



“Reservoirs of the Subconscious of a People”: The Local, National, and Global Resonances of a Lost Hinterland

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Rural space in Wales is always political. Historically framed as the “Welsh green desert,” a wild, unpeopled, empty space, the hinterland of mid Wales has been a crucible of colliding debates around protecting cultural identity on the one hand, and the need to provide essential natural resources for urban development on the other (Cliffe 1860; Griffiths 2014). Claims about the emptiness and barrenness of this hinterland have repeatedly been used to justify state exploitation of the landscapes’ resources. This has led to land acquisition, the displacement of people, the creation of reservoirs, afforestation, and the establishment of military

The poet R. S. Thomas wrote the poem “Reservoirs” soon after the opening of Llyn Celyn and Llyn Clywedog. Its opening lines are “There are places in Wales I don’t go: / Reservoirs that are the subconscious / Of a people” (1968, 26).

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training zones, and has potency in recent debates around rewilding in the Cambrian Mountains. This chapter will look at the ways in which recent screen fictions such as *Pen Talar* (2010), *Yr Ymadawiad* (The Passing, 2015), and *Patagonia* (2010) suggest that hinterlands, in this context, can stand for the national, but also that we might perceive articulations of global processes in the act of flooding a localized space, and a rippling out of resonances with other hinterlands across the globe.

Wales has a notorious reputation for being a wet country. According to the Meteorological Office, Wales is one of the wettest parts of the United Kingdom, with some areas experiencing 270 wet days a year. The topography of Wales influences the Welsh climate. Being situated on the west coast, surrounded on three sides by seas, alongside three mountain ranges—Snowdonia in the north, the Cambrian mountains which run from north to south, and the Brecon Beacon in the south east—results in a jetstream rising swiftly from the sea into the hills. The air cools rapidly as it ascends, leading to moisture dropping as rain. Water, therefore, is a constant presence in Wales, falling from the sky, flowing down the mountains and hills through its rivers, and returning to the seas. It is a frequent topic of daily conversation and the butt of several jokes. However, the material behaviors of water also result in threat; its innate ability to submerge and repossess land leads to the transforming of the landscape and the endangering of human life. Many areas of Wales, be they coastlines or lakes, are associated with vivid mythic stories around the power and threat of water. The most famous example is the myth of the kingdom of Cantre'r Gwaelod, sometimes called the Welsh Atlantis, purported to be located in Cardigan Bay. Drowned by rising seas after a drunken gatekeeper fell asleep and failed to close the flood gates, it has been suggested that the origins of the myth are in the folk-memory of a post-glacial rise in sea levels, which is reinforced by elements of the local landscape, namely a petrified forest and causeways (Whitehead et al. 2007, 75). There are numerous mythological and historical narratives that detail how water's material ability to reclaim land are numerous and that illustrate the impact of water on the physical and cultural landscape of Wales.

WALES AS A GEOGRAPHIC HINTERLAND

The flooding of Capel Celyn village in 1965 is arguably the most dramatic hydropolitical event in the history of the United Kingdom, and it continues to hold a central place in the Welsh consciousness over half a century

later (Griffiths 2014). Despite mass (although not universal) objection, the Tryweryn River was dammed, flooding Capel Celyn village and surrounding farmland to make way for a reservoir, Llyn Celyn, to service Liverpool and the Wirral. The village was one of the last Welsh-speaking areas in Wales, and the flooding resulted in the displacement of 48 people, while 12 houses and farms, the post office, the school, and a chapel with cemetery were all lost.

Stephen Daniels has noted that “particular landscapes achieve the status of national icons” (1993, 5). Rural landscapes are often considered the “real” and “authentic” essence of the nation, and they are an integral part of the nationalist narrative in Wales, resulting in the relationship between culture and land, and people and place being highly politicized (Gruffudd 1995, 150; Bohata 2004, 81).

