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Gwladfa

Geraldine Lublin

This is the thirty-sixth contribution to our [Welsh Keywords](#) series – inspired by Raymond Williams’ *Keywords* – which offers contemporary perspectives on contested meanings of words in Welsh and how these shifting meanings continue to shape our society.

A good few years ago, I was chatting to another PhD student and asked why he had chosen to study ‘*Y Wladfa*’, as the Welsh settlement in Patagonia is usually referred to in Welsh. He said the idea had come to him during his year abroad in the Netherlands: ‘Over there’ – he explained confidently – ‘people often talk about “the colonies”. As a Welsh person, I thought “We also have a colony!”, and that’s how I decided to learn more about the Welsh in Patagonia.’ Rather outraged, I remember thinking at the time: ‘This guy clearly has *no idea*; how can he compare the Welsh settlement to the Dutch colonial empire?!’

However, over the years, I have learnt to appreciate the complexities of the challenge posed by a colonial venture whose Welsh name derives from the verb ‘to colonise’ (*gwladychu*) but shouldn’t, I argue, be considered a ‘Welsh colony’. Perhaps recent debates around decolonisation in Wales, and reckoning with Wales’ complicity in British imperialism and contemporary structures of white privilege will offer an opportunity to take another look at what is known in Welsh as ‘*Y Fenter Fawr*’.

Let’s start by looking at the nomenclature. The *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* explains the Welsh term ‘*gwladfa*’ as ‘trefedigaeth [colony], gwladychfa [settlement]’ before linking it (when preceded by the definite article) to ‘part



BBC Wales interview during the sesquicentennial of the Welsh colony in Chubut, Patagonia, 2015
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of a province in South America with the name of Patagonia that was colonised by the Welsh in 1865'. Though '*gwladfa*' has occasionally been used to refer to Welsh settlements elsewhere, the date given for the first recorded use of the term (1863) reinforces its specificity in relation to the Patagonian venture.

No such specific term exists in either English or Spanish, into which '*gwladfa*' has been translated both as 'colony'/'*colonia*' and 'settlement' / '*asentamiento*'. In English, those who sympathise with the venture tend to refer to it as a 'settlement', whilst critics describe it as a 'colony'. Even though the expression most often used in Spanish to refer to *Y Wladfa* is 'la colonia galesa' [the Welsh colony], it is not linked in its South American context to the 'the full or partial political control of a country or area by another country', which most Argentines associate instead with the Spanish Empire

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that lasted until the early nineteenth century. Rather, 'la colonia galesa' was just one of the many government-sponsored immigrant agricultural settlements established throughout Argentina in the second half of the nineteenth century, with names like 'Colonia Esperanza' or 'Colonia Villa Urquiza'.

This may have been lost in translation, however. Whatever the leaders of the Welsh venture had told the immigrants, and whatever fantasies of autonomy they may have entertained themselves, the Argentine government had been unambiguous that the settlers would be under its authority and subject to its laws. When discussing the Welsh proposal in 1863, the Argentine Congress had specifically rejected the granting of special prerogatives to the settlement on the grounds that it would be dangerous to allow Protestant and 'English' immigrants any privileges whilst residing so close to the already British-occupied Falkland Islands.

Since Argentina's claim to the southern territories was not premised on effective occupation, the Welsh actually arrived in Patagonia *before* the Argentine state took full control, which allowed them to enjoy a high degree of *de facto* autonomy during the first decade. It is interesting to see how different Welsh- and English-language accounts are from those written in Spanish. Whilst the former portray the settlers as having considerable decision-making power, in Spanish-language materials they always appear under the protective umbrella of the Argentine state, even if sometimes rather tied to the apron strings of the British Empire. Indeed, things could have been very different if Westminster had accommodated a petition taken to London in 1899 asking for protection against the Sunday military drill duties required by the state from all Argentine citizens, Welsh descendants included.¹ Furthermore, hindsight makes it difficult to imagine the gamble of the Welsh settlers paying off and Chubut becoming the self-governing district they had hoped for, where all affairs would be conducted in Welsh.

Although the leaders of the migration maintained that it was not their intention to disregard the rights of indigenous Patagonians to the land,² there is no doubt that *Y Wladfa* was a settler colonial venture, facilitated by the Argentine state and followed closely by the UK, whose Royal Navy ships conducted regular inspections until as late as 1902. The Welsh were aware that the lands they aimed to occupy belonged to indigenous Patagonians, but the indigenous people's putative nomadic nature³ seemed to somehow weaken their connection with the territories and make the possibility of establishing a Welsh settlement seem less intrusive.

