

“Colonial Encounters at the Margins: the Welsh/Tehuelche in Patagonia “

Panel: Conceptualising IR from the Margins: Historically, Geographically and Beyond
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Lucy Taylor, Department of International Politics, Aberystwyth University.

lft@aber.ac.uk

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This paper reflects some initial thoughts on on-going research into the relationship between the Welsh and Indigenous Peoples in Patagonia. The aim is to explore the ambiguities of that relationship and to reveal fresh evidence and insight into indigenous experiences of settler colonialism in what is an unusual case.

The people now called Mapuche and Tehuelche had always lived in the region and practiced a nomadic, hunting life-style. The arrival of the Spanish brought horses which became central to their life-ways, economy and spiritual life. The Tehuelche had always traded with other Indigenous groups but now expanded this network to include settlers in northern Patagonia, later developing strong trading ties with the Welsh to the south (Bernal and Sanchez Proaño, 2007). Throughout, the Tehuelche retained control of vast expanses of land, from the sea shore, across the dry pampas, through fertile river valleys and into the mountains of the Andes. Unlike indigenous Nations to the north, on the eve of the Welsh arrival their autonomy was largely untroubled, their language and cultural life was unchallenged and they had no need to consider armed struggle in resistance to the encroaching realities of colonialism, capitalism and modernity (Gavirati, 2012; Williams, 2011).

Argentina became independent of Spain in 1820 but it was not until the 1860s that the now powerful Argentine state focused all its attention on taking control over the vast territories still ruled by Indigenous peoples. They embarked on the ‘Conquest of the Desert’, a series of wars which sought to subdue the ‘savage Indian’ and to appropriate indigenous lands, so that they might be set to work for the benefit of the new ‘Argentine Nation’ (Bartolomé, 2003). This land was understood to be a capitalist commodity, ripe for development, but also a space which must be drawn into the jurisdiction of the state and the European project of civilization (Quijada, 1999). For one influential

ideologue – Juan Alberdi – implanting capitalist modernity in the wilderness required the presence of people who embodied the Western project, thus he argued: ‘poblar es gobernar’, to populate is to govern (Alberdi, 2006 [1852]). President Sarmiento agreed, and aggressively promoted migration (Villavicencio, 2008).

It is into this ideological and social context that the first Welsh settlers arrived in 1865. This colony was part of a wider migration movement in Wales – and indeed the whole of Britain – driven by imperial expansion. British people migrated to the USA, Canada, Australia and South Africa. However, Welsh migration was also prompted by their sense of oppression by the ‘English’ government in London which denigrated Welsh people (Baur, 1954; Williams, 1975). England’s colonizing impulse to promote the English language, culture and social modes was applied to Wales, especially via language policy. Education, law and public administration was conducted in English, and the Welsh language was aggressively oppressed and disparaged (Roberts, 1998). Those Welsh speakers who migrated to the USA enjoyed a brief moment of cultural and religious freedom, but soon found that the next generation lost their Welsh language and culture, and that those who retained it, missed out on opportunities in the English-dominated colonial context. The answer, said Michael D. Jones, was to find a place where Welsh culture could flourish, where they might enjoy cultural and linguistic autonomy, govern themselves and generate economic prosperity for their own community (Jones, 1860). The Argentine state, on the look-out for White Western settlers, offered them the territory in Patagonia, which they took.

The relationship between the Tehuelche and the Welsh falls into two phases: before and after the Conquest of the Desert, the military offensive which brought holocaust to the indigenous and implanted the Argentine nation state in Patagonia (Williams, 1979). During the first phase, from 1865 to 1883, the two communities were juxtaposed and developed a complex interdependency, though conditioned by the norms of nineteenth century racial thinking. During the second phase, these binaries were solidified and violently imposed, obliging the Welsh to take sides. It was not without some regret and pity, though, that the Welsh recognised the full consequences of their position as colonizing settler in this vicious, binaried world.

To explore these dynamics, I will share some findings derived from studying the archives at the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth¹.

¹ I am hugely grateful for the help and kindness of the library staff; diolch yn fawr iawn i chi.