Tryweryn was not the first requisition of rural Welsh land by the Ministry of Defence and English cities for the benefit of their inhabitants, nor indeed was it the first instance of flooding Welsh valleys or exploiting Welsh water resources. In the late nineteenth century, the industrial growth of towns and cities such as Birmingham and the Liverpool area fueled a need for new sources of healthy water supplies and led to an appropriation of Welsh water resources (Whitehead et al. 2007, 70). To this end, in the 1880s, the village of Llanwddyn, north Wales, was flooded to create Llyn Efyrynwy, while the Elan Valley Reservoirs in mid Wales were completed in 1906 (Griffiths 2014, 451). Other land acquisitions caused tensions. In 1936, following an announcement that a training school for bombing was to be established on the Llŷn Peninsula, in the heart of the rural Welsh-speaking community, and on a historical site, the buildings were set on fire by Saunders Lewis, D. J. Williams and Lewis Valentine, who were later sentenced to nine months’ imprisonment in Wormwood Scrubs. At the beginning of the Second World War, the War Office acquired approximately 16,000 hectares of land on the Epynt Mountains in the Brecon Beacons for military training, controversially requisitioning 54 homes and evicting 400 people—including 50 farmers—who were displaced from their community and from the land on which many had worked for generations (Davies 2007, 574). For Saunders Lewis, the Government of England was “devouring Wales” and for the Reverend J. Dyfnallt Morgan this was “nothing less than an attempt to destroy our nationality” (Hughes 1998, 95, 98). Furthermore, the impact on the geography of the Welsh language was significant, with the boundary of Welsh-speaking Wales now forcefully remapped 15 kilometers westwards

(Davies 2007, 574). Since the requisitioning of Epynt, further reservoirs have been created—Claerwen as an addition to the Elan Valley dams in 1952, and Clywedog in 1967, to quench the increasing thirst of Birmingham and the West Midlands.

The areas targeted for extractive capitalism, the ones most easily requisitioned by the governments, and which had the potential to derive the most economic advantage were, by their very nature, sparsely populated, Welsh-speaking rural areas (Bohata 2004). The numerous examples of extractive capitalism and land loss cast mid Wales as a “blind spot ... [a] blank canvas,” an undiscovered and unknown place (Jones et al. 2020, 236). In 1975, Raymond Williams recalled

a young bureaucrat ... describing rural mid-Wales as a “wilderness area”, for the outdoor relief of English cities. He never understood why I was so unsocially angry. ... [H]ere was he... looking on a map at rural Wales: at fields and hills soaked with labour, at the living places of farming families, and not even seeing them, seeing only a site for his wilderness. (2003b, 6–7)

More recently, in the pre-publicity for the Ceredigion based series *Hinterland / Y Gwyll* (Fiction Factory for S4C and BBC Cymru Wales, 2013–2016) the producers referred to the area as “a part of the UK that is untapped and undiscovered ... It’s a part of Wales that has not been photographed, a sort of last place in Europe that people don’t know much about—a hinterland rich in history and myth” (Moss 2013). Other areas of Wales have been cast as playgrounds, with post-industrial regeneration on a number of historical industrial sites, including the coal mining valleys of south Wales and the slate quarries of the north. Various tourism initiatives have led to the construction of enormous zip wires being built on historical sites such as the Tower Colliery, the Penrhyn Quarry, and the slate mines of Blaenau Ffestiniog; all of which used to yield significant natural resources to be shipped from Wales. In other rural communities, land is framed by rewilding debates as empty, ruined, unproductive, and unpeopled, a “sheepwrecked” wilderness ripe for restoration (Monbiot 2014, 153).

In his compelling study *Hinterland: America’s New Landscape of Class and Conflict* (2018), Phil A. Neel argues that the key sites of the global economy are not post-industrial cities but rather hinterland areas—rural and semi-rural regions where extractive industries, like mining, and important supply-chain infrastructure are located. The hinterland is an area that

does not map easily onto the widely accepted conceptualization of the rural / urban dichotomy. Indeed, the hinterland is not rural in any conventional sense, but rather a “disavowed, distributed core” where resources continue to be extracted and developed (Neel 2018, 17). He draws attention to the unifying underlying dynamics which allows us to recalibrate the conventional way of seeing Capel Celyn—as a rural, agricultural, peripheral community—and reconceive it as a space intimately connected, by the destination of the journey of its water, to the city of Liverpool and its historical and contemporary global connections. Indeed, when Neel writes of rural regions being “simply abandoned, becoming wastelands for global production. At best they can hope to be transformed into recreation zones, military and prison complexes, or massive sites for primary production—swaths of countryside converted to mines, oil fields, or farms, or simply flooded to make way for reservoirs and hydropower projects serving the cities” (2018, 17), he could be talking of the Welsh experience since the mid twentieth century.