Perhaps in recognition of the territorial rights of Patagonia's original



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populations – whom they considered ‘a little more civilized than the Argentine soldiers’⁴ – or maybe as a token of their gratitude for having taught them to survive in the rugged steppe, the Welsh settlers always insisted that the government in Buenos Aires kept sending the supplies indigenous groups had been promised in exchange for allowing the Welsh settlers to make use of their territories in the Chupat region as agreed via the *Tratado Chequëlcho* (1865). As a prominent leader of the settlement, Lewis Jones himself escorted the indigenous Tehuelche when they travelled all the way to Buenos Aires in 1867 to protest that rations were withheld, which according to Glyn Williams would have ‘aroused the suspicion of the Argentine authorities’.⁵

Notwithstanding their perceived evolutionary superiority,⁶ the Welsh showed some empathy towards indigenous Patagonians, presumably given their experience of English oppression. Hugh Hughes’ *Handbook of the Welsh Colony* itself draws attention to this, comparing what schools taught about the monstrous ‘half beasts’ roaming the ‘hideous Patagonian wilderness’ to what English history lessons said about the ‘naked and cruel savages’ (the Welsh) civilised by English ‘long knives’.⁷

This empathy may have engendered the apparently peaceful coexistence

Above: Lewis Jones (1836-1904) photographed among Tehuelche people, c.1867.

of both groups in the first decades of the settlement, which would develop into what scholars have considered 'a mutually beneficial bond of economic complementarity'.⁸ The only recorded conflict (with an unidentified indigenous group) took place in 1884, the year when the 'Conquest of the Desert' came to an end. The *Handbook* notes that the settlers set out to 'defeat the Indian through kindness'. If we are to trust the claim that the Tehuelche were reportedly 'contented' to have the settlers in the area in order to trade with them instead of the 280-mile-distant Carmen de Patagones,⁹ however, we need to consider that the early peaceful coexistence could well have been the result of a deliberate diplomacy strategy by the Tehuelche. The lack of first-hand indigenous sources will not, alas, enable us to confirm this hypothesis.

In any case, even if we take into account the positive aspects of the link between the Welsh settlers and Patagonia's indigenous populations, the settlers' acceptance of the authority of the Buenos Aires government over Patagonian territories makes them participant – if not 'complicit' – in the wider process of dispossession suffered by indigenous peoples in what would eventually come to be known as Argentina. Yes, there is evidence that the Welsh tried to mediate with officials to spare their Tehuelche associates when the military campaigns of the so-called 'Conquest of the Desert' reached Chubut.¹⁰ However, it was the dispossession of indigenous populations that made massive extensions of land available for (white) settlement. Though the Welsh received a relatively small portion of the lands taken over, their expansion towards the West was forged by means of a collaboration with the state. Headed by Colonel Luis Jorge Fontana, the well-known and much-celebrated '*Rifleros Expedition*' was largely composed (and mostly resourced) by the Welsh settlers, and it was thanks to that arduous journey that they were granted plots in the areas now known as 'Trevelin' and 'Esquel'.

As with other settler colonial contexts, canonical accounts of *Y Wladfa* assume the availability of land for settlement as a given, erasing or glossing over the appropriation of indigenous territories. A key feature of Welsh Patagonian pioneer narratives, the much-romanticised 'friendship' with the Tehuelche¹¹ is deployed as a vindication that proves convenient in more than one sense. Firstly, it pleases Welsh diaspora tourists travelling to what Mici Plwm has described as the 'Disney of the Welsh-speaking middle-class',¹² as they pride themselves on the settlers' status as precocious icons of multicultural tolerance. Even those who have not visited Patagonia have sometimes bought into the idealised *Cymru fach dros y môr* where the old



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language is still spoken and the culture is cherished, and it is not difficult to see how this special link has developed between Wales and Welsh Patagonia as a *Cymru Lân* of sorts.

Nevertheless, if the erasure of the initial violence is important for the conscience of the Welsh visitor, it is also instrumental for the Province of Chubut, whose identity has been described as ‘the result of the fusion of the cultures of the Tehuelche and the Welsh’.¹³ Since the so-called *gesta galesa* [Welsh feat] is now synonymous with the foundational narrative of the Province, what may look like praise for the Welsh may be more appropriately interpreted as a legitimisation and reinforcement of the settler colonial structure underpinning not only Chubut but, arguably, the whole of Argentina as a state built on land taken from indigenous peoples.

In his ‘Fate of the Language’ (1962), Saunders Lewis had suggested looking

Above: Sesquicentennial of the Welsh colony ceremony in Puerto Madryn in 2015. Performance of the encounter between two cultures (Welsh and Tehuelche-Mapuche) © Gastón Cuello (CC BY-SA 4.0) <https://bit.ly/34YMFiP>

at ‘the significance and heroism of the Patagonian venture’ for inspiration. At this stage of the twenty-first century, whilst still taking inspiration from the brighter aspects of our past, it is learning from the less pleasant, more challenging episodes which allows us to respond better in the present, both as nations and as individuals. Here’s hoping debates around decolonisation and white privilege may help us achieve those aims.

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- 4 Glyn Williams, *The Desert and the Dream* (University of Wales Press, 1975) p. 114.
- 5: Glyn Williams, *The Welsh in Patagonia: The State and the Ethnic Community* (University of Wales Press, 1991) p. 58.
- 6: Glyn Williams, ‘Welsh settlers and Native Americans in Patagonia’, *Journal of Latin American Studies* 11/1 (May 1979) p. 41–66, 55.
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- 8: Marcelo Gavirati has studied in depth the formation of a model of ‘peaceful coexistence based on economic complementarity’ between 1865 and 1885 in Gavirati, ‘El contacto entre Galeses, Pampas y Tehuelches’, (unpublished PhD thesis, Universidad del Centro de la Provincia de Buenos Aires, 2012).
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- 10: Lewis Jones, *Hanes y Wladva Gymreig*, pp. 115–16.
- 11: I have discussed this in depth in my monograph *Memoir and Identity in Welsh Patagonia: Voices from a settler community in Argentina* (University of Wales Press, 2017).
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