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President Julio Roca and the Welsh Communities of Patagonia

Anne Fountain, *Peace College*



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Humberto López Cruz, Editor
University of Central Florida
Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures
PO Box 161348, Orlando, Florida 32708-1348

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ARTICLES

President Julio Roca and the Welsh Communities of Patagonia 1
Anne Fountain

La prosa modernista de Fabio Fiallo 12
Carlos X. Ardavin

Quotas R' Us: The Role of Sugar in US Relations
with the Trujillo Regime, 1947-1957 23
Michael R. Hall

Manlio Argueta: A "Committed" Third World Author 38
Robert K. Anderson

The Status of Women in Revolutionary Cuba:
An Examination of Education and Employment 50
Charlotte A. Cosner

From Peddlers to *Empresarios*:
The Lebanese in Latin America 65
Eric N. Baklanoff

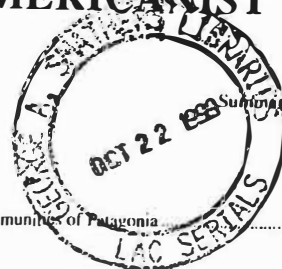
American Opposition to Puerto Rican Statehood:
The Politics of Culture 77
Diana Vélez

"Il Manzoni" en Cecilia Valdés 102
Cristina Guzzo

NEWS AND NOTICES 119

AWARDS 120

BOOK REVIEWS 121



ARTICLES

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PRESIDENT JULIO ROCA AND THE WELSH COMMUNITIES OF PATAGONIA

Anne Fountain
Peace College

At the southwestern corner of the Recoleta cemetery in Buenos Aires—on a quiet and shaded street—is a small museum/library dedicated to the memory of Julio A. Roca, President of Argentina from 1880-1886 and again in 1898-1904.¹ For many, Roca is best known for “La Campaña del Desierto,” a quasi extermination campaign, concluded in 1879, against dispersed Indian groups remaining in Argentina. At the same time, he, like other presidents of the Republic in the second half of the 1800s, showed a clear interest in encouraging European immigration as a way of populating lands in places like Patagonia and “civilizing” the nation as a whole.

Just a block away from the Roca museum, facing a busy avenue stands a modest but handsome monument dedicated to Guillermo Rawson, the illustrious statesman who did much to promote Welsh colonization in Argentine Patagonia and the man for whom the capital of Chubut province is named.² The Rawson monument, in addition to featuring a laudatory quote by Bartolomé Mitre, bears a plaque—given in 1965—to note the centenary of the foundation of the capital city of Chubut. This plaque, with a dedication by the province to “Guillermo Colesbery Rawson” shows the arrival of the Welsh pioneers to Patagonia and has the heading “Desembarco de los galeses/28 - julio - 1865.”

Seen simply as reflections of Argentine history which share the relative tranquility of an attractive neighborhood in Buenos Aires, the Roca library and the Rawson statue seem unlikely links for a little-known chapter in the immigration annals of Argentina. But, in fact, both Rawson and Roca gave special consideration to the Welsh; both are remembered with appreciation; and Roca is something of a hero to the Welsh community because a century ago he personally intervened in an important dispute involving their religious beliefs. The significance of Roca’s visits to the Welsh communities in Patagonia in 1899 is the focus of this article.

The Welsh communities in Patagonia had their origin in a colonizing effort dating from 1865 and conforming to a classic "push and pull" pattern of immigration to the New World. The push was fostered by Welsh yearnings to preserve language and heritage in the face of increasing English encroachment in the nineteenth century; the pull was provided by the desire of the Argentine government under President Bartolomé Mitre (1862-1868) to encourage European settlement. Welsh agents interested in immigration sent two men to investigate the options in Patagonia and these two men secured an interview with Guillermo Rawson, the Argentine minister of the Interior. The delegates paid a visit to the lands of the lower valley of the River Chubut and returned to Wales with hopeful reports.³ In 1865, the first colonizers from Wales arrived—a boatload of one hundred and fifty-three men, women, and children. Their vessel, the *Mimosa*, anchored at Golfo Nuevo, a large bay at the northernmost part of the Chubut region on July 28.⁴

