

What happened at Capel Celyn? How has the creation of the Tryweryn reservoir and the response to this shaped Welsh history?

Introduction:

There have been few events in recent Welsh history as far reaching and multifaceted as the flooding of Capel Celyn. The event acted as a spark for nascent Welsh nationalism, and was the crucible for further protest movements, such as the demonstrations around the investiture of Charles as Prince of Wales, or the horrific accident of Aberfan. In all of these crucial events in 20th Century Welsh history, the common trend of mismanagement, poor planning, and a lack of understanding of the Welsh response led to a steadily increasing wave of Welsh nationalism, which in turn contributed to the devolution movement and the creation of the Senedd in the 1990's.

This essay will attempt to explore the consequences of the flooding of Capel Celyn, detailing the fallout of the event in chronological order. In order to accomplish this, comparisons will be drawn to the response to the Aberfan disaster, and the investiture of Charles. The response to the later events would not have been as impactful without the lessons learnt from Capel Celyn, and the name of the village, as well as the reservoir which replaced it, have entered into the collective psyche of the Welsh nation.

The Flooding of Capel Celyn:

Water scarcity in the United Kingdom around the time of the flooding of Capel Celyn had led to an increased demand for domestic fresh water production, facilitated by the creation of reservoirs, distillation plants and other methods of water purification and storage. Wales had for decades been the site of water collection and storage for English cities, as Ed Atkins notes in his article *Building a Dam, Constructing a Nation: The 'drowning' of Capel Celyn*: "[Liverpool's] turn to rural Wales to secure water supply was not a new decision" (Atkins, 2018, Pg. 457). Expanding metropolitan populations, industrial works and other factors, including the weather, led to an increasing demand for water and reserves of it, the answer to which appeared to city and town councils as extracting, and keeping, the water of other regions. Wales, with its high rainfall and natural valleys and mountains, provided a perfect place for such a venture. Other areas of the United Kingdom, it should be noted, such as the Lake District in Cumbria, were surveyed by the Liverpool city council for the creation of such a reservoir, but the site of Capel Celyn in North Wales was chosen as the site anyway (Atkins, 2018).

It was during this process that the first of many protests against such a damming of the river Tryweryn took place. The scale of hostility is hard to understate, with 125 public authorities declaring their lack of support for the scheme, and over 1000 public

bodies declaring their own opposition. Hundreds of letters were sent from across the nation to the office of the Minister for Wales, Gwilym Lloyd-George, demanding that the scheme should not be allowed to go ahead (Atkins, 2018). Despite the hostility of both local and national groups to the plans to dam the Tryweryn river, the Liverpool city council voted in favour of the motion, making it clear to the people of Capel Celyn, and most Welsh nationalists, that their wishes would be ignored. This was only reinforced when the plans were sent to the House of Commons, where, despite the overwhelming majority of Welsh MP's voting against the proposed plans, the votes of the rest of the country ensured that the destruction of Capel Celyn, and the surrounding area, would go ahead (Atkins, 2018).

The opening of the Tryweryn reservoir was, itself, a total disaster. According to Martin Johnes, "The 400 guests were outnumbered by 500 protestors and were met with a barrage of booing and chanting" (Johnes, 2013, Pg. 233). It is in the context that the primary aftershocks of the Tryweryn damming must be examined - the flooding of a village, against the wishes of the local population, and the Welsh nation as a whole, for the benefit of an English city on whose orders it had been flooded, provided a springboard for much greater movements in favour of Welsh nationalism, and was, as has been detailed, very much the spark for anger at the British government.

Fallout:

One of the most important outcomes from the flooding of Capel Celyn and the movement to oppose it was the increased readiness of the Welsh nationalist movement to fight further infringements of Welsh territorial and national possessions. It was in the aftermath of the events of Tryweryn that another, more emotive event shook the entire nation: the Aberfan disaster. The closeness of these two events, and the response by the British government in Westminster to the concerns of the Welsh people, without a doubt inspired a huge increase in Welsh nationalism.

