists arrive in the village as part of an organised package tour. Among the latter, the influx of groups coming to Gaiman for the day (or, more accurately, the afternoon) from the luxury cruise ships moored on the bay of the coastal town of Puerto Madryn is especially visible.¹⁵ Additionally, the fact that surveys are carried out only during the Argentine summer season implies that out-of-season tourism goes unregistered. Nevertheless, visitor numbers to Gaiman's tea houses suggest that these establishments represent a compelling attraction for both high-season and low-season tourists.

The 'famous' tea offered in these tea houses consists of copious quantities of bread and butter and various kinds of cakes plus drink-as-much-as-you-can black tea, which is in some cases allegedly imported from Britain. As part of the tea 'ceremony', visitors also soak in the special atmosphere that most of these establishments try to reproduce, including the traditional Welsh music that typically plays in the background (especially Welsh choirs). Moreover, the large visitor groups from the luxury cruise ships may enjoy a bit of live Welsh choral singing while they feast upon the rich cakes.

The tea house walls and the typical Welsh dressers (uncommon in other areas of Argentina) are usually adorned with family heirlooms and decorative crockery bearing Welsh names and inscriptions which act as 'auratic objects' radiating authenticity. Despite the fact that the experience is being effectively set up or staged for commercial purposes, these signs of Welshness attempt to provide a reassuring authentication, as do the employed staff of Welsh descent, whose 'light-coloured eyes' are a feature of local identity as packaged for tourists (see,

e.g., the article 'Una senda con ecos de Gales' published in *Clarín*, the most read daily newspaper in Argentina [Quintans 2007]). Before leaving the premises, visitors can take advantage of the gift shops embedded in every tea house in order to exercise what Jennifer Craik has described as 'the ability to translate the site, historical figure, remembered activity, or experience into physical, durable and portable mementos which can serve as tangible reminders of the visit' (Craik 1997: 122).

Brought by migrants from the British Isles to Chubut, tea parties were popular in Wales in the second half of the nineteenth century. In his book '*Gym 'rwch chi baned?*', E.G. Millward describes the popular tea parties held in Wales in the second half of the nineteenth century in order to raise funds to repay the debts incurred by local chapels, explaining that: '[By 1890] Tea was enthroned as the national drink of Britain, enjoyed both by the poor and the wealthy. In that period, tea parties (as distinct from the tea meetings organised by chapels) became increasingly popular—a number of ladies getting together to drink tea and put the world to rights—and this is the origin of the familiar, stereotyped image, seen in pictures and photographs of Welsh women, all in their Welsh garments and tall hats, quietly sitting at a table on which there is porcelain crockery, a teapot, milk and sugar'¹⁶ (2000: 40-4). Such events were highly popular around the time when the first Welsh settlers migrated to Patagonia in 1865; tea parties were then transplanted to the new Patagonian homeland and enjoyed by chapel goers in the vestry after the Sunday service, when every family would contribute something to the communal gathering and news and gossip would be shared around a cup of tea. As shown in Figure 3, the accompanying stereotypical images also made it to Chubut.

But despite being promoted as a 'pure Welsh custom', the so-called 'Welsh Tea' is in fact a highly hybridised development. Although traditional 'afternoon tea' is still served in selected British establishments,¹⁷ it bears no resemblance to what Argentineans understand by 'Welsh Tea'. Welsh-style cream tart and apple pie are typically served together with buttered bread and various home-made fruit jams, but the most representative component of Welsh Tea is the so-called '*torta negra galesa*' [Welsh black cake], a kind of fruit cake which is, of course, more Patagonian than properly Welsh. Legend has it that the settlers created the recipe on the basis of the original Welsh *bara brith* [speckled bread] in order to make use of the various ingredients that families would pool together in times of shortage. Because this cake could last longer than other sweet delicacies, it proved ideal in times of hardship.



Figure 3. Album presented to HRH the Prince of Wales, 26 September 1925, 'The Misses Blanche E. and Maifron Roberts—Two beauties born in Chubut—Miss Blanche designed and made the leather cover'. (Reproduced by kind permission of Archifau a Chasgliadau Arbennig/Archives and Special Collections, Prifysgol Bangor/Bangor University).