Initially, the early Welsh settlers were afraid of encountering 'Indians', imagining them to be fierce and hostile, and their first encounter was highly noteworthy. The sparse diary of Richard Ellis, for example, notes the passage of events thus:

"March 17th [1866] Present of a daughter, Mary Anne"

"April 19th first visit by two Indians"

"24th the family encamped, Y Plas Heddwch"

"March 2nd and 3rd and 4th planted seeds"

"12th Brother J and self killed a puma"

"August 11th First tribe of Indians on [??] side of river"

"20th Second tribe of Indians came down north side"

A peaceable co-existence soon emerged though, as is conveyed vividly by the reminiscences of Welsh farmer and missionary, Jonathan Ceredig Davies:

"I remember when I first landed [in 1875 at the age of 16] at the colony in Patagonia these Indians were to be seen everywhere about the Welsh colony and on most friendly terms with the settlers. They visited some of the houses to beg for bread or to trade "poco bara compañoero" they used to say on coming to a door or entering a Welshman's house, and though gigantic as they looked in their strange long cloaks of wild beast's skins, painted red, they were so harmless that even a woman at home alone was not afraid. They were so fond of the Welsh settlers' bread and praised it so much that every Indian all over the country for 1000 miles soon became to know the meaning of the Welsh word 'bara'" (p268-9).

This portrayal speaks of familiarity, of a still present wonder/alarm at their appearance coupled with a relief at their lack of ferocity. This combination of a perceived cultural savagery alongside a lack of violence hints at not only relief but also a kind of impotency, which is both sexual ("even a woman at home...") and cultural 'they are so harmless...'. Davies also marks the Tehuelche as helpless – perhaps even child-like – by identifying them as 'begging bread', even though he recognises later that for the Tehuelche food is not property but something to be shared, saying: "their fire and food were free to all who came to see them" (p271). He is proud and pleased that they love something so simple but wholesome as Welsh bread, spreading its word across the territory. The bread motif – often mentioned in the archives – may act as a kind of metaphor for the Welsh style of colonization, bringing a civilization that is simple and charitable, wholesome and superior, and imbued, of course, with rich Christian imagery.

However, in fact it was Tehuelche meat which saved the Welsh from starvation. Following harsh winter and poor harvests, the Tehuelche found the Welsh half starved, and not only provided meat but shared their knowledge of the game available (guanacos, ostrich, hares) and taught them the techniques required for effective hunting, as well as sharing their technology (especially the bolas) and their means of cooking – the asado. In return, the Welsh taught the Tehuelche how to bake bread. This situation of vulnerability and the generous disbursement of knowledge that followed destabilised the easy binaries of barbarity and civilization, offering a series of intellectual and personal openings, and some Welshmen became expert at tracking, exploring and survival in the pampas, such as Llwyd ap Iwan and John Daniel Evans. More generally, indigenous knowledge of the landscape was valued and utilised; time and again accounts of journeys follow ‘Indian paths’, cross rivers by the ‘Indian Crossing’ and camp on their old campsites. Such knowledge was sometimes shared willingly, sometimes borrowed (as visible marks on the trail) and sometimes appropriated by coercion, but always valued, though mostly as a means of advantage and instrumental gain.

A fascinating vignette gives us a sense of the ambiguity characteristic of this period. One of the Caciques called Gallech had a son named Kingel who was sent by his father to school in the colony and became fluent in Welsh (p275, name spellings from Davies’ account). Gallech was sometimes invited by the lone representative of the Argentine state, Comisario Antonio Oneto, to dine. The purpose of such dinners is clear; Davies explains “Mr Oneto was very anxious to obtain from Gallech some reliable information concerning the interior of Patagonia, especially those parts that had not been trodden by the feet of white man”. However,

“unfortunately the government official and the Indian were not able to carry on much conversation together as Gallech knew no English and only a few words of Spanish. It is true that his son Kingel spoke Welsh with ease but Mr Oneto who was an Italian did not understand that language. In order to make up for this difficulty two interpreters had to take part in the proceedings, one of whom was a Welsh gentleman and the other being the son of the Indian chief himself. For instance in asking a question, Mr Oneto spoke in English to the Welshman, the Welshman spoke in Welsh to the son of the chief and the son spoke in the Indian language to his father. And in answering a question the chief spoken in Indian to his son, the son spoke in Welsh to the Welshman and the Welshman spoke in English to the Italian. Curious as it may seem, an interesting conversation was carried on for a long time in this singular and roundabout manner between the representative of the Argentine government and the Patagonian Indian chief. I was present in the room myself. The Indian spoke of some wonderful lakes far in the interior of the country which were then unknown

to White people but have since been discovered. Kingel, who is now a chief, never forgot his Welsh". (pp 276-278).

