

RITA SINGER
Reviews
Gwalia Patagonia
Jon Gower
Gomer, £14.99

Celebrating the 150th anniversary of the *Mimosa's* landing at Porth Madryn, Jon Gower's *Gwalia Patagonia* is the latest contribution to an already extensive body of history books and travel writing about Y Wladfa. In twenty-two chapters, he covers a truly astonishing breadth of topics: the historical circumstances which led to the establishment of a Welsh settlement in the most unlikely of places, the first endeavours in making the Patagonian territory habitable, the Argentinian genocide of the Tehuelche, the rise and fall of the railway, Welsh-language culture, family histories, natural history, trade relations and local myths and legends. The exploration of a century and a half of Welsh lives in desert country through broad historical brushstrokes as well as the fine details of personal stories show the author's commitment to the topic. *Gwalia Patagonia* is thus largely indebted to Gower's own journey to Argentina.

Blending critical distance with a genuine engagement with his conversation partners, Jon Gower's encounters with the people of Patagonia always ring true. Like the oft-quoted Bruce Chatwin, who appears to be Gower's main source of inspiration, the author hurdles from location to location. Unfortunately, his leaps across the map cost him his overarching narrative thread. As detailed snapshots, the individual chapters stand well by themselves. In their sum, however, it is not always apparent what Gower wants to achieve. Covering the decades leading up to and during the settlement, the first couple of chapters demonstrate this vagueness most prominently as Gower's chronicling of historical events is often smothered by florid prose. His verdict on William Vaughan's failure to establish another Welsh settlement in Newfoundland is indicative of this: 'Vaughan's claimed land would be swallowed up in the fog of history's forgetfulness, the words of his celebrant's poem fading on the sepia-coloured manuscript, the ink fading with the inexorable passage of time'.

A further shortcoming of *Gwalia Patagonia* is the inexplicable fixation on the male settlers. This is puzzling to say the least, as Gower repeatedly points out that in 19th-century Patagonia, women vastly outnumbered the male population. Certainly, Gower affectionately chronicles the lives of the writer Eluned Morgan and Ellen Davies, the latter growing up in Y Wladfa but living out her days in Wales. Gower is full of respect for their resilience, their defiant lives on small homesteads. However, on the whole the reader comes away with the impression that women's contributions to Welsh Patagonia are mere accidents. In fact, the author says as much when describing the vital introduction of irrigation in the desert: 'It was all made possible by accident. [...] The level of the river water rose, threatening to over-run the banks, which made Aaron [Jenkins]'s wife, Rachel, think that it might be an idea to open up a channel from the river into their fields, to let the floodwaters in.' Halfway into the book, after countless descriptions of farmers' feats in making the desert arable and farming cattle, the reader finally discovers that all these accomplishments are owed to a blip in history!

The portrayal of Patagonia's indigenous people is also problematic. Although Gower is very determined to give a rounded picture of the all but extinct Tehuelche cultures, he does not overcome his Eurocentrism. Admittedly, he derides the early outlandish descriptions by European explorers of the indigenous Patagonians and details the genocidal atrocities committed by the Argentinian government against the indigenous peoples. However, in his historical and contemporary treatment of the Tehuelche, Gower restricts himself to 'talking about' them instead of 'talking with' their descendants. Thus he maintains their characterisation as an exotic, mysterious

people who ultimately remain unknowable and lost to a mythic past. In part this impression is due to Gower's determination to establish the Welsh colonists as being European settlers who are beyond the accusation of discriminating against the Tehuelche. The religion of indigenous people is reduced to myths, and active Welsh missionary work is completely ignored. Instead, Gower focuses on the Tehuelches' great fondness for the hymn singing which won them over to Protestantism, although their descendants still have a weakness for building shrines in the desert.

In light of current portrayals of the Welsh settlers elsewhere, particularly Huw Edwards' programme *Patagonia*, these shortcomings are not unique. Rather, the oversight of women's contributions to building the colony, outside the feminine staples of literature and child-rearing, and the silencing of indigenous voices are symptomatic of the vast majority of contemporary approaches to the topic. Too often Welshness is reduced to ancestry, language and Nonconformity. In short, this framing does a great disservice to the complexity of Welsh identities in Patagonia and beyond.

Gower does succeed in the instances where he enters full-on travel-writer mode. Here, his writing captures the spirit of the landscape and embellishes it with a smattering of stories from *Y Wladfa*, with its continuation of customs and traditions brought over from Europe, and how they have changed over the years and become part of an Argentinian way of life. For him, Patagonia is more a state of mind than a clearly demarcated place on a map. While the border between Argentina and Chile had been more or less undefined until relatively recently, Patagonia uncovers itself to the traveller and the dweller by the quality of its soil, its vegetation, the wind and its oral history. Lived memory is key to understanding the place. Tracing a host of local stories, Gower shows that '[b]orders always pulse with possibilities and tensions'. There is an unexpected anarchy to be found in the desert. Patagonia is an impossible place, a place of failures, but also somewhere which encourages anyone who dares to set foot here to cultivate their strength of mind, no matter the misfortunes which have befallen those who preceded them.

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