

# Against the odds?

The relative importance of the factors involved in the fluctuating fortunes of the Welsh colony in the Lower Chubut Valley of Patagonia, between 1865 and 1895



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## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to my daughter Kate Freeman, who tragically took her own life in Australia on 26 June 2023. She was a very special and gifted person, a consultant paediatrician who cared passionately for her patients and the Aboriginal communities, and showed kindness to all. She was proud of her Welsh heritage. She will be greatly missed, and made a lasting impact in all walks of her life.

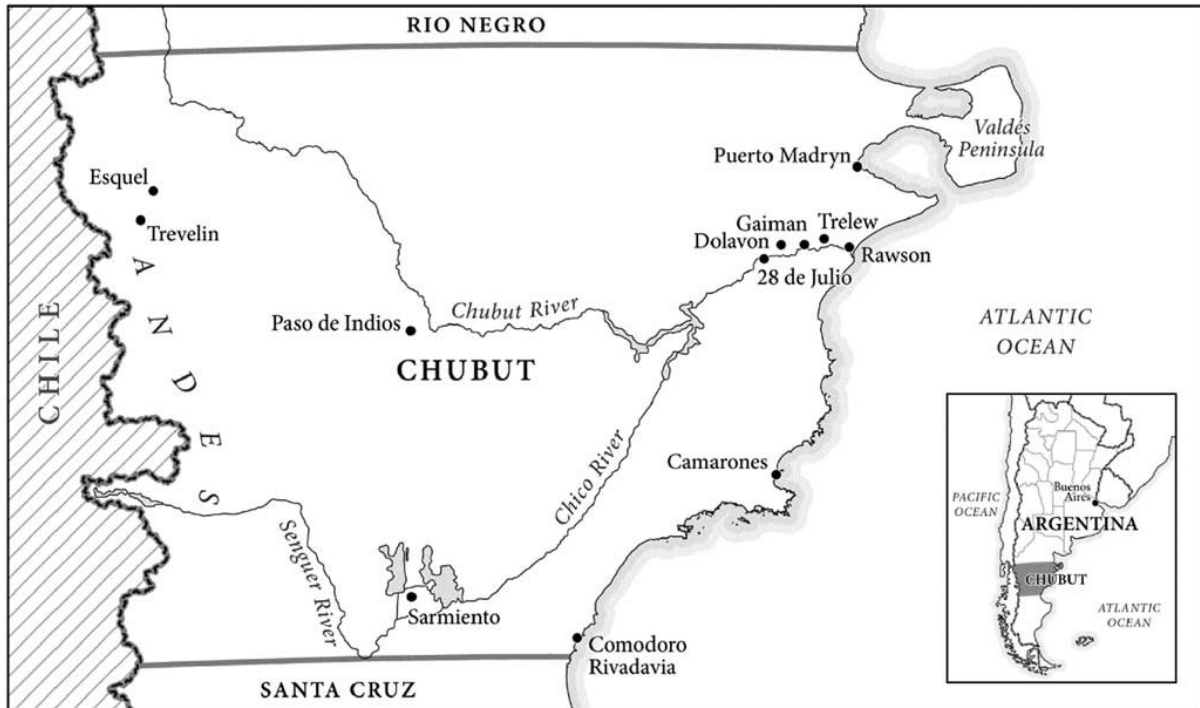
## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I am indebted to my long-suffering wife Marie, whose plans for our retirement were put on hold by my self-indulgent decision to spend the first six years of it absorbed in the Open University history degree. I must also thank the OU tutors who guided me on my studies, especially Dr Matthew Griffiths who gave me invaluable guidance and advice in my final module on Welsh history.

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## INTRODUCTION



Welsh Patagonia. Source: Geraldine Lublin, *Memoir and identity in Welsh Patagonia*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017, p. ii.

On 28 July 1865 a party of about 160 Welsh people disembarked from the *Mimosa* on a beach on the Atlantic coast of Patagonia in southern Argentina, at a site that later gave rise to the port of Puerto Madryn, before moving south to settle in the Lower Chubut Valley. They were the first contingent of Welsh settlers and, like those who followed, were motivated, at least in part, by a desire to establish a community (Y Wladfa in Welsh) that could preserve its Welsh culture and language, free from English (and other ‘foreign’) influence.<sup>1 2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Lucy Taylor, ‘Global perspectives on Welsh Patagonia: The complexities of being both colonizer and colonized’. *Journal of Global History*, 13.3 (2018), p. 448.

<sup>2</sup> Glyn Williams, ‘The Structure and Process of Welsh Emigration to Patagonia’ *Welsh History Review*, 8 (1976), p. 46. Taylor gives the number arriving as 165, but Glyn Williams’ research indicates that the number was 159, as 162 had left Liverpool and there were 5 deaths and 2 births on the voyage.

The Welsh community in the Chubut Valley had a very uncertain start and endured great hardships<sup>3</sup> but also periods of prosperity and expansion<sup>4</sup> over the next thirty years. This dissertation will approach the subject by assessing the relative importance of the factors affecting the colony's prosperity and the degree to which they impacted on the fortunes of the Welsh settlers. What will not be considered any further are the reasons that motivated the settlers to leave their homeland in the expectation of a better life in Patagonia. The secondary or satellite Welsh colony in the foothills of the Andes will not be discussed in detail. The questions posed in this essay can be summarised thus:

- What were the factors impacting the prosperity of the Welsh colony in the Lower Chubut Valley between 1865 and 1895?
- What was the relative importance of these factors, and how did that change over time?
- What helped the colony to thrive?
- What were the main challenges that impacted negatively on the colony?
- How did the community respond to the challenges it faced and to what extent was it able to overcome these challenges?

