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The Flooding of Capel Celyn: A Village Lost in the Waters of Tryweryn

In the mid twentieth century in Wales, a small town experienced a watershed moment that altered the political and national trajectory of the country. The Tryweryn reservoir, designed to supply water to the English City of Liverpool, flooded Capel Celyn in 1965. This event, which sparked many protests throughout Wales, and became a symbol of Welsh resistance to English dominance (Atkins 455).

The slogan, "Cofiwch Dryweryn" which in Welsh means "Remember Tryweryn" became famous throughout the Welsh community following the disaster. This sentiment would echo through Welsh politics for years to come" (Cofiwch Dryweryn). For many Welsh citizens, the flooding of Capel Celyn not only symbolized the loss of a community within Wales but also the destruction of Welsh culture and heritage. This was one of the many projects the British government conducted, in spite of widespread public outrage, that devastated Welsh towns (Cofiwch Dryweryn). The authorities of Westminster showed little regard for the local traditions and language. The decision at Capel Celyn made many Welsh people realize that the British government consistently prioritized English interests over Welsh concerns, reinforcing the longstanding grievances over Wales' marginalization within the United Kingdom (Cofiwch Dryweryn). This essay will explore the idea and eventual creation of the Tryweryn reservoir and

the response it provoked, arguing that this decision marked a turning point in Welsh history. The flooding of the town of Capel Celyn catalyzed a wave of political and cultural activism that triggered a surge in Welsh nationalism, leading to the emergence of political movements, calls for greater autonomy and preservations of the Welsh language and culture. As a result, the events surrounding Tryweryn significantly shaped the political landscape in Wales and its journey to self-determination and devolution.

The creation of the Tryweryn Reservoir in the 1960's stands as a pivotal moment in Welsh history, marked by cultural loss and controversy (Atkins 455). The reservoir was constructed to supply water to the English city of Liverpool, which was facing with increasing demands due to rapid population growth and industrial expansion. After considering several locations, the British government and Liverpool Corporation chose the Welsh speaking village of Capel Celyn in North Wales (Atkins 455). The government chose this area due to its close proximity to the River Tryweryn and the area's ideal conditions for reservoir construction.

While the construction of this reservoir was a practical solution for Liverpool's demand for a water supply, the decision to flood Capel Celyn provoked tough opposition from the local town itself, as well as the wider Welsh population (Atkins 456). To the Welsh people, Capel Celyn was not just a simple village in Wales but a significant part of Welsh cultural heritage. Capel Celyn was a Welsh-speaking village, where most inhabitants communicated in Welsh as their first language. For many people, the flooding symbolized the destruction of Welsh culture and identity. As Professor Ed Atkins of the University of Bristol writes, Capel Celyn embodied a “certain type of Welshness,” closely connected to the landscape and integral to a Welsh nation undergoing the decline of its cultural and linguistic heritage. (Houghton).

What made the situation even more polarizing was the British government's decision to proceed with the reservoir construction without consulting the local population of Capel Celyn or the Welsh nation (Atkins 458). During this time, this was not the only big project infrastructure project taking place in Wales by the British, but the decision to flood Capel Celyn angered many Welsh nationalists (Baines). Many in the local communities who protested were ignored by those in Westminster and Welsh interests were often sidelined in favor of English priorities (Cofiwch Dryweryn). The lackadaisical reaction from the British government, in response to the Welsh outrage that the reservoir was intended to benefit an English city and punish a Welsh one fueled a growing opinion of resentment across Wales (Atkins 457).

In 1957, the plan to flood Capel Celyn was officially approved by the British government and construction began shortly after (Atkins 457). Over the years, the Capel Celyn community was gradually displaced, and the village was submerged under the reservoir water in October 1965 (Houghton). The unfortunate residents of Capel Celyn were relocated to other parts of Wales with the help of the British government. However, many felt that the compensation was inadequate, as the financial settlement did not truly pay for the emotional and cultural loss of their homes and the annihilation of their Welsh-speaking village (Good). The flooding of the village therefore showed light to tragic displacement of the families, but also for the Welsh people, as it highlighted the as it emphasized the continuous disregard for Wales within the United Kingdom (Good). In this context, the creation of the Tryweryn Reservoir stands as a stark reminder of the broader political and cultural challenges faced by Wales in the 20th century. The project symbolized the power dynamics between Wales and England, with Welsh communities often caught in the wake of decisions made by distant authorities in Westminster (Good). While the reservoir was built with the intention of providing for the future of an English city, it came at

a significant cost to Welsh identity and heritage, making it a flashpoint in the larger struggle for recognition and self-determination within the United Kingdom (Good).