However, it is not this staple quality that makes 'Welsh cake' popular but rather its association with the epic of the Welsh settlers in Patagonia. This emotional link with history, as well as family history, is highlighted in the way the brand 'Memorable' markets their Welsh cake, which has been sold in specialist shops and even some supermarkets for more than 10 years. Branding their cake as 'The Flavor of History' and claiming to have been in Patagonia 'since 1865', the company website is quoted here exactly as it appears in the English section of the site:

The Black Cake was born with the need to find proper, easy conserved and long useful lifetime food. The Welsh people [...] developed this product, which ever since and at present it is recognized by the Welsh colony as a typical dish created in the Province of Chubut and considered as a Patagonian one. One of those first settlers, John Jones, who was also known by the nickname of Mountain Ash because of his hometown in Whales, kept his recipe within his family and shared it from generation to generation. The main characteristic of this recipe were the true secrets of the family bouquet. This recipe was preserved by the love of Hilda Jones-Jones (second generation), who kept it like a treasure and on November 1st, 1996, was transferred and shared with Ariel Sebastian, her great-grandson, moment in which the Establishment Nueva Gales was born. Ariel

committed himself to look after it and maintained it intact, without changes, for it contains the history of his descendants, together with the love of the ones that had cultivated the Patagonia in every sense of the word. This act has a real historic and cultural value with a profound devotion to our origin. Ever since, MEMORABLE was chosen as the name to remember it, because it has been elaborated in memory of those ancestors, utilizing the same handmade way, time and complete preparation, soaking the fruits in liquors and spices inside of French oak casks, taking a total time of 45 hours of preparation, just exactly as the old times. The black cake was meant to honour a family tradition and a sort of cult to those who have left their lives in the pursuit of the Welsh culture colony in the Argentine Patagonia. The black cake is our humble tribute and moreover... The Flavor of History (*[sic]*, *Memorable* <http://tortagalesa.com/en/historia.php>).

Moreover, the mass-production and selling of the product are then equated to the preservation of Welsh heritage on the same website under the 'Aims' section:

The constant sense of entrepreneurial progress, creates from the beginning the firm aim to maintain intact the product, for its history, quality and flavour, to preserve and spread the values and the Welsh culture, as well as the originality of our products, essentially because it is a sign of Patagonian identity, considering the cake as a typical one.

The exact quantity of ingredients has been maintained and by sticking to the original recipe, the processes were improved (French oak casks were made in order to soak the ingredients in liquors, in order to fix even more the aroma and flavours) but always avoiding any alteration in the elaboration of the artisanal product.

We have desires of success, trust, moral credibility and a project that contains "a lot of love" as the most important ingredient. (*[sic]*, *Memorable* <http://tortagalesa.com/en/objetivos.php>).

By relying on an overwhelmingly emotional marketing pitch that equates discernment with 'a lot of love', the producers of the 'Memorable' Welsh cake can simultaneously claim opposing features like tradition (as conveyed by the emphasis on 'maintaining' and 'preserving' original values intact) and change (as indicated by the introduction of the French oak casks). Together with the contradictory juxtaposition of tradition and change, the appeal to emotion is in this case the key to the success of the product, a connection that has been studied in numerous other contexts and from a variety of theoretical perspectives (e.g., Al Sayyad 2001; Jaworski and Pritchard 2005; Timothy 2007).

But how did one of the most visible practices expressing Welsh Patagonian identity in Chubut¹⁸ shift from the domestic domain of the community to the public sphere? Quoted below is Welsh Patagonian litterateur Irma Hughes de Jones's explanation of this transition:

A prominent place is also given to tourism these days. And this is where 'Welsh' things—or, rather, of the *Gwladfa*—attract a great deal of attention. In the wake of the celebration of *Gŵyl y Glaniad* [the Day of the Landing of the first settlers in Chubut] with a tea party in the afternoon and a concert in the evening, our custom of having tea with buttered bread, jam and cheese and different kinds of cakes became well-known to the 'other nations', as those around us were called years ago. After that, some people started offering tea in the towns for anyone who wished to have a cuppa in the afternoon. It was a very successful idea and, as a result, there is now a host of *casas de té* [tea houses] here and there in the *Gwladfa*, and especially in Gaiman. And they are not only owned by Welsh descendants. Some of the [non-Welsh] locals have liked the idea and provide the same service here. In general, they seek to employ Welsh descendants to work with them in order to ensure that its special intrinsic quality should still remain¹⁹ (2001: 126).

