

Unveiling the Contested Waters: Exploring Welsh Nationalist Discourse Surrounding the Tryweryn Reservoir Project

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Gwlad, Gwlad: Aspects of Welsh
History 1200 to the present day
Paper 1

The paper examines the multifaceted objections raised against the construction of the Tryweryn reservoir within the framework of Welsh nationalist discourse, focusing on procedural inadequacies and principled opposition. By analyzing historical events, including the drowning of Capel Celyn and the subsequent rise of Welsh nationalism, the paper elucidates how the flooding of Capel Celyn served as a catalyst for political and cultural resurgence in Wales. Moreover, the study delves into the interconnectedness of land, language, and identity, as articulated by J.R. Jones, highlighting the profound impact of territorial dispossession on Welsh identity and autonomy. Through a comprehensive analysis of several sources and scholarly perspectives, the paper sheds light on the broader implications of the Tryweryn controversy, including its reverberations in Welsh governance, activism, and nationalist ideologies. Ultimately, the paper contributes to a nuanced understanding of Welsh history by examining the diverse narratives and voices that have shaped the discourse surrounding the flooding of Capel Celyn and its aftermath.

The objections to the Tryweryn reservoir project can be divided into two main categories within the broader context of Welsh nationalist discourse. Initially, concerns were raised regarding procedural shortcomings and the evidence presented by project proponents, while others rejected the proposal based on ethical and moral considerations.

The first set of objections focused on procedural deficiencies and perceived arrogance exhibited by the Liverpool Corporation. Residents of Capel Celyn expressed disappointment over the lack of consultation and transparency regarding the project, asserting that they were only informed about the plans when surveyors arrived in their village. Despite attempts by the Capel Celyn Defence Committee to engage with the Corporation, their concerns were met with reluctance and dismissal. Even after

securing a meeting with the full council in November 1956, proper attention to the matter was only given after Alderman Gwynfor Evans, leader of Plaid Cymru, addressed the council. Prior to this, the Corporation insisted that delegations should address the water committee instead. Additionally, the patronizing attitude of some Liverpool officials exacerbated tensions, as evidenced by John Braddock's derogatory remarks towards Welsh protesters, implying that their opposition stemmed from their inability to sustain themselves in Wales. This sentiment was echoed by Liverpool's deputy town clerk, Mr. Harvey, who callously remarked on the ownership of the water with a dismissive "After all, God provided it." Such dismissiveness and lack of empathy further fuelled discontent among Welsh residents, as evidenced by objections raised by the Labour MP for Caernarvon, Goronwy Roberts, who criticized the insensitivity and arrogance of the process during the second reading of the Bill in 1957.

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These objections underscored not only the procedural flaws in the decision-making process but also the deeper grievances regarding the perceived disregard for Welsh interests and the erosion of Welsh autonomy. The resistance against the Tryweryn reservoir project was thus not merely a reaction to the physical displacement of a community but also a manifestation of the broader struggle for recognition, representation, and self-determination within the Welsh nationalist movement.[2]

J. R. Jones's a historian focused on the concept of "cydymdreiddiad" or interpenetration, emphasizing the intricate relationship between land and language when explaining why this flooding was so significant for Wales. He argued that a people's connection to their land is reflected through their language, as seen in the naming of geographical features such as mountains, rivers, and villages. Through language, the land becomes infused with nationality, history, and mythology, becoming an

integral part of people's lives. Jones eloquently described this relationship, stating that people perceive, discuss, and love their land through the lens of their language.

However, Jones lamented that while in certain parts of Wales, this interpenetration of land and language served as a reminder of Welsh distinctiveness, elsewhere, Welsh identity was diminishing in the face of advancing Britishness. He pointed to instances like the loss of areas like Tryweryn and the Gwendraeth Valley, where Welshness was being eroded, leaving behind only remnants in the form of place names. The drowning of Tryweryn and similar events represented more than just the loss of land; they symbolized the loss of Welsh identity and heritage, as the Welsh people were displaced and absorbed into a broader national identity.