Historians have studied many aspects of the Welsh colony in Patagonia, some of which have touched on the positive and negative impacts on its prosperity but rarely considering them comparatively. Discussion of the historiography would be incomplete without including Glyn Williams, who has devoted much of his career to researching the Welsh in Patagonia and has published extensively on the subject, including his comprehensive text *The Desert and the Dream*.<sup>5</sup> He is a sociologist<sup>6</sup> and anthropologist<sup>7</sup> as well as a historian and has been accused, on occasion, of failing to apply critical historical rigour in his narratives.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, *The Desert and the Dream* provides the narrative framework for this dissertation.<sup>9</sup> Williams'

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<sup>3</sup> Williams, 'The Structure and Process', p. 48.

<sup>4</sup> Williams, 'The Structure and Process', p.63.

<sup>5</sup> Glyn Williams, *The Desert and the Dream: A Study of Welsh Colonization in Chubut, 1865-1915* (Cardiff, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> D. Brown, 'Williams, Glyn (1939-)', in *Concise encyclopaedia of sociolinguistics*, ed. by R. Methrie and R. E. Asher (Oxford, 2001). In this article, Brown emphasises Williams' interest in sociolinguistics.

<sup>7</sup> David Rock, 'Ideas, Immigrants et Alia in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Argentina', *Latin American Research Review*, 29.1 (1994) p. 180.

<sup>8</sup> Rock, 'Ideas, Immigrants et Alia', pp. 179-80.

<sup>9</sup> Geraldine Lublin, *Memoir and Identity in Welsh Patagonia: Voices from a Settler Community in Argentina* (Cardiff 2017), p. 21. Lublin describes *The Desert and the Dream* as 'a thoroughgoing academic study of the development of the Welsh settlements' which 'opened up the topic to an English-medium audience'.

scholarship was preceded by that of his father, R. Bryn Williams, whose book *Y Wladfa*<sup>10</sup> has been described as ‘ground breaking yet highly romanticised’.<sup>11</sup> Earlier, John Baur wrote an extensively researched account of the Welsh colony, in which he concludes that its survival was due primarily to the indomitable spirit, faith and self-sacrifice of the early settlers.<sup>12</sup> More recently, Geraldine Lublin in her book *Memoirs and Identity in Welsh Patagonia* concentrates on the twentieth century memoirs of four people born in Patagonia of Welsh descent, but she does put their lives in context by describing the successes and challenges in the previous development of the colony.<sup>13</sup> Another recent author, Lucy Taylor has written on the paradox of the Patagonian Welsh being both colonisers and colonised, in their relationships on the one hand with the indigenous inhabitants, and on the other with the British and Argentine governments.<sup>14</sup> <sup>15</sup> Jean Lindsay’s article on the abortive gold prospecting enterprise exemplifies the colony’s attempt at diversification from its primary agricultural enterprises.<sup>16</sup>

The dissertation also analyses primary sources in the form of contemporary U.K. Parliamentary papers and newspaper reports. The former are high on the spectrum of reliability of primary sources as they are generally written to ascertain the facts of a situation, although still potentially coloured by the prejudices of the author(s). The British government took a ‘watching brief’ over the Welsh colony, without wanting to antagonise Argentina, where the British had considerable commercial interests.<sup>17</sup> Official U.K. reports of the condition of the Welsh colony often dispelled rumours and misinformation spread by those with vested interests, whereas it was not in the interest of the visiting Royal Navy officers or British officials to distort the facts. On the contrary, career advancement, or even careers themselves, depended on the accuracy and reliability of their reports submitted to Parliament. On the other hand, some of the newspaper reports cited are contradictory, exemplifying the potential unreliability of these sources.

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<sup>10</sup> R. Bryn Williams, *Y Wladfa* (Cardiff 1962).

<sup>11</sup> Lublin, *Memoir and Identity in Welsh Patagonia*, p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> John E. Baur, ‘The Welsh in Patagonia: An Example of Nationalistic Migration’, *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, 34.4 (1954), pp.468–492.

<sup>13</sup> Lublin, *Memoir and Identity in Welsh Patagonia*, pp. 4-10.

<sup>14</sup> Lucy Taylor, ‘Welsh–Indigenous Relationships in Nineteenth Century Patagonia: “Friendship” and the Coloniality of Power’, *Journal of Latin American studies*, 49.1 (2017), pp. 143–168.

<sup>15</sup> Taylor, ‘Global perspectives on Welsh Patagonia’, pp. 446-468.

<sup>16</sup> Jean Lindsay, ‘“Not Eldorado”: W.J. Parry and the Welsh Patagonian Goldfields Syndicate’, *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, 1996 (New Series, Vol. 3, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> Lublin, *Memoir and Identity in Welsh Patagonia*, p. 9.

Crucially, it seems that none of the existing historiography comes to a conclusion about the relative importance of the factors influencing the fate of the colony, or how that relative importance changed over time. These questions will be addressed in this essay. The chapters will deal, in turn, with the advantages enjoyed by the colony, the challenges it faced, and the way it responded to those challenges. The relative importance of the factors involved will be assessed and a conclusion reached about their impacts on the community in the thirty years after its foundation. The dissertation's findings will be summarised, and a suggestion made as to how they have contributed to the subject's historiography. The evidence presented will suggest that the support of the Argentine government and the ethos and cohesion of the Welsh community were the crucial factors in ensuring the colony's survival in the face of significant environmental and cultural challenge.

## CHAPTER 1: THE ADVANTAGES

The survival and ultimate prosperity of the Welsh colony in Patagonia would not have occurred without some of the advantages it enjoyed. First among these was the inspiration given by the founding father of the colony, Michael D. Jones (1822-98), a dynamic Welsh Congregationalist minister. He was a strong advocate of establishing a Welsh community in Patagonia, free from outside influence, to preserve Welsh culture, language and non-conformist religious independence. He was instrumental in setting up an Emigration Society in Liverpool in 1861<sup>18</sup> and funding a trip by Lewis Jones and Sir Love Jones-Parry to Argentina in 1862 so that they could negotiate with the Argentine government and determine the best location for the proposed colony.<sup>19</sup> Michael Jones also funded the 1865 voyage of the *Mimosa*, including fitting the vessel and subsidising the fares of the passengers.<sup>20</sup>

The Welsh settlers in Patagonia were imbued with a great sense of communal cohesion, generated by a shared nationalistic and religious ethos.<sup>21</sup> Lucy Williams paraphrases Fernando Williams' observation that the settlers 'understood the 'desert' of Patagonia as a space which set a test of their faith in God'.<sup>22</sup> Group solidarity was also ensured by the authority wielded by both family and chapel.<sup>23</sup> This undoubtedly helped them to overcome many of the challenges which would probably have overwhelmed other colonisers, as indeed had been the case in previous attempts by Europeans to settle in Patagonia.<sup>24</sup> One such abandoned settlement was the 'Old Fortress' near the mouth of the River Chubut, a collection of a few small houses surrounded by earth walls and a shallow moat. It had probably been built, then abandoned, by a group of European hunters in 1853. It was re-occupied by the first Welsh settlers to reach the Chubut valley in 1865, and from it developed the town of Rawson.