The building of the Tryweryn Reservoir and the submerging of Capel Celyn provoked widespread outrage across Wales and became a rallying point for Welsh activists and nationalists (Baines). The British government's project not only resulted in the physical displacement of a community, but also fueled a growing sense of injustice and frustration among the Welsh people. This event triggered many rallies, protests, and political movements, as many saw it as a symbol of the ongoing political and cultural ostracization within the United Kingdom (Baines).

Although the project sparked a range of responses, one of the most significant came from the Welsh political party Plaid Cymru (Roderick). Since its establishment in 1925, the political party has been a big advocate for Welsh autonomy in the United Kingdom and the preservation of its culture and language. After the flooding of Capel Celyn, the party quickly used the event as a powerful symbol, condemning the project as an example of the British governments disregard for Welsh interests (Roderick). Plaid Cymru organized protests and public campaigns, demanding greater political representation, and the safeguarding of Welsh language and culture. Plaid Cymru seized the opportunity to bring the Welsh people's grievances to the forefront and condemned the British government's actions. They believed the flooding of Capel Celyn demonstrated the total disregard of the Welsh nation by Westminster, especially since thirty-five out of thirty-six Welsh MPs voted against the bill (Day). This sentiment sparked widespread support and activism for the Welsh cause. The flooding of Capel Celyn greatly energized Plaid Cymru's efforts, helping to increase its growing prominence within Welsh politics during the 1960's and beyond (Roderick).

Alongside Plaid Cymru, Welsh cultural groups, worker's unions, and activists also began to mobilize in response to the flooding (Roderick). The flooding, made many realize the British government's attempt to strengthen English interests economically and politically at the expense of Wales citizens (Good). This sentiment led to the formation of various political movements, which advocated for the preservation of Welsh traditions and especially the Welsh language. The Welsh language, which had seen a steady decline in the twentieth century was increasingly now being associated with as resistance to English dominance (Atkins 458). Reminiscing on the flood, former Plaid Cymru leader Dafydd Wigley remarked, "the flooding of Capel Celyn significantly contributed to the growth of the party at that time. There is no doubt that this event played a key role in shaping the mindset that enabled Gwynfor Evans to secure victory in the 1966 Carmarthen by election" (Day).

This realization at the time fueled Evans' future advocacy for Welsh autonomy. Following the flooding, there was a growing push to preserve the Welsh-speaking communities (Williamson). Activists achieved this by reminding schools and cultural centers the cultural significance the Welsh language had to the Welsh identity (Amdanom). Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg (Welsh Language Society) gained prominence during the 1960's and 1970's, pushing for policies that supported the use of Welsh in government, public life, and education (Amdanom). Following the construction of Tryweryn, many activists saw the protection of the language as vital to protecting the Welsh identity in the face of continued cultural and political marginalization.

The incident at Capel Celyn also led to violent resistance. In 1969, a group of Welsh nationalists from the Free Wales Army (FWA) blew up a reservoir pipeline in response to the flooding (Atkins 460). Although these violent measures were rare and did not gain as much

widespread support as they did in Northern Ireland, these events underlined the deep resentment some of the population felt. For many, the destruction of the Welsh town of Capel Celyn was not just a loss of a village, but an attack on Welsh identity (Cofiwch Dryweryn). The flooding and creation of the Tryweryn Reservoir played a key role in mobilizing Welsh political and cultural activism. This event acted as a stimulant for a growing nationalist movement, which called for the preservation of the Welsh language and culture, as well as greater political autonomy and representation within the United Kingdom (Day).