Jones drew parallels with the philosophical concept of "being" and the importance of geographical space, quoting Tillich to highlight the significance of space in defining identity and power dynamics. He argued that the struggle for possession of space was not merely about physical occupation but about asserting power and control. In the case of Wales, the drowning of Tryweryn and proposals for further developments exemplified the lack of a centre of power for the Welsh people to resist the encroachment of the English/British nation. The Welsh found themselves marginalized and dispossessed, with their territorial and cultural integrity increasingly threatened.

In essence, Jones's analysis highlighted the complex intersection of land, language, and identity in Wales, shedding light on the struggles faced by the Welsh people in maintaining their distinctiveness amidst broader political and cultural pressures. The events at Tryweryn epitomized this struggle,

serving as a poignant reminder of the ongoing battle for Welsh autonomy and recognition within the United Kingdom.

Other moments began or had a new life force as a result of activism against the flooding. Movements such as the Welsh Language Society used direct (but non-violent) forms of political action to protest against the secondary position afforded to the Welsh language by the British state in Wales, whether in official documents or on road signage. Campaigns to elevate the use of Welsh in official business and for increased Welsh-language broadcasting brought about change and demonstrated an element of receptiveness among authorities to Welsh nationalist concerns.[4]

The decline of the language was also associated with the decline of other mainstays of traditional Welsh culture, most notably the chapels. Attendance went into a headlong decline after the religious revival of 1904/5, leaving the derelict chapel as a familiar landmark in Welsh towns and villages. By the 1960s, sympathetic observers were proclaiming that Welsh culture and the Welsh language were in crisis. In 1962, Saunders Lewis, the former president of the Welsh nationalist party, delivered a radio lecture under the title *Tynged yr Iaith* ('The Fate of the Language'), in which he warned that the Welsh language would be extinct by the end of the century unless drastic action was taken. The plight of traditional Welsh communities was further underlined by the plans of Liverpool Corporation to demolish and submerge the village of Capel Celyn. Despite extensive protests, the plan went ahead, and a vibrant Welsh community was wiped from the map. The event was, however, a pyrrhic victory for those who wished to exploit Welsh resources. It caused outrage across Wales and, along with

Lewis's call to arms, inspired the emergence of a 'militant' movement in defence of the Welsh language and the Welsh way of life.

The consequent cultural and political resurgence had important consequences. It was accompanied by political advances for Plaid Cymru, notably at Carmarthen in 1966, where the party's leader, Gwynfor Evans, won a by-election in what had previously been a Labour seat. By the 1970s, Plaid was making breakthroughs in north Wales, and was even showing signs of challenging Labour in its valley strongholds. Plaid's political advance was also accompanied by a wider cultural renaissance, spearheaded by Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg (The Welsh Language Society), founded in the wake of Lewis's broadcast in 1962. Cymdeithas instigated a campaign of non-violent direct action to agitate for measures to protect the language, including sit-ins in public places, a boycott of English-only state documents and, most controversially, the destruction and defacement of English-only road signs. The society was instigated by a younger generation of Welsh speakers, who began to assert a more confident and updated expression of Welsh culture. They embraced musical performers such as Dafydd Iwan and Meic Stephens who sang politically charged protest songs in Welsh. This political and cultural resurgence was also accompanied by a more militant movement, consisting of the theatrical, publicity-hungry, semi-comical 'Free Wales Army', and the underground, far more serious Mudiad Amddiffyn Cymru ('Movement for the Defence of Wales', MAC). MAC instigated a series of explosions, attacking water pipelines and symbols of British authority, before its leader, John Jenkins, was finally arrested in 1969.[5]

Many of the prior flooded areas, such as Llanwddyn in Montgomeryshire and Ynysyfelin, north of Merthyr Tydfil, were far more substantial than Capel Celyn, the hamlet which lies beneath the waters

of Llyn Celyn in Snowdonia. It was the combination of time and place that made Tryweryn such a symbolic moment in Welsh history, and which sets Capel Celyn apart from all the other lost settlements. The early 1960s in Wales was a period when a renewed interest in devolution coincided with a sharp decline in the number of Welsh speakers. As one of the last virtually monoglot Welsh communities, Capel Celyn came to symbolize both the pressure on the language and the apparent powerlessness of Welsh MPs to protect Welsh interests.[6]