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<sup>18</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', p. 23-4.

<sup>19</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', p. 31.

<sup>20</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', p. 35, citing Bangor University Library manuscript #759 and Museo Regional de Gaiman manuscript #2.

<sup>21</sup> A. C. Woods, *Reports on Welsh Settlement at Chubut, in Argentine Republic* (London, 1897), p. 3..

<sup>22</sup> Taylor, 'Welsh-Indigenous Relationships in Nineteenth Century Patagonia', p. 161.

<sup>23</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', p. 187.

<sup>24</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', pp. 10-21 and 192.



The site had several advantages, including availability of fresh water, access to the sea (albeit by small boats) and elevated spits of land which were safe from flooding, although some of the Welsh houses built in Rawson in 1865 were on low lying land and washed away in a flash flood later in the year.<sup>25</sup> Farm steadings were quickly established in the valley, each consisting of a simple two or three room dwelling and storehouse; the dry climate meant that barns to house animals and harvested crops weren't necessary.<sup>26</sup> The valley extended for sixty miles inland, and was between three and six miles wide with rich alluvial soil.<sup>27</sup>

The settlement of Rawson was named in honour of Dr Guillermo Rawson, the Argentinian Interior Minister, who supported the Welsh colony from its outset, motivated by his desire to establish Argentinian sovereignty over Patagonia, which at the time was disputed by Chile.<sup>28</sup> He personally financed the initial 1865 survey of the Lower Chubut Valley, including a ceremony claiming the whole of Patagonia as Argentine territory. He also helped to secure the loyalty of the Welsh colony by supporting it with considerable government funds and supplies.<sup>29</sup> The 1865 survey allocated 500 farms of 100 acres each, on land that was deemed good for cultivation and pasture, and by 1866 settlers were living on the farms along a twelve-mile stretch of the Lower Chubut. The settlers had worked hard at building houses, cultivating the land, and constructing a ten-mile stretch of cart road towards Golfo Nuevo. Wheat and dairy were seen as potentially the most profitable agricultural enterprises, and potential resources included fish and game, animal skins and furs, and minerals, including salt.<sup>30</sup>

The soil was rich but very dry, which caused initial crop failures. This was partially solved in 1867 with the first attempts at irrigation. After four gruelling years, the colony finally produced a substantial wheat harvest in 1869, although much of it was lost in a flood before it could be transported.<sup>31</sup> This relative success, achieved after four years of trial and error, engendered renewed optimism in the colony and encouraged more Welsh families to emigrate, sponsored by the Emigration Society in Wales.<sup>32</sup> Some newcomers also arrived

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<sup>25</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', pp. 45-7.

<sup>26</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', pp. 48-51.

<sup>27</sup> H. Fairfax, *Reports from Captain H. Fairfax on Condition of Welsh Colony of Chuput, in Patagonia* (London, 1876), p. 1. Fairfax was the captain of *H.M.S. Volage*. He reported back to the British Admiralty in March 1876 about his visit, with the ship's surgeon, to the Welsh colony. Chuput was an earlier spelling of Chubut.

<sup>28</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', p. 30.

<sup>29</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', p. 55.

<sup>30</sup> R.G. Watson in *Correspondence respecting establishment of Welsh Colony in Patagonia* (London 1867), p. 26.

<sup>31</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', p. 53.

<sup>32</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', pp. 57-8.

from New York and the Welsh community in Pennsylvania.<sup>33</sup> The Argentine government offered assisted passages, as well as giving some settlers official title to their land and extended land grants. Between 1875 and 1876 the population of the colony more than tripled, to 690.<sup>34</sup> This rapid increase in the population of the Lower Chubut Valley generated a second township, Gaiman, higher up the valley.<sup>35</sup> It was sheltered from prevailing winds, not liable to flooding, and surrounded by fertile land. Suitable stone was available from the valley sides as building material. The site was apparently selected on the advice of the indigenous Tehuelche people.<sup>36</sup>

The first settlers had been issued with the *Handbook of the Welsh Colony*, written by Hugh Hughes. In it, he advised ‘we cannot disregard the rights of the Indians .... we should attempt to make friends of them’.<sup>37</sup> In December 1865 the settlers received a letter (translated by a Swiss naturalist) dictated by an indigenous cacique (chief) offering friendship and trade.<sup>38</sup> The first recorded face to face encounter happened on 19 April 1866 when Tehuelche Cacique Francisco visited the colony with his wife.<sup>39</sup> The assistance subsequently given to the Welsh by the Tehuelche was invaluable to the survival of the colony. In the early years, when food and supplies were short and harvests failed, the hunting techniques and horsemanship learned from the Tehuelche helped to keep them alive.<sup>40</sup> Francisco himself apparently took the Welsh under his wing on hunting expeditions, showing ‘kindness and patience with the inexperienced ‘gringos’; pioneering explorer John Daniel Evans referred to the Tehuelche as his ‘brothers of the desert’.<sup>41</sup> The relationship was built on mutual respect but also mutual self-interest: the two communities traded with each other, the Tehuelche offering game, horses, rugs and ostrich feathers in exchange for groceries, tobacco and spirits from the Welsh. The ‘Indian rugs’ and ostrich feathers made up nearly 50% of the value of

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<sup>33</sup> Williams, ‘The Desert and the Dream’, pp. 72 and 74.

