How the Tryweryn Reservoir Changed Welsh History

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As of March 2023, only 29.7% of residents in Wales could speak Welsh. In 1961 only 62 years before 25% of the population spoke Welsh. One would think that over 60 years the number of Welsh speakers would go up by more than 4%. But the Welsh language and culture had been sacrificed. An example of the destruction of Welsh culture is what happened in Capel Celyn and the building of the Tryweryn Reservoir. Capel Celyn was a small village in Wales that was home to a lot of Welsh-speaking people, the village had a strong sense of Welsh culture despite its size. The building of the Tryweryn reservoir clearly shows how oppressed the Welsh are and is an important part of Welsh history. There was a lot of civil unrest leading up to the building of the dam, response to it being built, and the long-term impacts this had on Welsh history.
The Welsh have never been treated well in the grand scheme of things. Wales is its own country and has its own cultural identity even though it's still part of the UK. Some people considered Wales to be a British colony that only gained its independence in the 19th century. The drowning of Capel Celyn is a larger issue where Welsh people have no power and are getting no say especially when it comes to politics.

Before the Tryweryn Reservoir was built there was a lot of build-up happening before the event. In 1925 a Welsh Nationalist Party was formed. The party was created to protect Welsh culture with the former president of the party being Saunders Lewis. His goal was to get Welsh recognized as an official language in the United Kingdom. The Welsh Language Society decided to help campaign for his cause, which led to the BBC Radio Cymru and a Welsh TV channel, both made in 1945. The Welsh language being officially recognized helped strengthen Welsh nationalism and added a sense of pride to those who spoke Welsh therefore strengthening Welsh culture as a whole. The free Wales Army's work wasn't done there though and continued to protest throughout the building of the dam.
In 1950 representatives from Liverpool started looking for a good place to build a reservoir. Some options were the English Lake District in Wales but the idea never saw the light of day due to how expensive it would be. They would also be destroying cultural lands which was another issue. In 1950 they began looking at the Tryweryn River which was in North Wales, and around 50 miles away from Liverpool. The representatives from Liverpool were in favor of something that most Welsh people didn't want and seemed to be fine with destroying cultural lands when money wasn't an issue.

In 1956 there was a huge protest in Bala which 4000 people attended to show support for not building the Tryweryn Reservoir. Many important people and societies supported the cause and wrote letters of support such as Eamon de Valera, The Capel Celyn

Protection Committee and The Farmers Union of Wales. The Capel Celyn Defence Committee was made once the public learned about the dam, in total “1,055 public bodies expressed their opposition to the scheme – including 125 public authorities (Griffiths, 2014). " page 457. This shows that it doesn’t matter how many important people were against the building of the reservoir, the people who aren’t being oppressed will always have their way.

In December 1956 The Liverpool Cooperation decided to build the dam anyway. They argued that Liverpool needed water, It would be too expensive to build somewhere else and they wanted to help grow their economy. They had 252 votes for the dam and 161 against. Only residents of Liverpool who paid taxes were able to make the conference and have any say. City employees of Liverpool didn’t have to go to work for the day so they could vote for the people they worked for. People who lived in Capel Celyn had no say. The Tryweryn Reservoir showed how little power the Welsh had. The protests didn’t make a difference, neither did the Welsh public opinion. This caused a stronger sense of nationalism since the flood was a bit of a wake-up call.

This is similar to how people are writing to their government to ceasefire in Palestine. This shows how history is always repeating itself and why it’s good to learn from our past and stop oppressing one group of people for the other group's gain.

In 1965, 75 people were forced from their homes, 12 farms, 1 school, 1 chapel, and 1 post office. Cai, by Euring Salisbury, is about how people choose between digging up flooded graves or keeping them there. This town has faced a bunch of devastation but there is more to this symbolically than losing a town. Flooding a whole place shows how poorly the Welsh were still being treated. “Remember Tryweryn" became an important phrase that turned into a bit of “a verb To Tryweryn - to exploit the land or natural resources of a small nation, or to destroy its social life or language, in the interests of a big neighboring country or part of it.” p.463 (Atkins, 2018) The message is important because it means to stand up for your culture.

A child “saw and heard the dreadful scene of mud and dirt and noise - that which a child would imagine would be similar to the hell of the First World War...He [my father] turned to us, his eyes full of tears, and said, ‘Children, whatever you do in your lives, don’t ever forget this.” p.465 MP, Elfyn (Llwyd, 2014) This is someone's real-life account of what happened and it is important to know other people's stories. When you put a face to the numbers it makes a bit of a difference and humanizes the situation.