CAPEL CELYN AS DROWNED POSTCOLONIAL HAUNTED HINTERLAND

Since the flooding of Capel Celyn, there has been a deluge of creative and artistic responses which could be characterized as hinterland art and film, which form a visual response to the effect of loss. Among others, the paintings of Claudia Williams, the sculpture of John Meirion Morris, and the installations of Tim Davies have responded powerfully to the drownings, as have musical and performance pieces. *Dŵr* (Water) by Huw Jones, the first single released by Sain Records in 1969, was a protest song about the drowning, and numerous songs by artists as diverse as the Manic Street Preachers, Omaloma, and Y Ffug have referenced it. The history has been the subject of a play, *Porth y Byddar* (2007) by Manon Eames, staged by Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru, novels by Martin Davies and Lloyd Jones, as well as screen fictions. The latter have utilized the history of this drowned hinterland in diverse ways; as aesthetic, as genre, and, I will demonstrate, as a means of identifying contemporary global processes in the historical act of flooding of a localized space.

Pen Talar (Fiction Factory for S4C, 2010) is a historical television serial with its nine episodes punctuated by key events in the political and social history of Wales from 1962 to 2010. It presents a history of Wales through

the emotional lives of its characters, Defi Lewis, his sister Siân, and best friend Doug. Branded as the “Welsh *Heimat*” and taking inspiration from *Our Friends in the North*, it demonstrates the historical serial’s ability “to balance and address the ‘personal’ and the ‘political’ within one complex narrative trajectory” (Creeber 2004, 14). Its central concern is the development of, and subsequent disillusionment with, the so-called nationalist political project (Jones and Woodward 2011, 236).

The drowning of Capel Celyn provides a historical and political context for the Lewis family, but it also provides rich visual imagery. In the first episode, set in 1962–1963, ten-year-old Defi (Sam Davies) dwells on a newspaper headline claiming that, following the drowning of Tryweryn, the Clywedog Valley is being targeted as a reservoir. In the next scene, he is shown in the bath from above, his whole body submerged beneath the water as he holds his breath tightly. Lorraine (Lisa Marged), the object of his schoolboy crush, eerily bathes in a white dress in a pool of water in the woods. Later, the rain lashes over Defi as he discovers her lying and bleeding in the woods following an illegal abortion, a consequence of being groomed and abused by the local chapel minister. Lorraine dies in Defi’s arms, and this event not only haunts him throughout his life, but the watery imagery is central to both the aesthetics and narrative of the series, with rain signifying life-changing events in Defi’s life, providing an intertwining of the personal and the political. After tracing a version of Welsh history over 50 years, *Pen Talar* returns, in the final episode, to the woods, demonstrating the importance of the drowning of Capel Celyn to Defi’s life journey and political awakening. Furthermore it elevates the drowning of a small hinterland to a milestone event in the history of the development of Wales by portraying it as a catalyst that changed the course of a nation, and led ultimately to devolution and the establishment of the National Assembly of Wales (now known as Senedd Cymru / Welsh Parliament).

As *Pen Talar* demonstrates, the drowning of Capel Celyn was seen by nationalists at the time as a colonization of Welsh land, and an attack on the Welsh language. Post-devolution, there has been renewed and increased attention to the extent to which the relationship was colonial, leading to some heated debate, predominantly between historians who claim such a notion is “little more than self-indulgent and potentially offensive” and theorists who claim that the concept is useful as a means of illuminating relations of power, resistance, and complicity between different sites (C. Williams 2005, 10; Bohata 2004). Indeed, the postcolonial

idea that Britishness is an ideology was posited by J. R. Jones in 1966, and in 1975 Michael Hechter referred to the “Celtic fringe” as being an “internal colony” of the UK (Jones 1966; Hechter 1975). Later, in 1979, Raymond Williams called Wales “a post-colonial culture” and spoke of the oppression of the Welsh by the English (quoted in D. Williams 2003a, xxx).