<sup>34</sup> Williams, ‘The Desert and the Dream’, pp. 73-4.

<sup>35</sup> H. Fairfax, *Reports from Captain H. Fairfax on Condition of Welsh Colony of Chupat*, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Williams, ‘The Desert and the Dream’, p. 85.

<sup>37</sup> Lucy Taylor, ‘Welsh–Indigenous Relationships in Nineteenth Century Patagonia: “Friendship” and the Coloniality of Power’, *Journal of Latin American studies*, 49.1 (2017), p. 156.

<sup>38</sup> Watson in *Correspondence respecting establishment of Welsh Colony in Patagonia*, pp. 33-4. The author of the letter that Watson encloses asserts that he is cacique of the Pampa tribe, which he differentiates from the Tehuelche and ‘Chilenos’ (Araucans). However, most sources identify the Tehuelche as the indigenous group that interacted with the Welsh colony.

<sup>39</sup> Taylor, ‘Welsh–Indigenous Relationships in Nineteenth Century Patagonia’, pp. 148 and 156.

<sup>40</sup> R.P. Dennistoun in *Correspondence respecting Welsh Colony on River Chubut in Patagonia* (London 1871), p. 10.

<sup>41</sup> William Casnodyn Rhys and John Daniel Evans, memoirs quoted in Taylor, ‘Welsh-Indigenous Relationships in Nineteenth Century Patagonia’, pp. 157-8.

exports from the Welsh colony in 1875. Seal skins were also exported, the settlers hunting the seals by boat. The various advantages that the colony enjoyed enabled it to survive its first decade, to the extent that Captain Fairfax and Doctor Edwards, on their visit to the colony in 1876, found the settlers to be in good health, especially the children, thriving on a diet of dairy products and bread with occasional vegetables and meat. They visited most of the settlers and found them 'very content'.<sup>42</sup>

Wheat had become the mainstay of the colony's agricultural production, much of it taken to market by ship, thereby avoiding prohibitively expensive long overland transportation. The crop became even more profitable when Argentina introduced protective tariffs for wheat and flour in 1875.<sup>43</sup> An expanded irrigation system increased annual wheat production, which rose to 8000 tons by 1894.<sup>44</sup> The colony's economy received a further boost when funds were raised in Britain by Lewis Jones and others for the construction of a rail link from the Lower Chubut to the natural harbour at Puerto Madryn, a journey of forty miles that had previously been undertaken by small horse-drawn carts constructed from driftwood and willow. 462 people (all but three from Wales) arrived in 1886 to work on the railway, which was completed in 1889. This greatly facilitated the export of wheat and other commodities, and also the import of supplies that the colony needed from elsewhere.<sup>45</sup> The railway's terminus in the valley was determined by the topography, and was the focus of the colony's third settlement at Trelew, half way between Gaiman and Rawson. The site was at the centre of the wheat fields and had a good water supply.<sup>46</sup>

It is evident that the Welsh colony benefited from its shared ideals and ethos, from the support it received from the Argentine government and the indigenous people but above all from its own hard work and perseverance. However, the challenges it faced should not be underestimated, as the next chapter will elucidate.

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<sup>42</sup> H. Fairfax, *Reports from Captain H. Fairfax on Condition of Welsh Colony of Chupat*, pp. 2-3 and 8.

<sup>43</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', p. 59.

<sup>44</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', pp. 65-6.

<sup>45</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', pp. 81-82.

<sup>46</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', p. 86.

## CHAPTER 2: THE CHALLENGES

While the previous chapter has outlined the factors that helped to ensure the survival of the Welsh colony in Patagonia, the challenges they faced were considerable. Not least was the hostile environment that the first emigrants encountered when they disembarked from the *Mimosa* in 1865. Their parlous state was exaggerated in a sensational report in the *Liverpool Mercury*, based on one letter that it had received. It claimed that one third of them had ‘fallen prey to famine and want of water’ and that the ‘natives had acted very savagely’.<sup>47</sup> This was apparently corroborated by a report published the same day in the *Irish Times*,<sup>48</sup> but it seems likely that the two very similar reports were based on the same single source. These claims were subsequently refuted by a long article in the *Wrexham Advertiser*, reporting on letters from 20 of the settlers, which exposed the previous reports as fabrications, based on rumours spread by two men who had a vested interest in evacuating the Welsh colony to their own land concession further north in Argentina. The *Advertiser* report did mention the loss of a supply vessel and the difficulties the settlers had in finding their way in the new territory, but also asserted that they had a good supply of food and firewood and that they had encountered friendly natives who had rendered assistance.<sup>49</sup>

The emigrants had been enticed by promises of a fertile land, such as this report in the *Baner* newspaper of a lecture in Aberystwyth in 1863 given by Lewis Jones, a prime mover in the Emigration Society and eventual leader of the colony in Patagonia: he stated that ‘there is land to be pastured and farmed, wheat has been sown, one crop yielding 45 times the amount sown ... sheep weighing 300lbs are plentiful’.<sup>50</sup> What they found instead was a barren, arid semi-desert where the cold dry winds kept the soil temperature low, with bushes but very few trees, and scant areas of grass.<sup>51</sup> Captain Watson, a British diplomat, visited the colony in

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<sup>47</sup> Anon. ‘The Welsh Colony in Patagonia’, *The Liverpool Mercury*, 29 January 1866, p.5.

<sup>48</sup> Anon., ‘A Disastrous Account of a Newly Formed Welsh Colony in Patagonia’, *The Irish Times and Daily Advertiser*, 29 Jan 1866, p.3.

<sup>49</sup> Anon. ‘The Welsh in Patagonia’, *The Wrexham Advertiser*, 17 February 1866, p. 3.

<sup>50</sup> Williams, ‘The Desert and the Dream’, p. 34, citing a report in *Baner Ac Amserau Cymru* of 17 June 1863.