The Times (1956) described the protests as arguing for “Welsh resources for the Welsh... It is bad for Liverpool to come to Wales, and continue to be more nationally conscious, as it would be for the French to filch some English resources. What would the English say then?” p.462 (Atkins,2018). Another quote I found asks a similar question “Second, how would the case be changed, if at all, if the community were different? Again, if the opposition were principally based on the English destruction of a

Welsh community then the nature or type of that community is secondary or possibly irrelevant. If the community had been urban, English-speaking, and lacking in ‘folk culture’, the loss would have been of the same order and to be equally deplored.” p.634 (Cunningham, 2007.) The article brings up a good point about what the response would have been if they had taken water from a different community. The thing is that didn’t happen because it’s easy to oppress people that are seen as below you.
There were very few accounts of women, lgbt, and POC people’s perspectives on this. One thing that has always bothered me about history is the lack of focus on women and POC people. Not taking the time to learn about these groups gives the impression that these oppressed groups have done nothing of importance in history but that is not the case. These groups are just as smart and capable as everyone else yet it was really hard for me to find any information about them whatsoever. I can only find information about white people so do with that what you will.

In 1963 Three men from the Free Wales Army broke a transformer at a construction site “Emyr Llywelyn Jones, Owain Williams, and John Albert Jones. Emyr Llywelyn and Owain Williams were imprisoned for this crime, while John Albert Jones was granted three years probation.” p.463 (Atkins 2018) This is important to the cause because it shows that people cared about Wales and didn’t want their culture to be destroyed, lots of people protested against the cause but Capel Celyn was damned anyway. In 1963 the free Wales army started taking off with John Cayo Evans as their leader. They are a Welsh nationalist group. Various bomb attacks and acts of arson took place. Water pipelines, dams, and the Pembrey Air Force Base in Cardiff were attacked. In 1969 the police started arresting more people who were a part of this group
On October 19 2005, Liverpool apologized for the flood. This is similar to when Justin Trudeau apologized to the Kamagatamuru in 2016 or when the Canadian government apologized for mistreating Indigenous people after they had done the damage. The response to the apology wasn’t the best, it seemed as though the government was apologizing due to the backlash they received, rather than for actually doing something wrong. Some people thought that the apology came too late. “In 2015, Plaid Cymru MP, Liz Roberts, speaking of Westminster's plans to build a new ‘super-prison’ in Wrexham, evoked the memory of Capel Celyn, stating that: ... As long as Wales is shackled to this imbalanced institution at a constant democratic disadvantage vis-a-vis England, there will always be another Tryweryn waiting to happen" (Williamson, 2015). P.464 Tryweryn is just like the Trident nuclear submarines in Scotland which some people refer to as the “Scottish Tryweryn.” The Scottish people weren’t listened to by the UK Westminster government. P.464
In terms of Welsh Nationalism, this event made the people of Wales all fired up because it didn’t matter if everyone in Wales was against something, they were so oppressed that the British always had the final say. Since Wales is part of the UK there is that

sense of victory when winning World War I but that sense of victory was gone the second the British started to abuse them as well. Wales always gets the short end of the stick, the British take their lands and try to take away their language and culture and they got a bad deal when the Treaty of Versailles was happening. Wales is always struggling in comparison to London.

This reminds me of Indigenous people in Canada. Similar to how if people spoke Welsh in school they would be punished, the same thing happened to the Native people in Canada. Instead of learning from history it just keeps on repeating itself. A lot of the Aboriginal people in Canada are living in reserves with no clean drinking water, and a lot of Indigenous women go missing and no one seems to care. We live on their stolen land while they are suffering through generational trauma.
In my opinion, Welsh people only get listened to when they make a big fuss about something like the Rebecca riots. Even then they don't get listened to at all the unfortunate times. I remember during the black lives matter movement in 2020 people were wondering why POC people were so mad. People usually get fed up when an issue like this has been happening for a long time and they only finally get listened to when everything piles up. Even now in Lampeter, our university isn't taken care of as much as the Birmingham or London campus even though we are the University of Wales, not the University of London.

In conclusion, the Tryweryn Reservoir should never have been built and deeply impacted Welsh history. Before the building of the reservoir, the people from Liverpool could have chosen any other place but decided to displace a whole town despite the public not liking that. This fueled the Welsh Free Army and Saunder Lewis guys and the riots. The reservoir was built and the people of the small town had to choose between leaving their dead loved ones underwater or taking the graves with them. Imagine your whole town getting flooded for someone else's gain. This reminds me of a short story I read where people have to suffer for other people's gain. This happens all the time in the real world. There are people in third world countries getting paid next to nothing and working long hours so that we can wear the clothes that we wear. That's why when people boycott specific brands or hate on specific artists I find it to be a bit silly because most brands and celebrities have done wrong things and aren't very ethical. The real question is why do we feel like we have to oppress certain groups for others' gain? If we wanted to learn from history we would stop but that just doesn't seem to happen. I wonder if we ever could live in a world where we don't have to put other people down to be happy and that there would be enough resources to go around. The building of the Tryweryn reservoir is important because it's a good reminder of how oppressed the Welsh were and how to stop something like that from happening again. Things like this have continued to happen all around the world, things like this have happened in

Scotland and are happening in Palestine right now. The real question is will we ever learn from our past?

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