The Aberfan disaster is an event seared into the soul of the Welsh nation. 144 people, 116 of whom were children, were killed in an easily preventable catastrophe which saw an entire generation wiped out, and permanent damage done to the small village of Aberfan. Now infamously, the National Coal Board (NCB) made assurances to the local community over the safeness of the tip which they were using to deposit slag (Johnes, 2013, Pg. 245). This affirmation, an unabashed lie, was to doom the village of Aberfan to one of the worst disasters in Welsh mining history when the slag heap gave way in mid-October 1966. The resulting outpouring of grief and emotions only added to the fire of Welsh nationalism, and in the years since, has remained an open wound in the Welsh collective consciousness.

In the months that followed, the outpouring of support from around the world led to the creation of the Aberfan Relief Fund, which raised "£1.75 million (the equivalent of

£24.4 million at 2008 prices)” (Johnes, 2013, Pg. 246). The fund itself proved hard to access, and several years later in 1968, the government forced the removal of £150,000 to “[remove] the NCB’s remaining tips from above the village” (Johnes, 2013, Pg. 146). It is easy to understand the anger many of the village felt at this injustice, after having already suffered through the devastation of the mine collapse, only now to have the money that was donated to their cause taken, without their consent, and used to pay off the NCB’s mistake. In many ways, this is similar to the damming of the Tryweryn river and flooding of Capel Celyn, in that it was done at the expense of a small Welsh village for the benefit of English organisations and for the benefit of the British government.

Subsequently, these two events and the horrific mismanagement by the British government, as well as the lack of conciliatory messaging and unwillingness to compromise or understand the Welsh position, have contributed to the spike in Welsh nationalism and radicalisation in the middle of the twentieth century. In many ways, the years of the 1950’s acted as a crucible for the modern Welsh nationalist movement, a movement which had its apex at another event led by English people, nominally for their own benefit. The investiture of Prince, now King, Charles as Prince of Wales saw massive protest movements, including ones that exhibited similar characteristics to the movement of the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

Crowning:

Amidst the rise in Welsh nationalism, the British government in 1967 requested that the then Queen Elizabeth allow for her son, Prince Charles, to be invested as the Prince of Wales. In response to this, “young people held sit-ins, hunger strikes and demonstrations” (Johnes, 2013, Pg. 235). Male English heirs taking the title of Prince of Wales has been a tradition since the conquest of Wales by Edward I, as a way to placate Welsh monarchists, inspire Welsh loyalty to the English crown, and in the eyes of Welsh nationalists, a symbol of humiliation. These points will be examined, alongside the nationalist response in relation to Capel Celyn, in the next few paragraphs.

How the title of ‘Prince of Wales’ is used to placate and ensure the loyalty of Welsh monarchists is visible, maybe most emotively, in the reactions of the crowd of the 1958 Empire Games, after Elizabeth II announced that Charles would become Prince of Wales. According to Martin Johnes, “men and women [were] crying with emotion” (Johnes, 2013, Pg. 199), a reaction that would cause dismay among Welsh nationalists. It was after this apparent outpouring of emotion in anticipation of the investiture of Charles, and against the backdrop of rising Plaid Cymru membership and Welsh nationalism, that Charles was sent to Aberystwyth University. It was while he was in Aberystwyth to learn Welsh and continue his studies that Charles himself said “I’ve hardly been to Wales, and you can’t expect people to be overzealous about the fact the fact of having a so-called English Prince” (Johnes, 2013, Pg. 235). The climate in Wales following the catastrophe at Aberfan and the deliberate flooding of

Capel Celyn, combined with the self-admitted appointment of an English Prince as the figurehead of Wales was raucous.

Attempts to create a devolved government in Wales, and a local administration in the interests of the Welsh people, had been limited and successes even more so. According to Martin Johnes, “a small but increasing minority within Wales... felt that constitutional politics had failed the nation” (Johnes, 2013, Pg. 219). This is corroborated by the information that Ed Atkins provides; namely that of the “collective sense of political neglect by the primary political parties of the United Kingdom” (Atkins, 2018, Pg. 458). This feeling of neglect and lack of representation and power in the government of the United Kingdom helps to explain the general shift towards radicalism and nationalism in Wales. Events such as the investiture, which took place in spite of the general rise of nationalism, went on to fan the flames and further increase nationalist sentiment in Wales.

