

WELSH PATAGONIA AND GWENT.

Argentina has twenty six provinces, and one of them, Chubut which is in that part of southern Argentina known as Patagonia was first settled by a group of Welsh migrants in 1865, with others following from Wales over the next forty years. . Subsequently during the twentieth century Chubut province received much immigration from Europe, particularly Spain and Italy, so that by now those of Welsh extraction are in a distinct minority. Nevertheless, and amazingly, the symbols of Welsh identity can be prominent! There are Welsh tea rooms, functioning Welsh chapels, Welsh is taught in schools, and an annual Eisteddfod still prospers. Also, in contrast to those very areas in present day Wales from which the Welsh settlers went, and for Gwent this included : Tredegar, Rhymney, Newport etc., one can today go into some shops, pubs, and cafés in Patagonia where they know no English but will take your order in Welsh as I found out for myself in 2008!.

The settlement began in 1865 when a contingent of some 160 Welsh people went on the small ship the *Mimosia* sailing from Liverpool to create a Welsh speaking self governing community in that part of Patagonia which became Chubut Province - *Provincia del Chubut*. The territory was ‘empty’ settlement at the time, apart from the native migratory indians, and in the nineteenth century the Argentinean Government was advertising for people to come and settle in this area the ‘ownership’ of which was disputed with Chile. At this same time, some Welsh settlers in America (principally California and Wisconsin) had become dispirited that their American Welsh communities had so quickly become assimilated, losing their language and traditional culture. They urged compatriots back in Wales to create a movement to establish a thoroughly Welsh settlement or *Wladfa* in virgin territory; somewhere those who wanted a better life free from the torments of landlordism on farmers or the hardship of pits and ironworks could prosper and maintain their own culture in total democracy. Patagonia seemed the answer and a committee was set-up under the chairmanship of Reverend Michael D. Jones to promote the venture. Members of the committee toured Wales promoting the venture at chapel meetings where they ‘signed-up’ potential migrants. The first group landed on 28th July 1865 on a barren coast, some forty miles from the Chubut valley where they intended to settle, at a site now called Porth Madryn, It is named after Madryn in the Llŷn

Peninsular of Caernarfonshire, the home of one of the venture's leading promoters.. There one now finds a splendid monument erected in 1965 by the Argentinian government on the centenary of the *Mimosa* landing which states that the Welsh or *Galesa* were the first settlers.

With great difficulty these first settlers reached the Chubut valley from the barren coast, and faced extraordinary difficulties of survival for several years because of the unreliable rainfall. They almost gave-up and moved elsewhere (as some did) before a method of irrigation was devised. Also, they certainly would not have survived had they not (unlike previous Europeans in Argentina) made friendly relations with the native migratory indians who taught them to avoid starvation by hunting the animals that inhabited the semi-desert territory. In return the Indians received the agricultural skills and food from the settlers such as bread, which together with the Welsh hymn singing they doted on! After some twenty years when the first community was established against all odds and had created its' own Welsh constitution, chapels, schools and government, the land capable of cultivation in the Chubut valley had become very scarce so the new generation of young 'Welsh' men born in Patagonia went exploring for a location to establish a second community where they could have farms of their own. ..

They had to search as far as the Andes Mountains where they found a valley which reminded them so much of Wales they named it *Cwm Hyfryd* - the 'Lovely Valley. This was over three hundred miles from the first Welsh settlements in the Chubut Valley. To reach *Cwm Hyfryd* they had had to cross the semi-desert prairie wastelands which they called *Y Paith*. Despite considerable hardships and dangers in the process a second community was successfully established in *Cwm Hyfryd* and contact and trade was maintained along the route between these two Welsh areas so far apart. The part of Andes now home to the second Welsh Settlement was at the time bitterly disputed between Chile and Argentina. To avoid war it was decided to put the issue to a vote of the Andes inhabitants. Although *Cwm Hyfryd* was much, much, nearer established Chilean settlements and markets than the nearest of Argentina in the Chubut valley, the Welsh voted unequivocally for Argentina. It was this vote which determined the present

day boundary between the two neighbours. Today whether you go to the Chubut Valley in the eastern part, or to Cwm Hyfryd in the western Andean part of Chubut Province, you will find Welsh speakers and plenty of symbols of Wales despite the descendants of the original Welsh settlers being thousands of miles away from the original homeland. What do we know of Gwent connections with Welsh Patagonia?

