

America as Idea and Reality in the Context of Welsh Settlement*

By Elizabeth Rokkan

University of Bergen

The outbreak of the short-lived Falklands War in 1982, and the subsequent involvement of the Welsh Guards regiment in British-Argentine hostilities, reminded the British of a group of settlers in Argentina whose origin is closely related to the history of Welsh settlement in the United States. Considerable disquiet was expressed in the Welsh media at the prospect of a "cousins' war": the possibility that Welshmen from Britain would have to fight Argentinians of Welsh descent. The Welsh Nationalist Party (*Plaid Cymru*) went further: a letter was sent to the Prime Minister (by the Member of Parliament for Caernarfon, Dafydd Wigley), asking her not to send the Welsh Guards to defend the Falklands; and women members of the party appealed to the Argentine government, requesting that Patagonians, whether Spanish- or Welsh-speaking, be excused from taking part in the hostilities.'

The Guards were sent, many of them were killed in action, and in April 1983 their relatives planted hundreds of daffodils, the symbol of Wales, at the memorial cairn on the Falklands.' Later that summer, the prestigious bardic crown was won at the Welsh National *Eisteddfod* by a woman whose poem was written on the tragedy of Celt fighting Celt in spite of the common bond of their culture and ancestry.³

The presence of a Welsh colony in Argentina is an interesting, and possibly unique offshoot of the history of 19th century immigration into the United States. Instead of abandoning the experiment when settlement proved disappointing, and returning home, a group of Welshmen decided to try again elsewhere, but not, as one might have expected, within the British Empire, where there was, after all, plenty of choice. Their reasons were not primarily economic, but cultural: the desire to preserve their own language, religion and way of life.

Let us look first at the reality, and then at the ideas or myths which influenced the reality of Welsh immigration.

A considerable amount of Welsh migration to the American colonies had taken place prior to the Revolution, predominantly of Baptists and Quakers. The latter were prominent in the early settlement of Pennsylvania, 40,000 acres of which were sold to immigrants from Merionethshire in North Wales in 1682.⁴ In fact, in 1681, William Penn had intended to call his province "New Wales" because so many Welsh Quakers had already joined him, but he was overruled by the Secretary of the Privy Council at home. Because the Welsh wished to preserve their nationality, and had no wish to live among the English settlers, Penn "promised to give them exclusive title to a barony where they could keep up their old language and their old customs."⁵ This "Welsh Tract" is now on the outskirts of Philadelphia, and its place names reflect the Quaker history of South and North Wales. Like the Arminian Baptists, who also settled and flourished in this area, the Quaker community in Wales disappeared shortly afterwards, whereas the publication of books in Welsh was profitable in the United States in the 18th century, because readers were so numerous. According to the records of the National Library of Wales, the first three books published in Welsh in America were: *A Salutation to the Britains* (sic) . . . *for the Saving of their Souls* (1721), *An Alphabetical Concordance to the Scriptures* (1730), and *A Welsh Pamphlet, containing moral reflections upon Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell* (1735); clear evidence that the settlers' dream was for a national home, where linguistic as well as religious independence would be achieved, and the "language of heaven," as the Welsh describe their mother tongue, would survive. All three publications came out in Philadelphia.⁶

Penn is said to have had a Welsh grandfather; his deputy, Thomas Lloyd, was a Welsh Quaker. In 1700 Yale College was named after its first benefactor, the son of an immigrant, who returned to Wales to become High Sheriff of Denbigh, and is buried in the churchyard of Wrexham parish church. It is claimed that 18 signatories of the Declaration of Independence were Welsh, which was fitting, since Jefferson is quoted as having said: "The tradition in my father's family was that their ancestor came to this country from Wales, from near the mountain of Snowdon, the highest in Great Britain. My father's estate on the James River was called Snowdon, after the supposed birthplace of the family."⁷ Historians of the American Revolution tend to give prominence to Tom Paine's *Common Sense*. Another influential document published in 1776 was *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty* by Richard Price, a London-Welsh Presbyterian minister who corresponded with Franklin, Washington and Jefferson, and is said to have influenced both the Declaration and the Constitution. He argued that the colonists were fighting for *British* liberty and natural rights as well as their own. 60,000 copies of this work were sold, and 15 editions produced within one year.

