



Scenes from Welsh Argentine Patagonia
A group of Magellanic penguins at the Punta Tombo penguin colony (left); Puente Hendre – the first bridge built across the Chubut River by the Welsh settlers in 1888 is still in use (bottom right)



FROM THE VALLEYS

It's one of the great stories of human migration... The small Welsh community who, in 1865, set sail from their homeland with a dream of building a new nation. They battled uninhabitable terrain, bitter winters and prejudice – but their legacy, as **E Wyn James** discovers, is a small corner of Patagonia that is forever Wales. Photography by **Ben Roberts**

It's a spring day in Puerto Madryn in Chubut, in Argentine Patagonia and I'm looking out over the bay, watching the southern right whales – so named because they were once the 'right' kind to hunt, with plenty of oil and baleen – tossing their tails in the air. The whales come close to shore here between May and December to mate and calve, making this part of Chubut a firm favourite with tourists, as is its Magellanic penguin colony. I walk along the pier to take a better look – the whales are so close I could almost touch them – when I hear someone call my name. No, my ears don't deceive me, it's one of my children's friends, Gwenno, from our street in Cardiff, 7,000 miles away.

Gwenno tells me she's touring South America and knows that Puerto Madryn is a must-see; not so much for the whales, but because we're from Wales. As, oddly enough, the Chubut Valley has a rich Welsh heritage. Even the name 'Madryn' is Welsh: the port was named after an area on North Wales' picturesque Llŷn Peninsula. The Welsh settlement here is known as Y Wladfa. 'Ever since I learned at school that Welsh was spoken in a little part of Patagonia, I knew that I wanted to experience it,' she says. 'It's amazing.'

The story begins 150 years ago, when around 150 Welsh people arrived in Golfo Nuevo in July 1865 on a clipper ship named the *Mimosa*, intent





on establishing a new Welsh-speaking community in the nearby Chubut Valley. As they embarked from Liverpool in May 1865 on their two-month long voyage, the settlers raised the Red Dragon and sang new, Welsh words to *God Save the Queen*: 'We have found a better land in the far South, it is Patagonia. We will be able to live there in peace, without fear of treachery or the sword, and ruled by a Welshman'. Upon arrival, however, disillusionment set in, as the Welsh found themselves sheltering in caves on the bare, windswept shore in the middle of a Patagonian winter, before having to face a 40-mile trek across the dusty, arid steppe – an area which Charles Darwin remarked in 1833 would 'forever remain nearly useless to mankind'.

Today the journey from Puerto Madryn to the Chubut Valley over that barren terrain is just an hour's bus ride. Trelew is the first stop in the valley: the largest town here, with a population of just over 100,000. Its name means 'Lew's town', the 'Lew' being Lewis Jones (1836–1904). One of the most influential and controversial of the early Welsh settlers, it is he, rightly or wrongly, who received much of the blame for the too-rosy picture of the valley presented to the original settlers prior to their departure from Wales. There is little that is obviously Welsh about Trelew at a glance; and yet, every so often, one comes across a startling reminder of its origins.

Walking through the Parque Centenario from the bus station, a tall, austere statue of Jones casts a stern eye on passers-by, and amid Trelew's shopping centre is Capilla Tabernacl, a red-brick Welsh chapel built in 1889. Now dwarfed by the surrounding buildings, it is one of a network of chapels the Welsh built throughout the valley, for religious services and Welsh cultural activities. Many are now closed or only hold the occasional Welsh service, but they are held in high regard as heritage sites, and the Chubut government pays for the staff who explain their significance to visitors. And if you happen to be in this part of Patagonia at a *cymanfa ganu* (hymn festival) you can still witness fervent hymn-singing in the chapels, in both Welsh and Spanish.

Many of the pioneers who arrived on the *Mimosa* are buried at Capilla Moriah, a Welsh chapel on the outskirts of town. Moments from those settlers' graves is a remarkable new development, Ysgol yr Hendre ('School of the Old Homestead'). Founded in 2006, it's a bilingual Welsh-Spanish primary school. The *Mimosa's* passengers would have approved, even if things here didn't work out quite as they had hoped.

Like all emigration, that of the Welsh to Patagonia was driven by the desire for a new, better life; but it was propelled not only by economics, but also by the dream of establishing a new Wales, far from persecution and assimilation, which would be Welsh in

language, radical in politics and Protestant nonconformist in religion. For a while it seemed as if that dream would come true, as the Welsh through much sweat and toil turned the Chubut Valley into such a fertile location that by the late 1880s its grain was winning gold in international competitions.

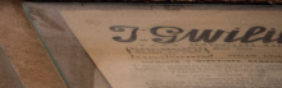
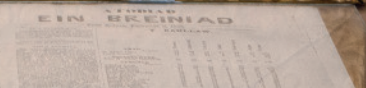
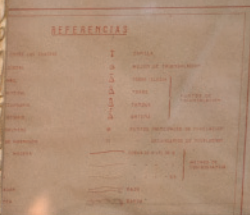
But with the economic success, came the seeds of failure. Peoples from elsewhere began to move in and the Argentine government started involving itself increasingly in the life of the settlement. The Welsh language and its culture would steadily decline throughout the 20th century, so much so that by 1986 a *Los Angeles Times* journalist could write that the Welsh settlement was 'sliding gracefully into history'. A key turning point in the fortunes of the Welsh language was the Argentine government's insistence in 1896 that schools become Spanish-language; but now remarkably, in 2015, there are once more schools in Chubut teaching in Welsh.