<sup>51</sup> Williams, ‘The Desert and the Dream’, pp. 40-2.

1866 and was scathing about the lack of planning and the way that the settlers had been misled, going so far as listing the promises in the prospectus and comparing them unfavourably with the reality on the ground. He also criticised the timing of the arrival, which was too late in the year to sow seed for a harvest early in the following year.<sup>52</sup>

The Mimosa landfall in Golfo Nuevo was not then deemed a suitable place for settlement, although families stayed there for up to eight weeks in crude shelters dug out of the soft rock while the men cleared a track through the scrub so that their livestock and provisions could be moved forty miles over the plateau to the preferred site at the mouth of the River Chubut, a location difficult to access by sea. The task was made more arduous by the lack of fresh water on the route, and the difficulty in preventing their livestock from straying.<sup>53</sup> The backgrounds of many of those first settlers did not prepare them well for lives as agricultural pioneers in a new territory. There were only four farm labourers and one farmer.<sup>54</sup> The majority, 92, came from the South Wales coalfield or English urban centres, and others came from the north Wales slate quarries. Whatever farming experience the group shared was of little benefit in an environment so different from their homeland.<sup>55</sup> One of their fundamental initial mistakes was the lack of appreciation of the need to irrigate their land, which led to crop failures; starvation was averted by fishing and hunting wild game, and reliance on the provisions they had brought with them, although by the end of 1865 almost all their livestock had been slaughtered, died or strayed. Paradoxically, it was not a lack of water but an excess of it that destroyed the fifty acres of potatoes and maize when the river flooded and ruined the crop at the end of the first year. By this time there was only sufficient food left for four months and Lewis Jones, leader of the colony, sailed to Buenos Aires and secured assistance from the government, including two consignments of provisions that arrived by sea in early 1866. He also attempted to bring 200 cattle from Buenos Aires, but those that made it to the Chubut soon strayed due to a lack of fencing.<sup>56</sup> The hardships resulted in a petition, apparently signed by nineteen people, to the British Governor of the Falkland Islands in early 1866, requesting evacuation because of their 'state of destitution'. This triggered the dispatch of R.G. Watson on board *H.M.S. Triton* in June 1866 on a fact-finding mission to the colony. He found the settlers in a good state and concluded that the petition was essentially a forgery.

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<sup>52</sup> Watson in *Correspondence respecting establishment of Welsh Colony in Patagonia*, pp. 24-25 and 31.

<sup>53</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', pp. 43-4.

<sup>54</sup> Alexander Turnbull in *Correspondence respecting Welsh Colony on River Chubut in Patagonia* (London 1871), p. 15.

<sup>55</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', p. 35.

<sup>56</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', pp. 52-5.

He was assured by the vast majority of the settlers that they wanted to stay and that there were no grounds for evacuation, but noted that there were twenty fewer than had arrived on the *Mimosa*.<sup>57</sup> The crew of the *Triton* helped with the repair of the settlers' only sea-going vessel and donated a roll of flannel to replenish the settlers' clothing supplies.<sup>58</sup>

Nevertheless, the prospects for the colony remained uncertain, as highlighted by a report in *The Scotsman* newspaper in October 1868, based largely on U.K. Parliamentary reports, which concluded with the gloomy prediction that 'the fate of the hapless colony would [imminently] be determined one way or the other'.<sup>59</sup> With the support of the Argentine government, the colony did survive and finally achieved a good harvest in 1869, although much of this was lost in another flood before it could be transported.<sup>60</sup> Concerns were then raised in Britain when fighting broke out in 1870 between indigenous people and settlers 400 miles north of the Welsh colony, and nothing had been heard from the colony for ten months.<sup>61</sup> In April 1871 a Royal Navy warship was again sent to investigate, and Captain Dennistoun was able to allay fears of conflict, reporting that a visit from 300 Tehuelche had passed without incident, except some rowdiness after the settlers had given them alcohol. He also reported, however, that drought had resulted in poor harvests since 1869 because the irrigation channels were too shallow; that there were only seven sheep left; and that the settlers were running short of food and clothing. There was also a shortage of timber for building and fencing. Despite this, none of the settlers asked to leave. They were surviving on bread, butter, milk and game meat. There was no school, and one makeshift church with a volunteer Nonconformist minister. Dennistoun was able to leave some food and soap, and coal for the blacksmith. There was a request for further supplies of seed and sheep, and a government subsidy to pay a school teacher.<sup>62</sup>

There was another influx of settlers in the mid-1870s, supported and sponsored by the Emigration Society. Captain Fairfax, on his visit in 1876, reported that 412 newcomers had arrived between September 1875 and February 1876, dramatically swelling the total population to 690. Unfortunately, the existing settlers had not received notice of their arrival

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<sup>57</sup> Watson in *Correspondence respecting establishment of Welsh Colony in Patagonia* p. 26.

<sup>58</sup> Watson in *Correspondence respecting establishment of Welsh Colony in Patagonia* p. 35.

<sup>59</sup> Anon., 'The Welsh Colony in Patagonia', *The Scotsman* 23 Oct 1868, p.5.

<sup>60</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', p. 53.

<sup>61</sup> George Richards in *Correspondence respecting Welsh Colony on River Chubut in Patagonia* (London 1871), p.7.