The author was rewarded with an honorary doctorate from Yale; the only other doctorate bestowed at that time was held by George Washington.⁸

The American Revolution had an enormous impact on Welsh opinion, an opinion that differed totally from the viewpoint of the English. "Politics in Wales begins with the American Revolution," asserts the Welsh historian Gwyn A. Williams; and again, "The first modern Welsh 'nation' was born with the American and French revolutions; so was the first Welsh democracy. (There was) a crisis of identity which created a 'nation' and generated a millenarian migration to the USA."⁹ The Dissenters in the growing industrial area of South-East Wales "were American in spirit," producing a society "similar in intellectual and social tone to that of Philadelphia which was the spiritual capital of most of them."¹⁰ So many Welsh were numbered among the rebel leaders of the Revolution that in Wales and in London, where a sizeable Welsh intelligentsia existed, it was firmly believed that the majority of those signing the Declaration of Independence were Welsh.

In the charged political atmosphere of the 1790's, when anti-American propaganda was continuous from the English side, it was common for the anthem "God Save Great George our King" to be sung repeatedly in the playhouses in order to drown the words of "God Save Great Thomas Paine." In Wales politics and religion could not be kept apart: a Baptist minister accused the spirit of America of afflicting the Church, and two characters, Mr. Politician and Mr. Go-to-America, of corrupting the godly.¹¹ After the attempted French invasion of South-West Wales at Fishguard in 1797 and the consequent hounding of Dissenters and Jacobins, many felt driven to migrate from Wales and London. This migration had already been influenced by the founding, in 1793, of the first political periodical to be published in Welsh (*Cylchgrawn Cymraeg*, The Welsh Magazine), and resulted in the formation of the Cambrian Company in Philadelphia and the purchase of land to be called Cambria, with the town of Beula as its center.

It was in this decade that the legends of the discovery of America three hundred years before Columbus by Madoc, Prince of Wales, and of the existence of a tribe of white Welsh-speaking Indians, Madoc's descendants, beyond the Missouri river, gained wide currency. As far back as the reign of Elizabeth I the historian John Dee had revived the Madoc story (which can be traced back to the 13th century) in order to support the claims of the English government and explorers against Spanish power in the New World. The story of the Welsh Indians was added when a Rev. Morgan Jones, captured by Indians in Virginia in 1669, claimed he had escaped execution by speaking Welsh, which his captors understood. In 1791 an *Enquiry into the Truth of the Tradition concerning the Discovery of America by Prince Madoc ab Owain Gwynedd about*

the Year 1170 was published by a Dr. John Williams; and at the newly-revived Welsh National *Eisteddfod* (an annual musical and literary gathering) later that year an Address was circulated, announcing that the Madoc Indians, the Lost Brothers, had been found, and urging the Welsh to find the promised land alongside them. "This ignited the first outbreak of America fever in North Wales," comments Gwyn Williams.¹² The Madoc myth, in his opinion, served radical and populist Welshmen "as the myth of Freeborn Saxons was serving their English colleagues. Welsh Indians were Welsh freedom."¹³ It is significant that immigrants applying for American citizenship would give their place of birth, not as the Kingdom of England, but of Wales; both their place of origin and their purpose in migrating combined in one and the same idea: the search for a national home (Y Wladfa).¹⁴

Out of the tensions engendered by competition for the fur trade and its attendant exploration in the Far West, an expedition was financed by the Spaniards and headed by a Scotsman, McKay, and a Welshman, John Evans, after a French fur trader reported in 1792 that he had had contact with the Mandan Indians, who were white like Europeans. After a 3,600 mile journey from St. Louis, John Evans spent the winter of 1796 with the Mandans, who were fair-skinned but not Welsh-speaking. A few years later, his map was used by Lewis (also of Welsh stock) and Clark on their expedition up the Missouri to the Pacific coast. Evans died, however, in New Orleans at the age of 29 in 1799, the year the English poet Robert Southey finished his lengthy epic poem "Madoc," as well as several short "Songs of the American Indians."¹⁵ In spite of subsequent 19th century publications discrediting the Madoc legend, a plaque commemorating Madoc's landing was set up at Fort Morgan, Mobile, Alabama, by the Daughters of the American Revolution, as recently as 1953.