While the initial protests were intense, the event had lasting consequences, particularly in the rise of Plaid Cymru and the increasing demand for Welsh devolution (Day). Following the flooding, the political landscape in Wales shifted significantly. Plaid Cymru, which had long advocated for Welsh autonomy within the United Kingdom, gained new momentum. The event invigorated public support for the party's goals, particularly the need for a devolved government. Gwynfor Evans, a key leader of Plaid Cymru used the Tryweryn Reservoir as a powerful symbol of Welsh subjugation to Westminster. In the years that followed, the party's interests shifted to prioritize the need for a Welsh parliament that could ensure Welsh interests were represented, particularly in contrast to English priorities (Day). This renewed sense of urgency also played a significant role in the push for devolution, which culminated in the 1997 referendum that led to the creation of the Welsh parliament (Senedd Cymru) in 1999 (History of Devolution). Although the referendum had been rejected, the events surrounding Tryweryn had shifted the political landscape. The loss of Capel Celyn reinforced the belief that Wales needed a political structure to protect its culture and interests, free from the English dominated system of Westminster. Ultimately, the flooding of Capel Celyn left a lasting impact on the political and cultural landscape of Wales, sparking a wave of activism that would influence the trajectory of Welsh nationalism (History of Devolution).

Although the flooding of the Welsh village Capel Celyn catalyzed the push for Welsh nationalism and autonomy, the marginalization of Welsh voices by Westminster persisted long after the scandal of Tryweryn. The same pattern reappeared in the modern era during the Brexit referendum of 2016 (Children and Young People in Wales). The events following the drowning became a symbol of Welsh domination to Westminster's interest and priorities, fueling the demand for a devolved Welsh government. While the creation of the Welsh Parliament in 1999 seemed like a resounding victory in the eyes for the Welsh nationalists, Wales' autonomy remained limited, and Welsh people's opinion in British politics continued to be dismissed (Senedd Cymru). This issue was underlined during the controversial Brexit referendum of 2016. While Wales voted to leave the European Union, many Welsh people felt that the concerns of the general population were once again being ignored in favor of English interests (Children and Young People in Wales). Ailsa Henderson of the University of Edinburgh documented that, “While Wales also had a Leave majority (52.5%–47.5%), with less than 5% of the United Kingdom’s population, it did not play a decisive part in the overall outcome (see Table 1). Brexit was made in England” (Henderson et al.). The vote to leave, was primarily pushed by the English, which once again made the Welsh feeling that their voices have been drowned out (Henderson et al.). The same sentiment was experienced by many in the Welsh communities during the 1960's during the construction of the Tryweryn Reservoir. The Brexit decision reignited calls for Welsh autonomy, especially concerning the preservation of Welsh language and culture, which had been a focus of activism following the events at Tryweryn (Henderson et al.). Welsh exclusion, both in historical and contemporary contexts, emphasized the need for Wales to have more control over its own affairs, especially in the light of the economic and cultural consequences of Brexit (Children and Young People in Wales). As Wales navigates the ongoing and changing political landscape, the

ramifications of the Tryweryn tragedy are still present. The push for political autonomy and cultural preservation that took off following the flooding of Capel Celyn continues to shape Wales today. The events of Tryweryn sparked an increasing demand for Welsh voices to be heard, not only in cultural affairs but in geopolitical decisions that affect the country's future (History of Devolution).

To summarize, the drowning of Capel Celyn in 1965 marked a remarkable turning point in the history of Wales, symbolizing both the physical and cultural destruction of a Welsh village. The destruction of a Welsh-speaking community to supply an English city with water ignited a wave of protests and turmoil and underlined the disregard of Welsh interests by the British government. The flooding sparked a surge in Welsh nationalism, with political groups like Plaid Cymru gaining popularity in the fight for Welsh autonomy and the preservation of Welsh language and heritage. The event led to the rise of the 1997 devolution referendum, which led to the rise of greater political representation. However, the progress was celebrated for long as the Welsh continue to feel marginalized today, especially following the Brexit referendum. The events of Tryweryn serve as a powerful reminder of Wales' ongoing fight for political recognition, with the call for greater autonomy and cultural preservation still resonating today. The flooding of Capel Celyn not only changed the political landscape but also reinforced the necessity for Welsh voices to be heard, both internationally and within the United Kingdom.

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