<sup>62</sup> R.P. Dennistoun and Dr. Turnbull in *Correspondence respecting Welsh Colony on River Chubut in Patagonia* (London 1871), pp. 9-21.

and had made no preparations or stored extra food for them. The lack of accommodation meant that the new arrivals had to lodge with the established families. The situation was made worse by another harvest failure in 1876, due to low river levels, lack of water in the canals and consequent lack of irrigation. Although the Argentine government did send supplies, they also sent a government commissary which dented the colony's aspirations to self-government. The new settlers had not been allocated any land, a situation complicated by the fact that there was a delay in granting title deeds to the original settlers on the land they occupied.<sup>63</sup> This chaotic situation generated criticism in some quarters, not least by the Argentine and British governments. The former refused further aid unless the Welsh agreed to relocate from the Chubut to a more benign region of Argentina, although it later relented. Lewis Jones, against his principles, also appealed for help from the British government, which denied the request for fear of antagonising the Argentine authorities and advised against further emigration to Patagonia. Opponents in Wales claimed (wrongly) that the settlers were dying of thirst, and pressed (unsuccessfully) for the leaders of the Emigration Society to be prosecuted.<sup>64</sup>

Watson, on his visit in 1866, had noted that the doctor who had gone out on the *Mimosa* only stayed for four months. Doctor Bolster, who accompanied Watson, was called on to treat some of the settlers.<sup>65</sup> Doctor Edwards, the ship's surgeon who accompanied Fairfax ten years later, found the settlers to be generally healthy, although he did note that there had been outbreaks of whooping cough in 1871, measles in 1872 and influenza in 1876. There was still no qualified doctor in the community. Many of the houses, he found, were infested with fleas.<sup>66</sup> Woods, another Royal Naval officer, visited in 1896 and reported a smallpox outbreak the previous year, resulting in the deaths of six settlers, and bemoaned the continuing lack of a resident doctor.<sup>67</sup>

The influx of new settlers in the 1870s included a higher percentage of farmers. This resulted in improved irrigation and other adaptations to the environmental conditions, and eventually increased agricultural production and an improvement in the economic viability of the colony. Profits, however, were reduced by the price-fixing practices of the merchants who were buying the colony's produce, resulting in a breakdown of trust with these merchants.

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<sup>63</sup> H. Fairfax, *Reports from Captain H. Fairfax on Condition of Welsh Colony of Chupat*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>64</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', pp. 70-1.

<sup>65</sup> Watson in *Correspondence respecting establishment of Welsh Colony in Patagonia*, p. 33 and 35.

<sup>66</sup> Fairfax, *Reports from Captain H. Fairfax on Condition of Welsh Colony of Chupat*, pp. 3-8.

<sup>67</sup> Woods, *Reports on Welsh Settlement at Chubut, in Argentine Republic*, pp. 3-6.

This led to the establishment in 1885 of an agricultural Cooperative Society in the valley, which had a stronger negotiating position with the merchants.<sup>68</sup> The other major impediment to profitability was the difficulty and cost of transporting produce to market, although this was alleviated by the completion of the rail link to Golfo Nuevo in 1889.<sup>69</sup> All the productive land in the Lower Chubut became occupied as the population increased and ambitious young men and families looked further afield for farms of their own, a search that led to the establishment of the second colony of Cwm Hyfryd in 1885.<sup>70</sup>

The Welsh settlers had to come to adopt a paternalistic and at times protective attitude to the Tehuelche, a position which set them at odds with the Argentine military who waged a genocidal campaign, the ‘Conquest of the Desert’, against the native people between 1879 and 1885.<sup>71</sup> A tragic incident occurred in 1883 which was untypical of the generally good relationship that the Welsh had had with the indigenous people. It is thought that a group of indigenous Araucans had been driven south by the military that year, and in their retreat ambushed four young Welshmen, three of whom were killed. The only survivor, John Daniel Evans (the same man who later referred to the Tehuelche as his ‘brothers of the desert’), escaped due to his knowledge of the area and the endurance of his horse, Malacara, to whom he later erected a monument. This was apparently the first violent encounter that the Welsh had had with the native people in the eighteen years since their arrival.<sup>72</sup> It did not seem to destroy the settlers’ empathy for the indigenous population, as evidenced by their criticism of the Railway Company’s chief engineer A.P Bell in 1887 for his treatment of the natives, whom he had subjected to humiliating treatment and confiscated their possessions.<sup>73</sup> The persecution of the Tehuelche, however, meant the end of the mutually beneficial relationship that they had enjoyed with the Welsh colony.

The 1880s saw increasing interference by Argentine authorities in the colony’s educational and administrative institutions. Obligatory state schooling was introduced, teaching in the medium of Spanish, and these schools emphasised Argentinian citizenship over and above Welsh identity. Imposition of Argentine political authority undermined the self-administration and founding constitution of the Welsh colony, which has been claimed to be the first true

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<sup>68</sup> Williams, ‘The Desert and the Dream’, pp. 79-80.

<sup>69</sup> Williams, ‘The Desert and the Dream’, p. 89.

<sup>70</sup> R. Bryn Williams, *Gwladfa Patagonia* (Llanrwst 2020), p. 89.

<sup>71</sup> Taylor, ‘Welsh–Indigenous Relationships in Nineteenth Century Patagonia’, p. 162.

<sup>72</sup> Williams, ‘The Desert and the Dream’, pp. 104-5 and Richard Bryn Williams, ‘Evans, John Daniel (1862 - 1943), a pioneer in Patagonia’, *Dictionary of Welsh Biography* (2001).

<sup>73</sup> Williams, ‘The Desert and the Dream’, p. 107.



democracy in South America, although the assertion that women had been included in the electorate has recently been challenged.<sup>74</sup> Further erosion of Welsh culture occurred as a result of an increase in immigration from people of southern European origin from 1885. They filled roles as administrators, tradesmen, craftsmen and labourers.<sup>75</sup> The impact on the Welsh community was summed up by John Spears in 1895:

The Welsh youngsters indeed have grown up to look with pride to the broad blue and white stripes of the flag under which they were born. They are children of the desert . . . ; and they speak of it with the soft vowels of Castilian, rather than the consonant of the Welsh.<sup>76</sup>

The problems that the colony faced were therefore numerous: the environment, lack of appropriate skills, isolation, shortage of supplies, along with commercial, cultural, bureaucratic and political challenges, to name but a few. The ways that the settlers met and, in many cases, overcame these challenges will be outlined in the next chapter.

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<sup>74</sup> Lublin, *Memoir and Identity in Welsh Patagonia*, p. 9. The research that Lublin cites is by F. T. Gonzalez, in his 2014 paper 'Las Constituciones de Y Wladfa'.

<sup>75</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', pp. 149 and 185.