In Gareth Bryn’s film *Yr Ymadawiad* (The Passing, 2015), Capel Celyn is cast as a haunted, lost, postcolonial landscape. Through its utilization of the material behaviors of water and a located haunting by ghosts that are specific and placed, *Yr Ymadawiad* plunges below the still waters of Capel Celyn and conceives what could lie beneath and beyond what is visible (Heholt 2016, 7; Luckhurst 2007).

Michael F. O’Riley notes, when discussing the use of the concept of haunting for the postcolonial imagination, that “postcolonial theory has relied, to a great extent, upon the idea of haunting in order to bring awareness of colonial history to the present” (2007, 1). Billed as a horror film, the hauntedness of *Yr Ymadawiad* is not immediately apparent. What is undeniable is the sound of pouring rain, while Stanley (Mark Lewis-Jones) stands at the bottom of a well, painstakingly filling a bucket with mud before hoisting it to the top. For the first five minutes, there is no dialogue; rather, Stanley’s life and his routines are presented to the viewer. The rain pours incessantly against the windows of the old house in which he lives alone. He lights a fire and planes a piece of wood to the sound of a gramophone. He looks at a photo album of black and white photographs in the light of an oil lamp. Eggs are collected from his chickens, are boiled and eaten, and he continues to dig, fill, and pull mud from the well in the lashing rain. Then he hears the horn of a car sound out continually and, walking toward the sound, locates a young couple, Sara (Annes Elwy) and Iwan (Dyfan Dwyfor), their car crashed into the river. As Stanley carries the injured Sara to the house, the rain continues to pour.

There are subtle suggestions that this sodden place is a liminal space full of traces and remnants. The landscape seems timeless and the relationship between human and water is foregrounded. Sara is haunted by nightmares and panic attacks revolving around drowning. An old wooden Noah’s ark toy lies on the floor. Sara sees fleeting visions of a young boy and after finding a photograph of two boys in a photo album, Stanley’s story is revealed, and the ghostly presence explained. It is Alun, Stanley’s brother who drowned in the river. Stanley explains, in Welsh:

My parents aren't dead. They left. Men came, told them they had to go. ...
 This is where Alun and me were born, I couldn't leave him here on his own.
 Three days they looked for me. Policemen calling and screaming....

The fact that this uncanny, drenched, time-locked world is the drowned village of Capel Celyn lying beneath the surface of the lake is not revealed until the closing seconds of the film. When, in the bath, Sara sees the boy fleetingly for the third time he disappears, but his wet footprints remain. This is a trigger for the film to visually foreground the material behaviors of water as it cascades through the ceilings and gushes along the floors, while Stanley stands eerily in front of the fire, holding Alun's hand. Sara, drenched, races from the house and runs through the landscape, intercut rapidly with images of her beneath water. Suddenly, there is a change of pace and *mise-en-scène*. There is a lake bathed in sunshine, and Sara emerges from it. In this final sequence, temporal and spatial boundaries are dissolved as the narrative travels from Llyn Celyn, the reservoir of the present day, to a reimagined Capel Celyn of the past. Spatially, it shows what lies beyond, and beneath the visible reservoir. As Ruth Heholt says: "Boundaries, border and spaces themselves dissolve in fluid recognition as that which haunts, moves in *and* out—here *and* there, in-between *and* nowhere. The boundaries between ghost, place and those who witness or experience the haunting are deconstructed, only to be re-constructed anew by affect" (2016, 6). The ghosts here, Alun, but Stanley too, are caught in-between; they are "the definition of in-betweenness, are caught in-between the liminal space of here and not-here" (Heholt 2016, 8). Through these hauntings, and this dissolving of temporal and spatial boundaries, Capel Celyn is cast as a postcolonial hinterland.