The context in which we find this conversation taking place is clearly oppressive in terms of the colonizing realities and future desires. Oneto seeks knowledge of the land as a representative of the Argentine government and its mission to control, populate and economically exploit Patagonia, and perhaps is on the look-out for opportunities of his own. Moreover, the social context – sitting around a dinner table – is one which disciplines the Tehuelche and forces them to utilise the technologies of Western modernity (napkins and forks) and obey its social conventions. However, there is no sense here that the Welsh colony, nor Comisario Oneto, is able to coerce Gallech into attending this dinner – throughout all the accounts, the Tehuelche seem to come and go as they wish. Gallech appears to have chosen to send his son to school (perhaps to equip him with strategic skills on behalf of the community) but withdrew him after a year, as Davies explains, “not wishing the boy to be ‘taught in the strange things of the white people’”. The relative parity of powerfulness in this particular setting – the lone Argentine official, the vulnerable Welsh settlement of families and the well-respected Cacique whose liberties are as yet untouched – is echoed in the three way translated conversation in which all three languages (Tehuelche, Welsh and English) have equal status. And all through this, not a word of Spanish is spoken.

This experience of relative parity was shattered, though, by the arrival of the Conquest of the Desert.

The conquest brought extreme violence to the Welsh/Tehuelche relationship. The actions of the Argentine state and its military imposed a context of open warfare and obliged the Welsh to be complicit in the imposition of racialised binaries and physical oppression of the ‘Indians’. Events recounted in Llwyd ap Iwan’s description of a surveying trip into the Andes in 1887, just three years after ‘Conquista’, open a revealing window onto the new scenario and its impact on relationships.

The materials consist of a small diary and a more extensive journal. The diary contains brief notes on the practicalities of travel and surveying, concerning horses, lists of workers, provisions, surveying and camp sites. The Welsh were accompanied on this trip by Tehuelche people who did the work of servants, and Argentine soldiers. The following excerpt gives us a sense of the trip:

“30 March – surveying and taking observations with 3 of the soliders...

4 April – Went out with Indians to hunt

16 April – Mr Bell and Pablo went to Rio Caranlewplm, 7 ½ leagues. Return of dark they saw tracks of Indians and soldiers prepare to kill the Indians”

17 April – March to Rio Caranlewplm. Rain, all wet. Gwersyllu yn nhyfryn lwl [...] according to Saiwaichin.

18 April – Get the boat ready... soldiers after the Indians, camp in an old camp of Indians, 1st watch Bell, 2nd watch Burmeister, 3rd watch.

24 April – “[...] found the soldiers return having captured the Indians”.

27 April – Tremain in camp. I get a talk with Saiwaichin.”

We can see here that the expedition was simultaneously marked by racial binaries and blurred relations. On the one hand, the Argentine soldiers were very clear that their job was to capture rebellious – that is, free – indigenous people and the idea of killing them has taken on a banal familiarity. On the other hand, the expeditionary party is enmeshed in the ‘Indian’ world: they go out with the ‘Indian Servants’ to hunt, Saiwaichin provides knowledge of the landscape and they camp in a former Indian Camp. However, ‘Indian’ knowledge was valuable only at the service of the Argentine state’s colonizing project.

The final entry here is intriguing. ‘I get a talk with Saiwaichin’ implies to me that he has wanted to talk to Saiwaichin – a person with an indigenous name – for a while but has somehow been prevented from doing so, perhaps by circumstance, by the interplay of social relations between the Tehuelche, Welsh and Argentinians, or by Saiwaichin’s reluctance. It implies to me that he has had something he wanted to ask or say, over and above the everyday talk of camp and hunting.

The Welsh were in an ambiguous position. They had not supported the Conquest of the Desert and indeed had unanimously agreed to defend the Tehuelche, on Cacique Sayhueke’s written request. The Welsh leader Lewis Jones tried to intercede on Tehuelche behalf, petitioning Buenos Aires, but the Welsh were ignored and were obliged to live with the consequences, as Llwyd ap Iwan’s account reveals. It continues:

1 May – March to Coral Sagmatta. Rain. One of the Indian girls being continually compelled by the Teniente to sleep with him this night escapes”.

The importance of this event in Llwyd ap Iwan’s mind is marked by the length of the sentence in what is a small diary with a cramped space for each day, just big enough for brief notes. I may be wrong but I sense his anger. What is clearer is that this sexual violation was common knowledge in the camp and had been occurring for some time.

We find further information in ap Iwan’s journal which he writes alongside the diary (written in Welsh; my translation).

“May 1st. We had had supper and were sitting in front of the fire when the Sergeant came to us, asking if we had seen an Indian girl, who had gone missing....A young girl she was, about thirteen or fourteen.... She was one of the most beautiful. They were all quite beautiful, but they were quite dirty *at the same time* [?] and the darker ones were yellow and ‘China’ [Asian-looking]. The Teniente had picked this girl – the reader will know what for – but she was having none of it, and the word was all around that she had pleaded with her father to kill her, rather than she be forced to go to him. She escaped tonight, but no one knew where to. However, she was found and everything carried on as before, except that from now on the men will be bound together in a line each night, in case they try to escape.”