Though there is now a thriving Wales-Argentina Society/*Cymdeithas Cymru-Ariannin* promoting the history of these settlements and cultural exchange between the two countries, there is not unfortunately a comprehensive data base listing all the early settlers who went out from Wales. The names and origins of the first party – those on the ship *Mimosa*, have been fully listed, and among them there does not appear be any family from Gwent per se, though there were plenty from nearby Aberdare and Mountain Ash. However, from disparate other sources there is information that there were Gwent migrants from the second and subsequent migrations.

In the second group to sail for Argentina was a young David Stephen Jones and his wife of Rhymney. David had had an accident as a collier and had decided that farming in Patagonia might yield less danger. His father's brother by the way was the Rhymney man who was to become Sir Thomas Jones and Cabinet Secretary to Prime Minister David Lloyd George! David Stephen Jones established a farm in the Chubut valley which still survives to this day and which is named *Twyn Carno*, which is still to this day the name of the top part of what with the establishment of iron works, was to become the town of Rhymney.

It is also known that a Bootmaker who had been in business in Newport, Gwent a Joseph Davies and wife Jane went to Patagonia sometime after 1871 with their children William Edward, Sarah and David. And, linking people from census information in Patagonia to census data in Wales, shows that some who emigrated subsequent to the first landing had roots in Tredegar. For example, in 1896, a 38 year old Owen Roberts recorded in a Patagonian census of 1895 as 'a widower born in Britain', married Elizabeth Lewis, 37 years old. Elizabeth had been born in Tredegar in 1859 (to Charles and Sarah Lewis) and at the time of the 1971 UK Census lived at 17 River Row.

Among the disparate sources indicating Gwent people who went from Wales to Patagonia, are also old photographs. One of these is of early settlers taken in 1890 near '*Yr Hen Amddiffynfa*' – the Old Fort at Rawson which had been the very first home base of the first settlers after making 40 mile the trek from the coastal landing at Porth Madryn to the Chubut valley. One of those on the photograph is a Rhys Williams of Nantyglo. Much work remains to be done in tracing all those who went from Gwent and the other parts of Wales to Patagonia.

Welsh migration to Patagonia only lasted some forty years. By the beginning of the first world war it had come to an end, and it is only of recent times that links between the Welsh descendents and their homeland have become firmly re-established. In the intervening period migrants from other parts of Europe poured into Argentina, with many reaching Chubut province, and to the extent that Welsh migrants probably now represent no more than some 7 per cent of all those who have settled there. Nevertheless, the Welsh influence is disproportionate, and to an extent it shapes the identity of many in Chubut who have no ethnic connection to Wales. Take for example the Mayor of the town of Gaiman in Chubut valley the town nowadays considered to be the most Welsh in Patagonia. His parents are of Italian and indigenous extraction, yet when this writer visited the town in 2008, he addressed and answered questions in perfect Welsh from the tour group, and his children are learning Welsh, because it is part of the history of their province, part of what makes them different from the remainder of Argentina!

In a key way, one aspect of Welsh influence is fundamental. The province of Chubut which has far more autonomy within Argentina than that currently possessed by the Welsh Assembly in Britain, received its' first constitution in 1958. Much of it was modelled on the constitution drawn-up by the first Welsh settlers to govern their new community which in 1866 had given full voting rights to all men and women over eighteen years of age, and with all voting to be by secret ballot! Neither of these rights existed in Britain at the time nor for long after either. Small wonder then that the President of Chubut Province on achieving provincial status referred to the importance of the written constitution of the first Welsh settlers and lauded it as: "A hymn of praise to freedom, and a confession of faith in democracy"! Quite a tribute to Wales.

There is much more that could be written here about the heroic Welsh story in Patagonia and their civic influence in Argentina, and readers can follow-up this account by going to the following web sites: - : www.glanriad.com ; www.cymru-ariannin.org ; *and* www.patagonia-argentina.com/i/atlantica/puertomadryn/gaiman.php

Colin Morgan, April 2009