The arrival was inauspicious. The Golfo Nuevo bay was so deep that it was difficult to find a place to drop anchor. The day was cold and rainy. The land which awaited the settlers was desolate, wind-whipped, and punished by sea salt. A single young man in the group who ventured off to look out over a hill never returned—his bones, clothing, and papers being discovered years later.⁵ The obstacles facing these first settlers were daunting. The land needed to be tilled, but few were farmers. Much of the soil was sandy and full of rocks, and arable land had to be retrieved from thorny scrub vegetation. Lack of drinking water was a problem, and the only other inhabitants in the area were Indians. Shortly after their arrival the colonizers said prayers over their first burial, a woman named Catherine Davies.⁶

Unbowed, the *Mimosa* passengers relocated to more fertile ground at the mouth of the Chubut River, where an Argentine official duly granted them formal possession of the lands—under the jurisdiction of Argentina whose flag was raised at the ceremony. The event in essence confirmed Minister Rawson's expectation of the colonization: that it would help establish the effective domain of the Republic and would cause the Argentine flag to fly over lands which had been desolate and unpopulated.⁷

Alone except for the Indians in the new lands to the south of their site of disembarkation, the Welsh colonizers gave their first

permanent settlement the name Rawson, in honor of the official who had promoted the settlement and created specifically for them the first Argentine agricultural and cattle-raising colony.⁸ The settlers began in earnest to adjust to the new soil and climate and conditions of farming improved after artificial irrigation was instigated.⁹ In the decisive first years the Welsh learned to trade with the Indians and to tame the initially inhospitable terrain, making peace with Patagonia—both its natives and its nature.

Although the Welsh had to rely a great deal on a spirit of self sufficiency, in the first decade they did receive some provisions from the Argentine government in the form of grains, livestock, cash subsidies, and even weapons for defense against the Indians.¹⁰ The Indians, however, proved to be allies rather than enemies: they aided the Welsh by giving meat and hides in exchange for bread, sugar and cotton cloth, and they further helped the newcomers by serving as teachers in regard to the local flora and fauna. Thanks to the Indians, the Welsh learned how to use lariats and "boleadoras" and to make use of a sturdy "quillango" or fur blanket for the vicissitudes of inclement weather. By all indications the two groups co-existed fairly well, and instances of "malones" or Indian attacks were rare. The major dilemma the Welsh faced in bartering with the Indians was whether or not to trade alcohol. Although the religious beliefs of the Welsh community argued strongly against such a trade, eventually the lucrativeness of the exchange proved persuasive.¹¹

Essentially, the Welsh were in an isolated part of the Republic, separated from the north by a strip of land subject to raids and attacks by the Araucano Indians. Little help came from across the Atlantic, and scant attention was given by Buenos Aires. The colony dwindled in number to barely one hundred before their ranks were replenished thanks to the efforts of Pastor Abraham Matthews who journeyed to both Wales and the United States in search of new settlers. In 1874 the colony was bolstered with eighty-four new members from both North America and Wales, and with the foundation of a second town, Gaiman, the Welsh communities in Argentina began a period of growth and stability.¹²

While the Welsh were expanding Argentina's frontiers to the south, the host country was engaged in a campaign against the Indians the "Conquista del Desierto," which was not concluded until 1879 by General Julio A. Roca who began his first term as

Argentina's president the following year.¹³ Additionally, the Paraguayan war of 1865 to 1870 absorbed national resources and the national government basically ignored the Welsh colonies during the initial decades of their existence. The Welshmen were free to practice their religion, something guaranteed by Argentina's 1853 constitution, and they formed their own local governance.¹⁴

The relative degree of isolation afforded the immigrants from Wales a period of political autonomy which lasted for nearly thirty years. Their self-governance was orderly and democratic, managed with a Council of twelve members, a president, justice of the peace, secretary, and treasurer. There were also two tribunals—one for justice and one for arbitration—and a rudimentary constitution. The Council functioned with meetings which were called to resolve problems and voting was secret with both men and women participating.

With time, living conditions improved dramatically. Familiarity with the land and the control of the Chubut river to create irrigation canals produced good crops, especially grains, which were sold in Buenos Aires and exported to Europe.¹⁵ Sheep tending and cattle raising were promoted and the Welsh became known for their acumen in breeding and trading horses.¹⁶ The early homes of wood and mud plaster were replaced with real houses complete with red roofs, and rail transportation, begun in the 1880s, connected the Valley of Chubut to the coast.¹⁷

Welsh expansion fostered by success in settlement and a continuing influx of new arrivals until 1911, followed a cooperative path with Argentine national consolidation. Under President Roca Argentina organized the national territories into jurisdictions which would become provinces when they reached a population of 60,000. Chubut was one of the governmental units created by the 1884 law and soon became a province, receiving its first governor, Luis Jorge Fontana, at the end of the same year.¹⁸