This text reveals a great deal; it indicates that there were several women in the camp (indigenous women are entirely erased from all other accounts), and hints at the racialised ranking of perceived beauty in ap Iwan’s eyes. In particular, we perceive the dynamics of racial and gendered inequalities at work as the girl’s predicament and her vivid plea leap from the text, we glimpse the agonised conversation, the impossible position of the father and the anxieties of the community. We also see one of the consequences of this event – the binding of Tehuelche men at night. This glaring image of subjugation speaks of the Argentine army’s considerable capacity to exercise power and the racial/ethnic hierarchy that is imposed. More important, perhaps, is what we do not see and do not know. Reading the text, I wonder what happened to the girl and what her name was. Was she obliged to go to the Teniente? Did she resist and receive punishment? Did she bear his child? Did she escape? Did she dream of murdering him? Or, did she use this situation strategically to the advantage of her family?

While Llwyd ap Iwan does not follow her story, neither does he let this incident pass without expressing his opposition and disgust to the oppressive project as a whole:

“If many of the English knew the meaning of war in its different facets they would not be so ready to send their soldiers out to oppress nations. The killing and wounding of bodies is nothing to the pitifulness that follows, the crushed feelings, the violence and oppressions, the infections and diseases, famine, the destruction of families, separating children from their parents and the husband from his wife, humiliating people and a thousand and one other bitter lessons which will be revisited, sooner or later, on those who have caused all this. The married men, even though they are pagan without high civilised ideas, at the same time love their freedom and their wives and children, as was easy to see, when they had the freedom to come together, and their faces become sadder each day under the burden of humiliation”.

To me, this passage conveys his outrage and perhaps distress in the face of colonizing oppression – an oppression in which he is entangled. I wonder if the previous entry ‘got a talk with Saiwaichin’ is linked to this incident and, indeed, whether it sparked this uncharacteristic and passionate outburst in the journal. Is he repeating Saiwaichin’s words? He feels himself to be apart from the Argentine project of subjugation and his opening words “if many of the English knew” seems to try both to blame the English colonizing impulse for the horrors of colonization and also to set himself apart, as a Welshman, and gain comfort from this position. However, he does not defy Argentine authority and continues to play his allotted role the next day: “2 May – March 4 or 5 leagues down river”. In the end, as in so many texts, Llwyd ap Iwan is reduced by this colonizing/racializing context to the distancing trope of pity for the ‘poor Indians’.

The Welsh became caught up in the binaried processes typical of the nineteenth century, processes in which they acted as both the agent of imperialism and as its subject. The tropes of barbarism and civilization which underpinned Argentina’s nation-building project could contemplate no blurred identities or border-crossing relationships, and, thanks to their geographical origin and skin colour, they were drawn into the category of Argentine civilization. However, this meant that they must conform with the norms of the new nation state. For the Conquest of the Desert put an end to self government for not only the Tehuelche but also the Welsh. The official language of public engagement became Spanish and their children no longer learned lessons about the Welsh homeland in Welsh, but rather about the Argentine state in Spanish. They were on the ‘winning’ side of the colonizer/colonized divide, but nevertheless they lost their autonomy and saw their culture once again come under threat from a distant, hegemonic government which promoted a mono-cultural, mono-lingual society. They did not suffer attempted genocide, ethnic erasure, displacement, the loss of territory, racism and the annihilation of their way of life, as the Tehuelche did, but the Welsh too were disciplined and ethnically silenced by the advent of the Argentine state.

The story of Welsh colonization in Patagonia might be told as a binaried confrontation between colonizer and colonized, but my research reveals, I think, that this would do a disservice to both the Welsh and the Tehuelche. It would underestimate the powerfulness of the Tehuelche in the first twenty years of the colony, and leave no space for emotions such as friendship, admiration or gratitude. However, to turn the other way and imagine that the Welsh and Tehuelche relationship was one of happy and equal friendship is to ignore the way that dominant ideas about racial hierarchies – who was ‘naturally’ superior and who ‘naturally’ inferior shape those relationships, however cordial. The Welsh never doubted that their life-style was superior, that their religion was correct, that their morals exemplary and that they had a right to colonize the supposedly empty lands of the Chubut Valley, Patagonia. However, this ‘superiority’ is tempered by their own

experiences of cultural disparagement and linguistic oppression back home in Wales. From the outside looking in, the Welsh shifted place within the global binary of civilization/barbarism but as we have seen from the archives, it is clear that while such binaries acted powerfully on the Welsh they can in no sense capture the complex relations of those early years in Chubut.

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