Plaid Cymru's the Welsh nationalist political party in Wales, committed to Welsh independence from the United Kingdom grew considerably in support during the 1950s and 60s. Their arguments gained traction following the Tryweryn controversy in 1957, when Parliament approved the bill allowing the Liverpool Corporation to flood the Tryweryn valley in Merioneth, despite no Welsh MPs supporting Liverpool's initiative. This incident reinforced Plaid Cymru's assertion that the Welsh community lacked power under the existing political framework. Gwynfor Evans' steadfast leadership garnered widespread admiration, even from those who didn't fully align with his goals. The dwindling number of Welsh speakers and the erosion of Welsh cultural values fuelled the belief that only unwavering nationalism could safeguard the nation from extinction.[7]

During the eight years it took to build the Tryweryn dam, there was uproar. Plaid Cymru favoured peaceful protest with a 250,000 signature petition, demanding Wales be given control of its internal affairs. However, this was not enough for some, and direct action was taken with the blowing up of a transformer at the Tryweryn dam in 1963. Owen Williams was convicted of stealing explosives to blow up a pylon feeding electricity to the dam. In 1966, the new dam at the Clywedog Reservoir, built to supply water to Birmingham, was bombed. Plaid Cymru's response was: 'No one should be unduly

surprised that this has happened. The destruction of Welsh-speaking communities and the exploitation of Welsh water resources without material return is a symbolic example of the outrageous way in which Wales is treated by successive London Governments.

In the context of the objections and controversy surrounding the Tryweryn project, R.S. Thomas, a prominent Welsh poet, maintained a notable silence regarding the use of Welsh land for supplying water to English cities. Despite the fervent uproar over the flooding of Welsh communities, Thomas's literary works, such as 'What is a Welshman?' and 'Reservoirs,' predominantly focused on themes of national identity and cultural preservation rather than directly addressing the issue of land appropriation.

Thomas's references to individuals like Thomas Charles and Henry Richard in his poems suggest a critique of what he perceived as a sense of servility and passivity among his fellow Welshmen. These figures represent symbols of cultural stagnation and spiritual decline, highlighting Thomas's lament over the perceived erosion of Welsh identity and values.

Furthermore, Thomas's apparent disregard for the issue of land use in the context of Welsh nationalism may have been influenced by the views of Saunders Lewis, a prominent Welsh nationalist leader. Lewis famously prioritized the preservation of the Welsh language over demands for self-government for Wales, shaping Thomas's perspective on the priorities of Welsh nationalism.

The theories of nationalism, as referenced in Thomas's work, highlight the importance of territorial boundaries in defining national identity. While some, like Gellner, prioritize the nation-state over specific historical territories, others, such as Anthony D. Smith, emphasize the significance of historical continuity and territorial boundaries in defining nationalism. The nationalists objecting to the flooding of Welsh land expressed a belief in Wales as a historically defined country with its own territorial boundaries, echoing Smith's model of nationalism.[8]

Despite increasing support for Plaid Cymru, the party struggled to secure parliamentary representation, leading to frustration among its members who felt marginalized in Welsh politics. Some individuals, driven by patriotism, resorted to violent actions, including attacks on installations at Tryweryn and the formation of the 'Free Wales Army' in 1963. The frustrations within Plaid Cymru's ranks contributed to direct action on language issues following Saunders Lewis's radio lecture criticizing the party's focus on parliamentary elections, especially after the disappointing results of the 1964 general election.

The return of the Labour party to power in 1964 marked a significant shift in Welsh governance. The establishment of a Secretary of State for Wales signalled a significant step towards greater autonomy. Despite initial reluctance, the Welsh Office was gradually given more authority leading to its expanded responsibilities over housing, education, industry, and other sectors. The Welsh Office's enhanced economic role, in the 1970s, empowered Welsh decision-making through the allocation of public funds and strengthened the concept of Welsh territorial unity.

Although the Welsh Office operated within a centralized framework influenced by the priorities of the central government, its existence bolstered the perception of Wales as a unified entity, prompting the

establishment of other organizations to reflect this unity. These developments, including the creation of councils for arts, sports, and consumers, contributed to the evolving landscape of Welsh governance and identity.[9]

It's important to note that alongside prevalent Welsh nationalist aspirations, there exists a long history of Welsh involvement in British imperial endeavours. The term 'British Empire' itself was coined by Dr. John Dee, a Welshman, as early as 1580. Welsh individuals have often participated willingly in imperial activities, serving as soldiers, missionaries, administrators, and colonists. It could be argued that supporters of movements like the Welsh Defence League and Cymuned represent more jingoistic manifestations of this British identity.