Inspiring the national idea and increasing support for “Britishness” as it were, through loyalty to the English crown has been a tactic employed time and time again throughout British history. It was a fundamental building block of the British Empire, provided the impetus for the acts of Union all throughout British history and can be rightly viewed as being the root of the modern British legal and political system. The country is, after all, called the “United Kingdom” - and this is not lost on the Welsh nationalist movement. At the time of the investiture, as is commented on by Jon Gower, for some “the investiture ceremony, with its 4000 guests, was a flagrant reminder of both royal privilege and Welsh subjugation” (Gower, 2014, Pg. 294). It is in the context of all this social and nationalist upheaval, all of which stemmed from the sparks of Capel Celyn, must be viewed. Anger surrounding the extraction and use of resources by English towns and cities, brought to a head after Tryweryn, combined with the crowning of yet another English heir as Prince of Wales, and the horrifically mismanaged response to the Aberfan tragedy, eventually boiled over for some nationalists into the need for direct action.

As has already been detailed, the feeling among some nationalists was that the two main political parties, Labour and the Conservative parties, had left them feeling “under-represented and... [politically] neglected” (Atkins, 2018, Pg. 458). With the events detailed so far in this piece, and the general air of radicalism in the nationalist spheres of politics, it is easy to understand how some members of the Welsh political scene felt compelled to resort to more active measures. The creation of organisations such as the Free Wales Army (FWA) and *Mudiad Amddiffyn Cymru* (MAC - Movement for the Defence of Wales), nationalist organisations set on disrupting the rule of Wales by the English government, are evidence of this. The FWA had been present in the history of Welsh nationalism since the flooding of Capel Celyn, being present in numbers and uniform at the opening of the Capel Llyn reservoir, among the number of protestors who outnumbered the official attendees of the ceremony (Gower, 2014). The MAC took a much more proactive role, being

involved in the bombing of power converters, pylons and electricity, as well as the bombings around the investiture of Charles as Prince of Wales.

Conclusion:

To conclude this piece that has covered the flooding of Capel Celyn, the Aberfan disaster, and the investiture of Prince Charles, one of the most important advancements in Welsh self-rule and domestic politics should be discussed. The devolution movement, and the subsequent establishment of the Welsh Senedd has meant that a greater portion of Welsh people are able to participate in the democratic systems of the nation than ever before. No more will English towns and cities be able to extract and turn Welsh water into capital for their own production, and never again will villages, native speakers of Welsh, be flooded for the capital gain of cities hundreds of miles away.

In many ways, Capel Celyn can be viewed as the main contributing factor to the massive rise in Welsh nationalism, and the subsequent calls for independence and greater internal autonomy. It was the spark for the anger that surrounded the response to the Aberfan catastrophe, and the unresolved disputes around the poor handling led in part to the wave of protests around the investiture of Prince Charles. The anger felt, and near total lack of reconciliation and care shown to the Welsh nation in the wake of moves by the English government, both regional and national, against Welsh interests, only contributed to the steady climb of nationalism. As we have seen, there were opportunities for compromise, and many actions should have changed after consideration of the feelings of the Welsh people were taken into account, but more often than not, they were completely ignored. While small changes and incremental concessions eventually led to the devolved government and the creation of the Senedd in the 1990's, for the tiny village of Capel Celyn, and the people of Aberfan, it came much too late.

To finish this assignment, a final summary of the consequences of the flooding of Capel Celyn will be mentioned again. In the opinion of the author, the most important consequences are the creation of a devolved government, the rise in Welsh nationalism, the response to the Aberfan catastrophe, and the reaction to the investiture of Prince Charles.

Reference List:

- Atkins, Ed. 2018. 'Building a Dam, Constructing a Nation: The "Drowning" of Capel Celyn', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 31.4: 455–68 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12186>>
- Gower, Jon. 2014. *The Story of Wales* (London, England: Bbc Books)
- Johnes, Martin. 2013. *Wales since 1939* (Manchester University Press)