To the early towns of Rawson and Gaiman were added Trelew and Puerto Madryn, and in 1888 the Welsh also moved westward to form a new colony the "Colonia 16 de octubre" at the foot of the Andes. The great flood of the Chubut Valley in 1899 caused additional dispersion, and after the ravages of the flood waters another group of Welsh moved north to the province of Rio Negro at the invitation of its governor.¹⁹

Welsh incursions to the west proved favorable to Argentina. Much of the exploration of western Patagonia was accomplished by Welsh pioneers although they have not received appropriate recognition for their efforts.²⁰ Further, when the British arbiter of Argentina's turn-of-the-century border dispute with Chile asked the Welsh colonizers of the Andes valleys which country the lands belonged to, Argentina or Chile, the Welsh response seemed to confirm the adage of Argentina's political thinker, Juan Bautista Alberdi: "gobernar es poblar."²¹ The Welsh declared that they had come under the Argentine flag and that they wished to remain under its banner, thus giving a boost to Argentine claims to the region.²²

Welsh settlements stabilized by the early part of the twentieth century, and by this time they had expanded north and west and had experienced success in both agriculture and livestock raising. The colonizers had adapted to the New World environment and yet maintained the language and tradition of Wales to a remarkable degree. Within the first fifty years the Welsh settlers had made the previously uncultivated Chubut Valley into one of the most fertile and productive zones of Argentina and had made the entire Patagonian area more attractive to other European immigrants.²³ The forbidding site of disembarkation for the first settlers, became a thriving city and bustling port—Puerto Madryn. The vigor and independence of the initial period of Welsh colonization was strong enough that much of the populace still retained a strong cultural identity with the Celtic homeland when the colony's centenary was celebrated in 1965.²⁴

The Welsh as immigrants proved to be of considerable benefit to Argentina—helping to realize the expectations of a number of her most illustrious thinkers—among them Sarmiento, Rawson, and Alberdi—and following a course of development and expansion in harmony with Argentina's national interests. Only in two major ways did the Welsh communities seek a course of action that departed from the policies of the host country: first, they differed in their treatment of the Indians and, second, they refused to break the Sabbath to follow the rules for military practice.

The Welsh treatment of and interaction with the native Indian population stands in stark contrast to that of Argentine national politics and policies. While General Roca's military expedition slaughtered, conquered, or pushed onto reservations the Tehuelches

and Araucanians of the southern frontiers, the colonizers from Wales consciously, consistently, and compassionately cultivated peaceful relations with the Indians.²⁵ The difference in treatment of Indians between the Welsh and others in Argentina is further underscored by English accounts which claim that while others in Patagonia whipped and robbed Indians who became inebriated, the Welsh simply helped Indians who had gotten drunk to sober up in a quiet place.²⁶

The one major instance of a Welsh clash with the Indians is a dramatic one—the story of John Daniel Evans—and it is in essence the exception that proves the rule. This episode of 1884 involved four young Welshmen who had traveled far west and were surprised by an Indian attack. Only Evans with his noble horse “Malacara” was able to escape, and a return expedition in search of the other three found only their mutilated remains. The Evans-Malacara saga has been described vividly by a woman writer from the Welsh community in Argentina, Eluned Morgan,²⁷ and reports circulate in Chubut that Anthony Hopkins, who is of Welsh background, is interested in making a movie based on the events.²⁸

The second departure from national policy sprung from Welsh beliefs about the sanctity of the Sabbath, and required a Presidential intervention to bring resolution. In this case, the same Roca whose campaign had driven the Indians to despair—and whose ferocity against the indigenous people was a background for the fury of the 1884 attack on the Welsh—proved to be an ally.

A government decree of August 13, 1896, required all male citizens between eighteen and forty years of age to engage in military exercises on Sunday, and put the young men of the Welsh colony to a test of faith. While the Sunday policy created no special hardship for most in the Republic, who saw Sunday primarily as a day of leisure and certainly not exclusively a religious day, the Welsh viewed military practice on Sunday as a violation of their beliefs, and many preferred incarceration to submission. The Welsh made it clear that they were willing to accept the obligations of conscription—but not on Sunday. The press in Buenos Aires entered the fray, with Catholic newspapers condemning the Welsh and inventing insulting epithets for them while Protestant publications praised their defense of religious principles. At the end of the three-month period of required military exercises in 1896, the Welsh who

had been jailed were freed, but the colony remained alarmed at the interference with their religious practice and petitioned the government to let them hold the military exercises *any other day* but Sunday. The following year the conflict presented itself anew; the decree was imposed, the Welsh resisted and were jailed, and tensions were heightened. Welsh delegates traveled to the capital and obtained authorization for the governor and local officials to modify the military exercise day *if* those officials chose to do so. The local officials, however, —especially the local military authorities—were opposed to any concessions to the Welsh and the conflict continued.²⁹