The displaying of tea drinking as a marketable commodity thus opened the door to a player external to the ethnic community whose 'heritage experience' is offered. Moreover, the fact that non-Welsh owners of tea houses should try to employ Welsh descendants among their staff in order to compensate somehow for their ethnic shortcomings and ensure the 'purity' of Welsh customs as advertised to tourists provides another instance that new, non-essential 'authenticities' can be devised and marketed. As formulated by Nezar Al Sayyad, 'The consumption of tradition as a form of cultural demand and the manufacture of heritage as a field of commercial supply are two sides of the same coin' (2007: 162). Rather than preclude commodification, authenticity can easily fall prey to it. Nevertheless, the rise of what in Arjun Appadurai's terms could be called the 'commodity candidacy' (Appadurai 1986: 13)²⁰ of Welsh Tea has raised new issues within the community.

The 'War of the Tea Houses'

Until 1994, all of Gaiman's tea houses had been owned by individuals who were either of direct Welsh descent or had a more or less clear connection with the nineteenth-century pioneers. Some of these establishments offered a supposedly more 'authentic' experience by having the staff speak Welsh or at least say a few phrases in the language, as seen in other heritage tourism industries in other parts of the world. But in this case, given the status of Welsh as a minority or—in more politically correct terms—a 'lesser used' language, it was not a key to accessing a valuable commercial resource but rather a quaint adornment.

Although there had been instances of minor friction among the various tea houses in Gaiman, the so-called 'War of the Tea Houses' was unleashed with the opening of 'Tŷ Te Caerdydd' in 1994 by a family of Spanish and Polish extraction, a development which sent shock

waves through the valley of Chubut and announced the end of ethno-linguistic supremacy over the control of the tea house market in the town of Gaiman. Moreover, the new tea house had a secret weapon up its sleeve.

Though she spent only a few hours in Gaiman, the visit of Lady Diana in 1995 created an unprecedented flutter in the otherwise quiet town. Apart from the local inhabitants, people from the surrounding areas joined the national and international press in their attempt to at least catch a glimpse of the Princess of Wales, who had the press following her across to the other end of the world after admitting the previous night to having been unfaithful to her husband Charles and questioning his eventual aptitude to be king. However, for a group of Gaiman residents Diana's comments were not half as shocking as the fact that she was having tea in a recently opened tea house whose owners were not of Welsh descent.

In the wake of Lady Di's visit, 'Tŷ Te Caerdydd' gained fame and customers with Diana's brief sojourn as the main attraction, supported by an aggressive marketing campaign. In fact, the pervasive advertisements around Gaiman (Figure 4) mention her name as if it were part of the name of the tea house. Moreover, if serving Welsh tea had until then been regarded as a work of craftsmanship, it became a somewhat mass-produced and mass-consumed good with the new tea hall boasting a capacity of 200 customers.

As a snap reaction to the kidnapping of a most lucrative aspect of their heritage, the owners of the 'genuine' Welsh tea houses decided to undertake a symbolic marking of their identity by creating the '*Círculo de casas de té de descendientes de galeses*' (Figure 5) (an association pooling the efforts of tea house owners of Welsh descent) in order to guarantee the



Figure 4. Tŷ Te Caerdydd advertisement in Gaiman, Chubut. (Copyright by the author)



Figure 5. '*Círculo de casas de té de descendientes de galeses*' plaque (Gaiman, Chubut). (Copyright by the author)

provision of an 'authentic' experience. Although members hardly ever got together, the main product of this association was the joint agreement whereby all the tea houses owned by Welsh descendants were to display the plaque shown on the slide in order to flag them as 'authentically Welsh'.

Nevertheless, the association has not been able to prevail over the active marketing techniques of 'Tŷ Te Caerdydd', whose visitors are lured by the fact that the Princess of Wales herself had tea in that very place. Furthermore, the tragic death of the 'Queen of Hearts' is remembered in the garden of the tea house every 31st of August, a rite of commemoration duly advertised in the local press in order to remind people of the historic royal visit, and keep business thriving. The image of the late Princess of Wales is glorified in various pictures and commemorative plaques, and also on display are the special crockery and table linens used on the day of her visit (Figures 6-8). Guests will also be able to see an exhibit of the (unwashed) cup from which she sipped (lipstick stains and all)—and there is even a small bottle with the remains of the tea left in her cup (Figures 9-10).²¹