The political enthusiasm resulting from the combination of these long-lived myths with the idealism of the Revolution buoyed up 19th century Welsh migration to the States when difficulties arose in British industries such as iron-ore smelting, coal-mining, slate-quarrying and tin-plate working. In that period a considerable number of periodicals were published, in Welsh and English, on both sides of the Atlantic. The American ones had easily identifiable titles: *The Cambrian*, *Cambrian Gleanings*, *Celtic Digest*, or *The American Celt*.¹⁶ Denominational periodicals published in Wales provided an outlet for letters from immigrants. As Alan Conway points out in his collection *The Welsh in America*, these clearly influenced emigration. One of these letters, dated August 1, 1868, from John Lloyd at 63 Chrysler Street, New York to his parents in Wales, opens as follows:

Ha! ha! Here I am at last with my feet on the famous land of America. Many laughed at me when I said I was coming here and said, "We will believe you when you have gone." Well, will they believe me now because I have gone. (Translation by Conway, p. 46.)¹⁷

One interesting collection of letters in Welsh originates in Wisconsin, and describes farming in the Welsh Praerie area of the Wisconsin Territory in the 1840's and '50's. Another collection consists of letters from soldiers serving in Wisconsin regiments in the Civil War.¹⁸ The Welsh at home and in the United States tended to be pro-Northern in their sympathies. Otherwise, mid-century political writing in periodicals such as *Yr Amserau* (The Times, published in Liverpool from 1843), supported nationalist movements in Europe, in Hungary or Ireland, for example.

Some of the idealistic experiments launched by Welshmen such as the socialist Robert Owen (New Harmony 1825) or Samuel Roberts, the abolitionist and Congregational minister, together with William Bebb, former Governor of Ohio (Tennessee 1856–67) failed, and their members were dispersed or returned home. Papers in the National Library archive are mainly concerned with the realities of settlement, especially land, business and family news, and religion. Yet the dream of the national home persisted, in spite of contrary opinion. "We have no dread of the future prosperity and standing of the Welsh in this great and noble country, if they will love and learn the English Bible as much as they did the Welsh for several generations," wrote H.E. Thomas in 1888.¹⁹ Or, of Utica, N.Y., before W.W.II: "The effort to perpetuate the Welsh language in this country is as useless as trying to stem the tide with a broom."²⁰ Emrys Jones's detailed study of the gradual 20th century encroachment of the English language on this community through the abandonment of Welsh in the local newspaper *Y Drych* (The Mirror), in the Yearbooks of the Welsh Presbyterian Church, and even in the local eisteddfod, describes the result as "successful adaptation" and "almost complete assimilation." In the late 1940's, for instance, the St. David's Day dinner opened with the oath to the American flag and closed with the singing of "America." Jones compares this community with the Chubut Welsh "who emigrated in order to keep their identity."²¹

When attempts failed to found exclusively Welsh communities in the U.S., a new national home in Argentina was pioneered by Michael D. Jones. In 1865 the "Mimosa" landed 153 emigrants, with only one farmer among them, at the mouth of the Chubut Valley. They suffered drought and flood, but survived, helped by Indians, and later by the governments of Britain and Argentina, to establish a second settlement inland in the

Andes. In Wales to this day only Patagonia is described as the National Home (Y Wladfa).