The year 1898 loomed ominous again for the Welsh in regard to the government policy of military practice on Sunday; the new Governor of Chubut, in 1898, was a military man of Irish background who rebuffed the Welsh pleas for concession. Welsh emissaries journeyed to the capital to petition anew; and when that proved unsuccessful, they continued to Great Britain where newspapers in London took up their cause. Back home, the *porteño* press and the English-language papers continued the dispute in print, with the English newspapers claiming that the dilemma had to have been particularly severe to have prompted such reaction from the peaceful and law-abiding Welsh. In Chubut, the Governor was irritated over the uproar and clamored to find out who had sent the delegates. Ironically, just as the Welsh were being punished in the press and chastized by local officials for their persistence in the dispute over Sunday, their settlements at the foot of the Andes were helping to bolster Argentine claims in its border dispute with Chile, an endorsement that did not go unrecognized.

The beginning of 1899 ushered in Roca's second presidency, and the new President determined to travel to the Welsh colony to personally take a role in resolving the military practice dispute. The presidential party, which included the minister of the navy, Comodoro Martín Rivadavia, and a coterie of journalists, arrived by ship at Puerto Madryn on January 23, 1899; and the following morning the President journeyed by train to Trelew where he was received with hurrahs and enthusiasm. President Roca's tone and demeanor were low-key; his trip had been billed as simply part of a journey south to meet with the President of Chile, and he arrived in Chubut without pretension and without trappings of office. As he

shook the rough and calloused hand of a Welsh farmer, President Roca observed that those were the hands that would help the Republic to triumph. As he toured Gaiman and Rawson, visiting homes, seeing the evidence of tidy prosperity, and receiving repeated requests from the Welsh for an end to the oppressive Sunday military exercises, Roca must have felt reassured that the Welsh were certainly not rebellious troublemakers—but rather concerned and constructive citizens. He promised to remove the obstacles on his return to the capital, and this he did, in April of 1899, with a decree which made clear that the military obligations could be fulfilled on any day of the week. It certainly could not have hurt that Welsh delegates from Patagonia had helped to highlight the plight of their compatriots among the public in Great Britain; but Roca rightfully received acclaim among the citizens of Chubut for showing comprehension and common sense, and he remained a friend to the Welsh until his death. In his visit to those lands which had taken on the status of a province during his first presidency, Roca also promised to extend telegraph wires to the colony, and by March of 1900 these telegraph lines had reached Trelew.³⁰

Welsh records of Roca's visit display a respectful and appreciative tone, and by all accounts the President was visibly impressed by the qualities of character and the evident material progress he witnessed in the colony. In a stop on the road from Gaiman, President Roca was able to hear the impressive vocal talents which have long been associated with Wales, when a children's choir sang the national anthem with such beauty and vigor that His Excellency was understood to have commented that he had never heard his country's anthem sung so well.³¹

The attitude of mutual admiration between Roca and the Welsh which arose from the President's 1899 travels to Patagonia are reflected in the laudatory comments each had for the other. Roca declared to the Welsh at the time of his visit: "Habéis luchado no sólo contra la naturaleza cruel sino, lo que es más difícil, contra el aislamiento y la soledad. Os merecéis por todo ello el agradecimiento nacional."³² And a Welsh newspaper of January 27, 1899, detailing the President's activities and hopeful of his interest in their cause, proclaimed: "Que la historia marque en sus páginas de oro el derrotero trazado por tan ilustre patriota y que la estela que deje en pos de su paso sirva a generaciones futuras."³³ Just as

Rawson had seen the promise that the Welsh might fulfill in Patagonia, so Roca had seen that promise fulfilled. When President Roca died in 1914, the Welsh community remembered him with a tribute that closed with these words: "El territorio de Chubut, con la muerte del distinguido hombre público está de luto, como lo está la república entera. Que sirvan estas modestas líneas como homenaje al extinto amigo y protector de la Colonia chubut."³⁴

The historic exchanges which took place between President Roca and the Welsh leaders of Chubut in 1899 are a little-known but significant part of the Welsh chapter in Argentine history. These events help to document Argentine appreciation for the contributions of the settlers from Wales, and serve to confirm the dual role that the Welsh communities played in establishing exceptions to government policy and practice while helping to define the parameters of immigrant success in the Southern Cone.