Figures 6-8. Commemorative plaques and photographs of Lady Di's visit to Tŷ Te Caerdydd (on display in the tea house). (Copyright by the author)

Of course a good number of locals bemoan in private conversation the commercial success of this 'illegitimate appropriation', denouncing that the non-Welsh origins of the owners of the 'alien' tea house prevent them from providing an 'authentically Welsh' tea service. Alongside the appetising experience, tea houses owned by Welsh descendants are supposed to offer access to the history and culture of the community as part of the service through interaction with the protagonists of the epic and their descendants. In a sense, they would just be



Figures 9-10. Showcase with the special crockery and table linen used on the day of the visit and detail of the cup from which she sipped and bottle with the rest of the tea left in her cup (on display in the tea house). (Copyright by the author)

reproducing the romanticised tea ceremony as they would have experienced it at their original family home—and that is clearly not the case with the new tea house. After all, shouldn't the sweet treat be only an excuse to learn more about the wider culture and traditions of the little Celtic nation? How dare these outsiders set up a 'Welsh Tea House' if they are not even Welsh in the first place?

In challenging the new tea house on grounds of ethnicity, Welsh descendants are defending their 'original' heritage and identity from a purported tampering. Nevertheless, the newcomer's credentials are of a completely different nature. Rather than being based on their genealogical background or linguistic command of the heritage language, the 'Welshness' flogged by the new tea house stems almost exclusively from the image of Diana. The owners of the new tea house do not pretend to be Welsh, but rather mention Diana's name to those who are willing to hear. And their tea hall is seldom empty. Lady Di's visit seems to represent as much of a valuable commodity as Welsh ethnic authenticity. Having tea among the ubiquitous pictures and souvenirs that remind diners of her visit to the non-Welsh teahouse could be regarded as an at least equally 'authentic' experience of Welshness, in disregard of any value the Welsh language or family background could hold.

As an aside, the whole fuss over issues of legitimacy and authenticity in relation to this case is considerably ironic, given the degree of Welshness that Diana embodies. Unaware that the titles of Prince and Princess of Wales are granted to the Heir Apparent to the throne of the United Kingdom and their partner and have nothing to do with ethnic Welshness, most non-British tourists (Argentinean or from other parts of the globe) regard having tea where the Princess of Wales herself did as the pinnacle of authenticity. Moreover, confused visitors may even find in the sad fate of the fairy princess what seems to be the perfect complement to the epic enterprise of the Welsh in Patagonia; she would easily fit a part in the mythical Welsh identity projected by the collective imaginary in Chubut.

Welsh culture in Patagonia has survived into the twenty-first century despite the various adversities that the settlement faced from its inception in 1865, but at what cost? Is Welsh tea leading the way for other aspects of Welsh heritage to be commodified? Given the broad appeal of a modern icon, the purchasing power of a purported 'Welsh ethnic authenticity' has been greatly diminished. As Jonathan Rutherford has stated, 'In the commodification of language and culture, objects and images are torn free of their original referents and their meanings become a spectacle open to almost infinite translation' (1990: 11). Once identities enter the marketplace, issues of 'legitimacy' and 'authenticity' can lose relevance, and it is ultimately up to the individual to assign value to the different products. Since it depends on the meanings attached to it, an experience can be as 'authentic' as we want it to be, and a picture of Diana can be as much a token of Welshness as the next 'genuine' Welsh descendant in Chubut. Despite its apparent commodification, Welsh tea still holds value as a representation of Welsh culture, and the same could be said with respect to other 'pillars' of Welshness in Patagonia.

The Welsh man of letters R. Bryn Williams could scarcely have imagined the wide currency enjoyed by Welsh heritage in Patagonia at the turn of the twenty-first century when he prophesied almost fifty years ago that 'The epic of *Y Wladfa* [i.e., the Welsh settlement in Chubut] as a Welsh-language society [was] coming to an end, and before long all that [would] remain [was] the memory of one of the most glorious failures of the Welsh nation' (1962: 298). Yes, it is true that the settlement could be regarded as a failure in terms of the autonomous objectives of the leaders of the *Mimosa*, and the same could be said about their dream of a monolingual Welsh-language community in Patagonia. However, Welsh culture (which includes the language and religion but is not based solely on these) is very much alive in Chubut—even if

in a highly hybridised state—and the commodification of aspects of Welsh Patagonian heritage attests to the success of the settlement in terms of economic improvement.

