Gaiman Journal;

Just Think of It as a Little Wales With Cactuses

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Body

When guests arrive at the Hosteria Gwesty Tywi, a local bed-and-breakfast, Gwyn and Monica Jones pass around a gourd of mate, the potent herbal tea that Argentines drink communally to establish friendship.

Mr. Jones, 36, a recent immigrant from ***Wales***, has picked up better than passable Spanish, developed a taste for beef and taken to drinking more wine and less beer.

"He's very Argentine," Mrs. Jones, 38, who though born here is of Welsh immigrant stock, said with a laugh. "And I am very Argentine, too."

But the Joneses speak Welsh with each other and with their 2-year-old son, Macsen. And in a twist on Argentina's history of repeated waves of European immigration, they have set up a Web site in Welsh and Spanish in which they advertise their lodging and chronicle how the English stole the Celtic crown from the Welsh at the turn of the 14th century.

"Every day," Mr. Jones said, "someone from ***Wales*** is faxing, E-mailing, phoning or arriving here. ***Gaiman*** is a Welsh home away from home."

It was the desolation of this windswept corner of Patagonia, where the land and even the ***cactuses*** are dry and cracked, that attracted 153 hardy Welsh shepherds and coal miners here in 1865. Colonists kept arriving in central Patagonia until the eve of World War I, as word got back to ***Wales*** that Argentina was a place that welcomed the Welsh.

The Chubut Valley colonists' goal was to gain some measure of independence from the English, speak their native Welsh without interference and let their identity blossom.

The original colonists accomplished all that, and more, in establishing a lasting cultural enclave with roots deep enough to defend against time and assimilation.

This is a town of low mud-brick houses trimmed with ivy, of Protestant churches marked by signs in an ancient language that only 600,000 people in the world speak today. The place has become a beacon for Welsh people

from the British Isles and the United States. And the lyricism and practical lessons of Celtic folklore, fables and poetry have attracted the interest of a growing number of Argentines who have no Welsh ancestors at all.

Welsh is taught in the local public schools, and learning Welsh is becoming the fashionable thing to do for adults here and in neighboring towns -- even among the non-Welsh.

Community festivals known as eisteddfod, which are marked by friendly competitions of choir singing and recitations of Welsh poetry, are attracting Argentine visitors and tourists from all over Patagonia and even from as far away as Buenos Aires. In recognition of the melding of cultures, tango contests have been added to the festivities.

At a local school this week, eight ***Gaiman*** teen-agers spent a morning around two tables attaching pseudonyms to children's drawings to be judged at an eisteddfod. Although only two students were of Welsh descent, four are taking Welsh language classes, and all said Welsh cultural activities were the center of their social lives.

"Without Welsh, ***Gaiman*** would be boring," said Romina Urios, 17.

Carlos Blasetti, a 27-year-old Welsh-language teacher who was supervising the youths, said: "As cultures around the world become more and more homogenized, what we are doing here is very important. If you don't go back to your roots, you lose your identity."

The Welsh renaissance here began in 1965, on the 100th anniversary of the first Welsh landing in Patagonia on board the ship Mimosa. Cultural interchanges with the old country were started, and the eisteddfod, not held in decades, were re-established.

The next breakthrough came in 1991, when retired Welsh teachers began to come to give language courses. The practice has been stepped up in recent years, with younger teachers staying for a year or more, on full-time salaries ultimately paid for by British taxpayers.

Juan Carlos Davis, 28, an administrator at the local government pension office whose father was of Welsh descent, recalled the moment eight years ago when he was working in a grocery store and a retired teacher from ***Wales*** came up to him.

"After asking what was my last name," Mr. Davis said, "he asked me why I didn't speak Welsh. It was as if he stabbed me in the back. Then, when he invited me to join him, of course I said yes."

Today, after dedicating himself to several years of language study, Mr. Davis teaches Welsh to other adults in his spare time.

"It's hard to explain what the attraction is," he said. "But I'm noticing that my generation and even more those younger than us have this urge to find our roots."

In 1992, 60 Argentines in and around ***Gaiman*** took Welsh lessons. That number has increased to more than 200 students today. Although no survey has been taken, an estimated half of the 5,000 people in ***Gaiman*** speak at least some Welsh and 20 percent can carry on more complex conversations. And fluency, once common only among the elderly, is on the rise.

A recent adult Welsh class in ***Gaiman***, in which two students and their teacher worked on verbs while translating a simple story about a tranquil Welsh lake in summer, was a mix of good fun and serious study, but also food for the soul.

For one of the students, Irma Sara da Graca, a 64-year-old retired teacher, taking Welsh lessons since 1992 has been an opportunity "to discover the genes of the grandmother I never knew."

She added: "My life has been so enriched, because I identify with this culture. Why? Don't ask. It's something special."

Welsh spoken in Argentina has evolved ***little*** in a century and a half. But the Patagonian Welsh has a few modifications, some of which have added poetry.

"Awrlais," the Spanish Welsh word for clock, for instance, literally means "the voice of the hour." A teacher from ***Wales*** said she had never heard the word before she came here.

"The flourishing of our language is like the Welsh legend of the red dragon," said Mrs. Jones, the lodge owner. "Every time it fought the white dragon, it would disappear, only to return and flourish again."

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Graphic

Photo: Thanks to hardy colonists who started arriving in 1865, Welsh is alive and well in ***Gaiman***, Patagonia, where Ana Pinciroli, left, and Irma Sara da Graca, right, learn the language from Sandra Day. (Horacio Paone for The New York Times)

Map of Argentina showing the location of ***Gaiman***: In ***Gaiman***, Welsh colonists built a home away from home.

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