Notes:

¹ The Roca Museum is located at Vicente López 2220 near the corner of Azcuénaga.

² The Rawson monument is just off of Las Heras. Rawson served as minister during the presidency of Mitre (1862-1868).

³ The two men sent were Lewis Jones and Sir Love Jones Parry. John E. Baur, "The Welsh in Patagonia: an Example of Nationalistic Migration," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, XXXIV (Nov., 1954), p. 470.

⁴ Virgilio Zampini, *Colonización del Chubut por los galeses*, (Trelew, Chubut: Junta de estudios históricos del Chubut, 1984) section 2. (This brochure is organized by sections rather than pages.)

⁵ Ema Wolf and Christina Patriarca, *La gran inmigración* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana S.A., 1991), pp. 135-36.

⁶ Abraham Matthews, *Crónica de la Colonia Galesa de la Patagonia*. Translated from Welsh by F.E. Roberts (Rawson, Chubut: Editorial El Regional, S.A., 1992), pp. 20-26.

⁷ Zampini, section 7.

⁸ Bernardo González Arri, *Sesenta Años de República* (Buenos Aires: Imprenta Ferrari Hnos., 1945), p. 93.

⁹ Zampini, section 3.

- ¹⁰ Baur, HRHR, pp. 473-79.
- ¹¹ Williams, Glyn, "Welsh Settlers and Native Americans in Patagonia," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 11 (1979), pp. 50-51.
- ¹² Zampini, p. 4.
- ¹³ Arthur P. Whitaker, *Argentina* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1964), p. 39.
- ¹⁴ González Arrili, p. 68.
- ¹⁵ Wolf and Patriarca, pp. 140-45.
- ¹⁶ H. Hesketh Prichard, *Through the Heart of Patagonia* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1902), p. 22.
- ¹⁷ Wolf and Patriarca, pp. 140-45.
- ¹⁸ Wolf and Patriarca, p. 145.
- ¹⁹ Zampini, section 10.
- ²⁰ Glyn Williams, *The Desert and the Dream: A Study of Welsh Colonization in Chubut, 1865-1915* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1975), p. 92.
- ²¹ Alberdi (1810-1884) exercised considerable influence over Argentina political and social thinking and argued strongly for European immigration which, he felt, would flourish in the new lands which his country could offer. He was adamant that there be no religious discrimination against the immigrants and that Protestants as well as Catholics be welcome. Hubert Herring, *A History of Latin America*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf: 1968) pp. 717-19.
- ²² J. Emma Nozzi and Silvia Edelstein de Itzkow, *Los galeses en el Río Negro*, (Carmen de Patagones: Museo Histórico Regional Municipal, 1967) p. 5.
- ²³ Williams, *The Desert and the Dream*, pp. 170-71.
- ²⁴ Williams, *The Desert and the Dream*, p. 191.
- ²⁵ David Rock, *Argentina 1515-1987: From Spanish Colonization to Alfonsín*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) p. 154.
- ²⁶ Jorge Oriola, "Trevelin a cien años de la colonia 16 de octubre," *Todo es historia* (Vol. XVIII, no. 227) (March 1996) p. 42.
- ²⁷ Eluned Morgan, *Hacia los Andes*, (3rd edition) (Trans. from Welsh by Irma Hughes de Jones) (Rawson, Chubut: El Regional, 1991) pp. 31-37.
- ²⁸ Interview February 10, 1999 with Catherine Fountain, graduate student at the University of California, Los Angeles, who visited the Welsh communities of Chubut in March 1998 and interviewed Clery Evans, the granddaughter of John Daniel Evans. It is possible to visit the burial site of Malacara at the Evans family home in Trevelin.
- ²⁹ *Roca y los galeses del Chubut*, (Buenos Aires: Ministerio de Educación y Justicia, 1965) pp. 5-7.
- ³⁰ *Roca y los galeses del Chubut*, pp. 7-17.
- ³¹ *Roca y los galeses del Chubut*, pp. 14-22.
- ³² Roberto Hosne, Barridos por el viento: *Historias de la Patagonia desconocida* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Planeta Argentina S.A.I.C., 1997) p. 133.
- ³³ *Roca y los galeses del Chubut*, p. 15.
- ³⁴ *Roca y los galeses del Chubut*, p. 26.