Trelew may be the largest town here, but the town of Gaiman, a half-an-hour bus trip to the west, is the beating heart of Welsh life in the Chubut Valley. It's home to Bethel Chapel, and a plethora of traditional Welsh tearooms. Cruise ships coming to Puerto Madryn routinely unload passengers to partake of the local take on Welsh fruit cake, *torta negra* at the various establishments, and the Tŷ Te Caerdydd ('Cardiff Tea House') ☑

'The settlement would be Welsh in language and radical in politics. For a while it seemed as if that dream would come true'

From above
Silvia Beatriz Almeyra, principal at Ysgol yr Hendre, Trelew; poplar trees were introduced by Welsh settlers to protect crops and livestock from strong Patagonian winds; a multilingual sign welcomes visitors to Gaiman





AT A GLANCE

Of the 500,000 or so people living in the Chubut Province it is estimated that about 10 per cent are of Welsh descent.

It is estimated that as many as 5,000 people here are able to speak Welsh.

Common surnames include Evans, Williams and Jones.

In 1888 a new Welsh settlement was established in the Andes, 400 miles west of the original settlement. Welsh remains a living language there, and as in the Chubut Valley, there has been a revival of interest there in recent years in all things Welsh.

In the frame

A photograph from a collection at the Welsh Regional Historical Museum, Gaiman; children practise at the Draig Goch ('Red Dragon') rugby club, Gaiman



tearoom counts the late Diana, Princess of Wales, among its previous visitors.

Each September, Gaiman hosts a Youth Eisteddfod in which hundreds of young people compete. It's a traditional cultural festival transplanted from Wales and consists of a range of literary and musical competitions. The big difference here is that much is in Spanish, although recent years have seen a significant increase in the number of Welsh-language competitions. I've been a number of times. It's enchanting to hear familiar Welsh pieces with a strong Spanish lilt.

I'm staying at the B&B Plas y Coed ('Place of Trees'), the oldest tearoom in town, built in 1880, with walls that are adorned by illustrated Welsh tea towels and lovespoons. The proprietor, Ana Chiabrande Rees, is chatting in Welsh with a customer as I arrive.

'When my great-grandmother started this place in 1944, it was the only Welsh tea room in Patagonia for at least 25 years,' Ana says. 'Our ancestors had a very difficult struggle to keep the culture and language alive. It's so important to keep all the traditions. We need to treasure them.' As well as Welsh and Argentinian guests, she says she has a lot of visitors from 'Canada, Spain and Italy coming every year, and some from the US'.

Speaking of Welsh guests, I bump into a former student of mine, Manon, and her partner, Rhys, staying just along the corridor. 'It's my second time in Gaiman,' says Manon, 'but the first time for Rhys. It was his childhood dream to visit Y Wladfa.'

I head out to visit the Museo Histórico Regional de Gaiman, the local museum of Welsh life, in a converted railway station (the railway here has long since been dismantled), to meet its custodian Fabio González. He's an old friend, and directly descended from Lewis Jones. Together, and not for the first time, we look over some of the wealth of



Welsh spirit

An advertising hoarding – showing allegiance to Wales – on the road into Gaiman

artefacts and manuscripts relating to the Welsh in Chubut – there's everything from irons and harps to a Welsh dresser – before heading out for some food at Gwalia Lân ('Pure Wales'). Despite the name and the large red dragon emblazoned above the door, the menu is Argentine. We're meeting the composer Héctor MacDonald here, whose studio is just up the road.

He is in a buoyant mood. 'The BBC has asked me to compose a piece of music to celebrate the 150 years of the Welsh settlement,' he tells us, 'to debut at the International Eisteddfod in North Wales in July.' Héctor, who was born in Gaiman, speaks Welsh; how does he feel about the future of Welsh culture here?

'My mother's generation, the people who are 70 and 80 years old now, really suffered oppression in the 1940s and 50s, from a government that was trying to have everyone speak the Spanish language,' he says. 'For a time, this valley had forgotten its Welsh language and heritage – the language is so key to the Welsh identity.' He feels things improved for his generation (he's 47). 'It's thanks to the institutions in Wales who sent language teachers out here to reinvigorate the language. My Welsh is better than my English.' The evening passes quickly, conversation flowing freely (in Welsh) between old friends.

The next day is my last in Chubut Valley, and I leave with a heavy heart. Although the Welsh settlement did not develop along the lines envisaged by the early Welsh pioneers, remarkably, Welsh culture remains a vibrant element in Chubut. What

is even more remarkable is the way recent years have witnessed such a revival of interest in Welsh language and culture. Fifty years ago, at the time of the settlement's centenary celebrations in 1965, few would have thought there was any future for the Welsh language in Chubut; yet today, there is a vigorous Welsh learner movement and a new generation of children receiving Welsh-language education. What, one wonders, will the future hold for the Welsh language in Chubut 50 years hence? *E Wyn James is a professor of Welsh and co-director of the Cardiff Centre for Welsh American Studies at Cardiff University. Journey Latin America (journeylatinamerica.co.uk; 020 8600 1881) specialises in travel throughout Latin America, including Argentina. A ten-day itinerary visiting Buenos Aires, Puerto Madryn, Gaiman, Trelew and Esquel costs from £2,299pp*.* ■



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