By acknowledging the existence of competing and ambivalent nationalism across the political spectrum, this essay aims to fill certain gaps in Welsh history. It sheds light on extremist voices to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics shaping Welsh identity and nationalism over time.[10]

In conclusion, the construction of the Tryweryn reservoir stands as a pivotal moment in Welsh history, encapsulating the complex interplay of political, cultural, and socio-economic forces within the Welsh nationalist discourse. Through a comprehensive examination of historical events and scholarly perspectives, this paper has shed light on the multifaceted objections raised against the project, ranging from procedural inadequacies to principled opposition rooted in ethical and moral considerations.

The initial objections highlighted procedural deficiencies and perceived arrogance on the part of the Liverpool Corporation, underscoring the broader grievances regarding the disregard for Welsh interests and autonomy. The resistance against the Tryweryn reservoir project was not merely a reaction to the physical displacement of a community but also a manifestation of the broader struggle for recognition, representation, and self-determination within the Welsh nationalist movement.

Moreover, the interconnectedness of land, language, and identity, as articulated by J.R. Jones, underscored the profound impact of territorial dispossession on Welsh identity and autonomy. The drowning of Tryweryn symbolized more than just the loss of land; it represented the erosion of Welsh identity and heritage, further exacerbating the struggle for Welsh autonomy and recognition within the United Kingdom.

Additionally, the resurgence of political activism and cultural renaissance following the Tryweryn controversy demonstrated the resilience of Welsh nationalism in the face of adversity. Movements such as the Welsh Language Society and Plaid Cymru played pivotal roles in advocating for Welsh language rights and greater autonomy, contributing to a renewed sense of Welsh identity and solidarity.

Furthermore, the paper explored the broader implications of the Tryweryn controversy, including its reverberations in Welsh governance, activism, and nationalist ideologies. The formation of organizations like the Welsh Office and the emergence of extremist voices like the Free Wales Army underscored the evolving landscape of Welsh governance and identity, reflecting the intricate dynamics shaping Welsh nationalism over time.

By acknowledging the existence of competing and ambivalent nationalisms across the political spectrum, this paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of Welsh history. Through a comprehensive analysis of diverse narratives and voices, it seeks to fill certain gaps in Welsh historiography, shedding light on the complex and contested nature of Welsh identity and nationalism. Ultimately, the Tryweryn controversy serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring struggle for Welsh autonomy, recognition, and self-determination within the broader framework of British imperial history.

Word Count 2754

Footnotes

[1]Michael Cunningham, “Public Policy and Normative Language: Utility, Community and Nation in the Debate over the Construction of Tryweryn Reservoir,” *Parliamentary Affairs* 60, no. 4 (May 12, 2007): 625–36, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsm037>.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Geraint Jenkins, *A SOCIAL HISTORY of the WELSH LANGUAGE* (University of Wales Press, 2015), 133–34.

[4]Nick Brooke, “Learning the Lessons of Terrorist Failure: The Dogs That Didn’t Bark in Scotland and Wales,” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, March 26, 2019.

[5]Mark Garnett, *The Routledge Handbook of British Politics and Society* (Routledge, 2020), 413–14.

[6]Vaughan Roderick, “Tryweryn: How Reservoir of Anger ‘Fuelled Nationalist Cause,’” *BBC News*, October 21, 2015, sec. Wales politics, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-politics-34533405>.

[7]John Davies, *A History of Wales* (Penguin UK, 2007), 652–53.

[8]Clive Weed, “What Is a Welshman? Nationalism and R. S. Thomas. S,” *Open Research Online*, 2018, https://oro.open.ac.uk/56086/2/Weed_A329_RVoR.pdf.

[9]John Davies, *A History of Wales*

[10]Dominic Alessio, “The Dragon Is Not Always Red: The Extreme Right and Ultra-Nationalism in Wales,” *National Identities* 17, no. 3 (February 27, 2015): 289–309, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2014.987658>.

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