<sup>76</sup> John Spears, cited in Baur, 'The Welsh in Patagonia', p. 491.

### CHAPTER 3: THE RESPONSES TO CHALLENGE

The spirit of cooperation in the Welsh community stood them in good stead, with a division of labour based on individual skills. Those few who came from a farming background helped to cultivate the land for neighbouring craftsmen, who in return helped to construct their dwellings. The women took on the traditional roles of housework, milking, butter and cheese production, and tending the kitchen garden. Trade within the community, and then with the Tehuelche, was predominantly based on a bartering system. A shortage of equipment was partly overcome by corporate ownership. The objective of the community was to administer themselves as a self-sufficient unit with minimal assistance or interference from elsewhere, but the settlers soon realised that ongoing support from the Argentine government was necessary, in the form of livestock, provisions and money.<sup>77</sup> It was probably only the inspirational leadership of Lewis Jones and others, with their strong nationalistic, religious and ethical ethos, that sustained the colony in those difficult early years and persuaded the majority of settlers to persevere. For some, the even harsher economic alternative of a return to their homeland probably played a part in their willingness to remain.<sup>78</sup>

The major breakthrough (literally) in the development of sustainable cultivation occurred in 1867 when a farmer, despairing at the sight of his withering wheat crop, cut a channel from the river to water his crop which then produced the valley's first wheat harvest. The value of irrigation was then, if belatedly, recognised and each farmer irrigated his land as best he could by digging canals and constructing sluice gates and low earth walls to retain the water.<sup>79</sup> The cooperation required in these projects led to the formation in 1871 of the Irrigation Society, which organised the construction of a canal network and ensured that the benefits were fairly distributed.<sup>80</sup> Shortage of labour delayed work on the network, but the wave of new immigrants in 1875-6 allowed rapid progress. Each farm paid a subscription to the Irrigation Society to cover maintenance of the canals. Canal construction continued, and by 1892 three main canals totalling 87 miles had been completed along the valley, with a

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<sup>77</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', pp. 53-4 and 62.

<sup>78</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', p. 58.

<sup>79</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', pp. 62-3.

<sup>80</sup> Glyn Williams, 'Incidence and Nature of Acculturation within the Welsh Colony of Chubut: a Historical Perspective', *April Meeting of Kroeber Anthropological Society* (1967), p.75.

network of 100 miles of secondary canals.<sup>81</sup> Three cooperatively owned windmills and one flour mill were in operation by the mid-1880s. Animal husbandry was limited by the lack of fencing, due to the shortage of timber and also the uncertainty over farm boundaries, which was rectified during the 1890s.<sup>82</sup>

Another significant joint venture was the establishment of the Cooperative Society in 1885. This was set up because the Welsh farmers perceived that they were not being given a fair price for their produce by the merchants based in Buenos Aires. Farmers earned credit at the Coop for the produce they supplied, which was then pooled to give the Coop a stronger bargaining position with the merchants. Transport costs were reduced when the Coop rented vessels to transport the produce from Puerto Madryn to Buenos Aires, where it was able to bulk buy supplies at wholesale prices to bring back and sell in the colony. During the 1890s the Coop started to ship the wheat directly to Britain in years when it commanded higher prices there than in Buenos Aires. Due to its influence in the farming community, the Coop was able to instigate swift changes and diversification in agricultural production to take advantage of the changing market prices of agricultural commodities. The profits of the Coop were distributed annually among the shareholders, yielding at times an annual return of up to 20 per cent. It also sponsored social events and supported communal projects.<sup>83</sup>

The difficulties in transporting produce to market were eased by the construction of the railway between Trelew and Puerto Madryn, completed in 1889. The work was undertaken by new immigrants from Wales and Italy and the British engineer A. P. Bell was appointed to oversee the project.<sup>84</sup> The railway, along with the irrigation network and the Cooperative Society, helped to establish the economic viability of the colony in the 1880s and attract new immigration which in turn further increased the labour force and economic potential of the community.<sup>85</sup> Agricultural improvements resulted in wheat harvests of very high quality, one producer winning gold medals in international shows in Chicago and Paris in 1885.<sup>86</sup> The prosperity of the community was reflected in the agricultural show at Trelew, held every year on 1<sup>st</sup> March (St. David's Day), at which valuable prizes were on offer for the best exhibits.<sup>87</sup> As Glyn Williams observed, perhaps rather subjectively, the Lower Chubut Valley was the

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<sup>81</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', pp. 64-5 and 162.

<sup>82</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', pp. 67-8 and 80.

<sup>83</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', pp. 80, 165-9 and 184.

<sup>84</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', pp. 81-2.

<sup>85</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', p. 91.

<sup>86</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', p. 66.

<sup>87</sup> H. Cochran, *Reports on Welsh Settlement at Chubut, in Argentine Republic* (London, 1900), p. 8.

most mechanised rural community in Argentina by the late 1890s and one of the most productive in South America.<sup>88</sup> Commander Woods, from *H.M.S. Acorn*, who visited in November 1896, found the settlers to be ‘in a prosperous condition’ and ‘looked contented and healthy’ with good housing. Telephone and telegraph connection had been established between Trelew and Puerto Madryn. There were now ten ministers of religion of various denominations and twelve schools.<sup>89</sup>

As the population of the Lower Chubut increased and all the productive land was occupied, the need arose to find another area that could be economically colonised. Expeditions were sponsored by the government as a way of establishing Argentine sovereignty throughout Patagonia, and also assisted by indigenous guides, who showed the Welsh explorers the trails that guaranteed water supplies on their journeys. Eventually a region in the foothills of the Andes was discovered in 1885, and this fertile area, named Cwm Hyfryd (Pleasant Valley) became the second Welsh colony in Patagonia, giving rise to the townships of Esquel and Trefelin.<sup>90</sup> The entrepreneurial spirit which drove the exploration for new land also inspired a few enterprising individuals to seek their fortunes prospecting for gold. Inspired by the stories of fortunes made in the Californian gold rush, they hoped to find another El Dorado in the west of Patagonia. In 1890 a substantial gold strike was reported and subsequently verified by two mining experts from Wales. A minor gold rush ensued and in 1892 the Welsh Patagonia Goldfield Syndicate was established, with shareholders in Britain. However, lack of suitable machinery and disagreements led to collapse of the project.<sup>91</sup> Another company, the Phoenix Patagonia Mining Company was formed in 1893, owned exclusively by members of the Welsh colony. It sponsored extensive explorations but with poor financial returns.<sup>92</sup> By 1899, the gold workings had ceased.<sup>93</sup>