As with other cultures in other parts of the world, the new dynamics of globalisation are allowing for Welsh identity in Chubut to be constructed and claimed in previously unforeseeable ways, not least for marketing purposes. Time will tell whether or how these changes will affect the way future generations regard their Welsh Patagonian heritage. Amidst struggles over legitimacy and authenticity, being of Welsh descent is undoubtedly a valuable commodity in the new Patagonian marketplace of the twenty-first century—though it is not essential when it comes to selling Welsh heritage and culture.

Endnotes

¹ This article is partly based on my doctoral dissertation, where I have analysed the ways in which four Welsh descendants from the province of Chubut construct and reflect Welsh Patagonianness in memoirs published between 1984 and 1997. Preliminary versions of the discussion have been presented at different events in Cardiff University (2007) and the University of Southampton (2008).

² Quotation in the original Spanish: 'Conviene aumentar el número de nuestra población y, lo que es más, cambiar su condición en sentido ventajoso a la causa del progreso. Con tres millones de indígenas, cristianos y católicos, no realizaríais la república ciertamente. No la realizaríais tampoco con cuatro millones de españoles peninsulares, porque el español puro es incapaz de realizarla allá o acá. Si hemos de componer nuestra población para nuestro sistema de gobierno, si ha de sernos más posible hacer la población para el sistema proclamado que el sistema para la población, es necesario fomentar en nuestro suelo la población anglo-sajona. Ella está identificada con el vapor, el comercio y la libertad, y no[s] será imposible radicar estas cosas entre nosotros sin la cooperación activa de esa raza de progreso y de civilización.'

³ The current National Constitution of the Argentine Republic still testifies to Alberdi's influence in its assertion in Article 25 that 'The Federal Government shall foster European immigration; and may not restrict, limit or burden with any tax whatsoever, the entry into the Argentine territory of foreigners who arrive for the purpose of tilling the soil, improving industries, and introducing and teaching arts and sciences.' (*Constitución de la Nación Argentina*, translation from official website of the Argentine Senate.)

⁴ See, for example, Dumrauf 1996: 152.

⁵ Despite the fact that Argentina received a larger proportion of immigrant population than other Latin American countries when considering the numbers of its indigenous and *creole* populations, the national government largely failed in their attempt to attract a majority of Northern European immigrants, receiving instead a great majority of Italian and Spanish Southern Europeans.

⁶ Nevertheless, the change in circumstances was apparently not conveyed to prospective settlers (G. Williams 1975: 34) and, according to Abraham Matthews, actions continued in Wales as if the law that granted them special privileges had been approved (Matthews 1894: 7).

⁷ The 'Law of Public Land' stated that approximately 100 acres were to be granted to each family (with a minimum of three members) who would be willing to settle anywhere in the Argentine Territory (Dumrauf 1996: 158).

⁸ For an in-depth discussion of the role of the Welsh settlers in the context of the ongoing debate regarding the dichotomy of civilisation versus barbarism in Argentina, see Lublin 2009.

⁹ Announced in January 1965, the exchange program consisted of two parts: while the British Council granted two scholarships for Patagonians to pursue postgraduate studies in Wales, the Centenary Commission in Wales conferred scholarships to four descendants of Welsh immigrants to participate in the Centenary celebrations in Wales and travel to the land of their forefathers. They would later be in charge of sharing the fruits of their unique experience with their fellow Patagonians at home so as to strengthen the cultural links between the two countries (Welsh Assembly Government website 2007).

¹⁰ The year 1966 saw the introduction of the awarding of the Crown to the best poem in the Spanish language, which was to run parallel to the competition for the (Welsh language) Bardic Chair.

¹¹ Following a rekindling of local interest in Welsh in the late 1980s (MacDonald 2006: 142), the first teachers from Wales ventured to Chubut in the early 1990s to teach the language on a voluntary basis, thus opening the way to the current official scheme funded first by the Welsh Office and then by the National Assembly of Wales and reinforcing the ethnolinguistic revitalisation of Welsh culture in Chubut flourishing in the twenty-first century.