A letter from the Rev. D. S. Davies in New York to Mr. John Thomas of Merthyr (Sept. 26, 1872) insists that "the Welsh people in Wales must understand what draws the attention of Welsh-Americans to the cause of Patagonia . . . that it is a Welsh movement with its chief aims to preserve the Welsh nation and its ancient language for ever. . . . Unplanned emigration has meant the death of the Welsh nation and language in the U.S. and elsewhere . . . Everything here destroys our common heritage."²² However, this second attempt at cultural isolation, although able to celebrate its centenary in 1965, seems equally doomed, its schools no longer recognised by the Argentine government, its bilingualism in retreat. Jean LaPonce's concept of the rigid and the flexible (Fr. *souple*) linguistic frontier is perhaps relevant here. He finds that "the most favorable solution from a minority point of view is the rigid frontier controlled by the local authority" (as in Switzerland today).²³ Linguistic frontiers in the U.S. and in Argentina may be too flexible for the survival of minority languages.

Looking back on the story of Welsh migration westward, Gwyn Williams sums up the situation thus: "Never again after the 1790's was the Welsh diaspora to America to carry that sense that Welsh was the vehicle of universal liberty, of universal values . . . never again was it to create a Kingdom of Wales which found Madoc . . . a sufficient symbolic myth."²⁴ Nevertheless, in the 20th century both the idea and the reality of America continue to exert their influence in Wales. The Welsh Nationalist Party was founded in 1925, and has profited by the ethnic revival of the '60's. At the annual National Eisteddfod, now a week-long program of cultural rituals, of political speeches, and of literary, musical and crafts competitions, an afternoon is set aside for welcoming the exiles of the Dispersion (*Y Cymru yn Wasgar*), on stage before the 8,000-strong audience and the TV cameras, and the American contingent is always the largest. The new school of Anglo-Welsh literature, half a century old, also looks westward. One example, Jack Jones's novel of the inter-war years, will bring us back full circle: its title is *Off to Philadelphia in the Morning*.²⁵

NOTES

* This paper was summarized on presentation to the Workshop on Ethnicity, Conference of the European Association for American Studies, Budapest, March 1986.

1. Reported on the *Today* program, BBC Radio 4, May 10, 1982.

2. News Broadcast, BBC Radio 4, April 12, 1983.

3. *Daily Telegraph*, August 3, 1983.

4. Their story has been told by T. A. Glenn in *Merion in the Welsh Tract* (1896; reprinted Baltimore 1970).
5. David Salmon, "The Quakers of Pembrokeshire". In Francis Green, ed. *Hist. Soc. of West Wales Transactions* vol. 9, 1920-23 (Carmarthen: Spurrell, 1923) p. 23.
6. William Williams, "The First three Welsh books printed in America". *Nat. Library of Wales Journal* II 1942: 109-119.
7. Quoted in David Williams, *Cymru ac America/Wales and America* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1946) p. 49.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *The Search for Beulah Land* (London: Croom Helm, 1980) pp. 7 & 1.
10. *Op. cit.* pp. 14-15.
11. Gwyn A. Williams, *MADOC: the Making of a Myth* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979) p. 116.
12. *The Search for Beulah Land*, p. 34.
13. *MADOC, ibid.*
14. *The Search for Beulah Land*, p. 38.
15. *The Poetical Works of Robert Southey* (London: Longman, 1844).
16. Idwal Lewis, "Welsh Newspapers and Journals in the United States". *Nat. Library of Wales Journal* II 1942: 124-30.
17. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1961).
18. Clare Taylor, ed. *Letters from Welsh Immigrants* (Typescript MS, Dept. of History, University College of Wales, Aberystwyth).
19. "The Welsh in America" in A. Jones, *The Cymru of '76* (Utica: Swyddfa y Drych, 1894) p. 49.
20. Emrys Jones, "Some Aspects of Cultural Change in an American-Welsh Community." *Transactions Cymmrodorion*, Bicentenary Vol. 1949-51 (London: 1953) p. 28.
21. *Op. cit.* p. 35.
22. Alan Conway, *op. cit.* pp. 321-3.
23. "La Frontière Linguistique Intra-Etatique." Paper, IPSA Congress, Paris 1985, p. 1.
24. *The Search for Beulah Land*, pp. 182-3.
25. (London: Hamilton, 1947).