The various expeditions that the Welsh had launched from their base in the Lower Chubut Valley meant that by the end of the century they had visited almost every part of northern Patagonia. The pioneering spirit which underpinned these expeditions is exemplified by this quote from one of the explorers: ‘The exhilarating sensation of wild freedom behind a troop

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<sup>88</sup> Glyn Williams, cited in Lublin, *Memoir and Identity in Welsh Patagonia*, p. 8.

<sup>89</sup> Woods, *Report on the Welsh Settlement in Chubut*, pp.3 and 6.

<sup>90</sup> Williams, ‘The Desert and the Dream’, pp. 88 and 99 .

<sup>91</sup> Lindsay, ‘“Not Eldorado”: W.J. Parry and the Welsh Patagonian Goldfields Syndicate’, pp. 136-163.

<sup>92</sup> Williams, ‘The Desert and the Dream’, pp. 109-11.

<sup>93</sup> Cochran, *Reports on Welsh Settlement at Chubut, in Argentine Republic*, p. 8.

of fresh and frisky horses was experience we enjoyed, leaving civilisation behind us and facing the western wilds'. The first settlers had been fearful of attack from the indigenous people and established a volunteer militia of thirty men. Their initial view of the interior as a hostile wilderness, populated by roving bands of dangerous savages, was modified fairly quickly when they realised that the Tehuelche, far from being a threat, could be of great help in surviving those difficult first few years and then in utilisation of resources that enabled them to live and travel in the hinterland. Mutual trust developed between the two very different peoples, with the Welsh adopting an almost paternalistic attitude to the Tehuelche, going so far as to protect them from the Argentine military during the latter's genocidal 'Conquest of the Desert' in the 1870s and 1880s. The settlers' understanding of the environment of the interior was also improved by the scientific attitude of many of the Welsh explorers, derived either from formal training or from extensive reading on subjects such as botany and geology.<sup>94 95</sup> One of the foremost explorers was Llwyd ap Iwan, son of founding father Michael D. Jones. He was a trained surveyor, and left meticulous records of the areas he travelled through, which were extensive. In 1894, motivated by the ongoing pressure on land resources in the Lower Chubut, he led a Welsh expedition to an area 400 miles south of Cwm Hyfryd and proposed an ambitious irrigation system there which would have allowed the establishment of 700 new farms near the border with Chile. The Argentine government unfortunately withdrew its support due to border tensions with Chile and the project never reached fruition. Other enterprising Welshmen did, however, set up scattered holdings throughout Patagonia by the turn of the century, an important factor in support of Argentina's claims in that border dispute.<sup>96</sup>

Towards the end of the century, the influx into the Lower Chubut Valley of non-Welsh people, especially Catholics of southern European origin, challenged the hegemony of the Welsh culture, language and religion. This challenge was resisted by the spirit of cohesion among many of the Welsh settlers. Welsh continued to be the language spoken in the home and chapel, and marriage outside the Welsh community was discouraged. Welsh language publications from the homeland were widely read in the colony,<sup>97</sup> and there were local Welsh language newspapers, *Y Brut* (1868), *Ein Breiniad* (1878-89) and *Y Drafod* (from 1891).<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Taylor, 'Welsh-Indigenous Relationships in Nineteenth Century Patagonia', pp. 144-5 and 150.

<sup>95</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', pp. 113-6.

<sup>96</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', pp. 136-7.

<sup>97</sup> Williams, 'The Desert and the Dream', pp. 185-6.

<sup>98</sup> Taylor, 'Welsh-Indigenous Relationships in Nineteenth Century Patagonia', p. 145.

Welsh choirs and cultural events, such as eisteddfods and the Gorsedd of bards, were enthusiastically maintained.<sup>99</sup> It was this determination to protect their culture, along with their pioneering spirit and hard work, that enabled the settlers to meet the challenges they faced and ensure the survival of the colony.

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<sup>99</sup> R. B. Williams, *Gwladfa Patagonia*, p. 86.

## CONCLUSION

There were many factors influencing the successes and failures of the Welsh community in the Lower Chubut Valley. Evidence has been presented above that the colony would not have survived without, arguably, the two most important positive factors: the support of the Argentine government, especially in the early years; and the social cohesion, ingenuity and work ethic of the Welsh settlers themselves. These two principal advantages, along with the peaceful and mutually beneficial relationship the colony maintained with the indigenous Tehuelche people, helped it to overcome the very significant environmental, political and cultural challenges that it faced. Much has been written previously about the history of the colony, but approaching the subject from this novel angle has hopefully added usefully to the historiography.

Three key figures played their parts in this story: Michael D. Jones, provided the initial religious and nationalistic inspiration for the colony, and another Welshman Lewis Jones led it through its most difficult early years. A third man, Guillermo Rawson, the Argentine Minister of the Interior, played a vital early role in ensuring the nascent colony's survival in its first decade, providing invaluable logistical and financial support both at an official and a personal level. The efforts of the first settlers in a hostile environment were blighted by lack of skill and poor planning. The environmental challenges were considerable: droughts and floods all but destroyed the morale of the settlers. It was only their ingenuity and expertise in irrigating the dry but essentially fertile land that resulted in successful cultivation, and their resilience (with government support) that allowed them to recover from the disastrous floods. Their success was almost their own cultural undoing, as more non-Welsh immigrants were attracted to the valley; but the fact that there is still a vibrant Welsh culture in Patagonia today is testimony to their determination to avoid complete acculturation and retain a Welsh identity 7500 miles from their homeland.

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