¹² The original Spanish reads: 'Quizás como ninguna otra provincia de la Argentina, Chubut recibió una fuerte inmigración galesa a fines del siglo pasado. [...] la localidad en la que más lograron conservar sus tradiciones fue Gaiman. [...] Así es que quienes deseen conocer un pueblo galés casi quedado en el pasado, con idioma, arquitectura y costumbres de ese origen, no pueden dejar de visitar Gaiman. Si el deseo es conocer la cultura galesa en profundidad, se puede visitar el Museo Histórico Regional Galés, [...] el Túnel, [...] y las viejas capillas [...]. Y, por supuesto, después de un paseo por las pintorescas calles de Gaiman, y la ribera del río, los visitantes pueden disfrutar del afamado té galés, preparado según antiguas costumbres que le otorgan un singular sabor y perfume. todo acompañado por riquísimas tortas.'

¹³ Despite the surge in tourist interest in the tea houses, locals (usually of Welsh descent) continue to congregate there for special occasions and celebrations.

¹⁴ Visitors come not only from Argentina's neighbours, such as Chile or Brazil, but also from other countries in Latin and North America, from Europe, and from Israel (14 visitors), Australia (ten visitors), New Zealand (three visitors) and India (one visitor).

¹⁵ Only a small minority of cruise ship passengers choose to visit Gaiman. Although there are no statistics for how many people make their way down from Puerto Madryn, official figures indicate that a total of 46,054 tourists arrived in Chubut from their moored cruise ships between October 2007 and April 2008—almost 30% more than the 35,729 visitors recorded for the same period in 2006-7 (*Cruceros: turistas arribados a la provincia en cruceros según temporad*: <http://www.estadistica.chubut.gov.ar>).

¹⁶ The original Welsh reads: '[Erbyn 1890] nid oedd te yn ddiod I'r dosbarth canol yn unig. Gorseddwyd te fel diod genedlaethol Prydain a yfid gan y tlawd a'r cefnog fel ei gilydd. Yn y cyfnod hwn death y te parti (ar wahân i wyliau te'r capeli) yn fwyfwy poblogaidd—nifer o wragedd yn cwrdd i yfed te a rhoi'r byd yn ei le—a dyma pryd y cafwyd y ddelwedd gyfarwydd, ystrydebol, mewn lluniau a ffotograffau o ferched Cymru, oll yn eu gwisgoedd Cymreig a'u hetiau tal, yn eistedd yn dawel wrth fwrdd ac arno lestri tsieina, tebot a llaeth a siwgr.'

¹⁷ For a discussion on British afternoon tea as a tourist attraction in the United Kingdom, see Hall and Boyne 2007.

¹⁸ A. Jones and W. Jones also discuss a case of appropriation of tea as a feature of Welsh identity among Welsh-Americans, although in their case tea is associated with Welshness in the framework of the temperance movement and there is no actual tea service involved (A. Jones and W. Jones 2001: 66–8).

¹⁹ The original Welsh reads: 'Rhoddir, hefyd, le amlwg i dwristiaeth y dyddiau yma. A dyma lle mae pethau "Cymreig", neu'n hytrach Wladfaol, yn cael cryn dipyn o sylw. Yn sgil dathlu Gŵyl y Glaniad gyda the parti yn y prynhawn a chyngerdd yn yr hwyr, daeth ein harferiad o gael te hefo bara meny, jam a chaws a gwahanol fathau o deisennau yn adnabyddus i'r "cenedloedd eraill" fel y gelwid y rhai o'n

cylch flynyddoedd yn ôl. Wedi hynny dechreuodd rhai drefnu te yn y trefydd ar gyfer unrhyw un a ddymunai gael paned yn y pnawn. Bu'r syniad yn llwyddiannus iawn fel erbyn hyn mae yma lu o *casas de té* yma ac acw yn y Wladfa ac yn enwedig yn y Gaiman. Nid yn unig disgynyddion y Cymry fydd yn eu rhedeg ychwaith. Mae amryw o'r trigolion wedi hoffi'r syniad ac yn rhoi'r gwasanaeth yma hefyd. Fel rheol, maen nhw'n trio cael personau o dras Cymreig i gydweithio â hwy er mwyn sicrhau fod y naws arbennig sydd i hyn yn dal yno.'

²⁰ Appadurai explains the role of the social in economic practice by stating that '[the] commodity candidacy of things is less a temporal than a conceptual feature, and it refers to the standards and criteria (symbolic, classificatory and moral) that define the exchangeability of things in any particular social and historical context' (Appadurai 1986: 14).

²¹ For studies of reactions to and commemorations of Diana's tragic demise around the world, see Kear and Steinberg (1999), Walter (1999) and Denney (2005).

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