The final shot demonstrates the power of water to shape both social and physical landscapes, and highlights the complex relationship between water and people. Sara, emerging from the present-day reservoir, and the ghostly Stanley, lying beneath its luminous surface, emphasize both the materiality of water and its extant political agency. Its inherent materiality, its ability to flood and submerge land, and to obscure what lies beneath, enables water to be a powerful political weapon the resultant trauma of which is depicted in *Yr Ymadawiad*.

THE WALES / PATAGONIA EXILED HINTERLAND

Patagonia (Marc Evans, 2010) is a transnational film that has two disconnected narratives of two journeys crossing the Atlantic Ocean. Cerys (Marta Lubos), a partially sighted elderly Argentine woman, travels from Patagonia to Wales accompanied by her young neighbor Alejandro (Nahuel Pérez Biscayart) in a quest to find the farm where her mother grew up. A young, troubled Welsh couple, Rhys (Matthew Gravelle) and Gwen, are traveling in the opposite direction as Rhys, a photographer, works on his dream commission to photograph the Welsh chapels in the Patagonian Desert. The film's premise is based upon the historical relationship that has existed between Wales and Patagonia since 1865, when the *Mimosa* set sail from Liverpool for Argentina carrying 163 Welsh men, women, and children, fleeing the low wages of the coalmines and the poverty of their hill farms. This was a nationalistic migration with a cultural agenda, and from Liverpool, known as the British Empire's "second city" (Wilkes-Heeg 2003, 43). The migrants had been promised fertile land to farm where they could create a new homeland, be free to speak their own language, and prosper. Two months later, the Welsh came ashore in Patagonia, a territory inhabited only by small tribes of the nomadic Tehuelche people; they faced a barren, inhospitable desert, and endured many years of hardship. Eventually, aided by the Tehuelche, they founded a community on the banks of the Chubut River. This Welsh settlement and the Welsh language survives there to this day.

Following their arrival in Wales, Cerys and Alejandro travel the length of the country to visit three farms of the same name as the farm of her ancestors, Nant y Briallu (Stream of Primroses). Cerys quickly dismisses the first two, claiming, despite her poor sight, that "she will know" when she arrives at the correct farm. Alejandro discovers that the farm was in fact drowned in 1965, as part of the flooding of the village of Capel Celyn. As Wil (John Ogwen), a local man, vividly recalls bodies being exhumed from the village graveyard to be reburied close by, Cerys walks among the moss-covered gravestones, tracing the names of her ancestors with her fingers. The erasure of place, as it is presented here, is keenly associated with the postcolonial concept of exile, which "involves the idea of a separation and distancing from either a literal homeland or from a cultural and ethnic origin" (Ashcroft et al. 2007, 75). George Lamming talks of exiles like Cerys feeling "a sense of exile by our inadequacy and our irrelevance of function in a society whose past we can't alter, and whose future is

always beyond us” (1995, 12). An unbridgeable distance lies between Cerys and Nant Briallu, since there is no possibility of return to the place of her ancestors, which has effectively ceased to exist. In this film, the drowning of Capel Celyn is instilled with an importance that goes beyond Wales, as the effects of the drowning are seen as having rippled outwards, gaining transnational significance. Cerys’s mother and her unborn child were exiled from Wales to Patagonia due to Cerys’s very existence. As an elderly woman, she is exiled once again, and dies alone far from Patagonia, on the shore of Llyn Celyn in proximity to a native place to which she cannot return (Said 1993, 407).

The film’s linking of Wales and Patagonia raises questions about the historical Welsh presence there, which in Welsh is known as “Y Wladfa”—The Colony. It could be argued that the Welsh migrants colonized Patagonia from a colonized position, which in some ways challenges colonial and postcolonial orthodoxies. *Patagonia* is not interested in addressing difficult questions about the establishment of the Welsh colony. Rather, it explores the fact that Wales and Patagonia are both hinterlands of global powers and hierarchies, existing within the political frameworks of Britain and Argentina. This tension is represented by Martin (Rhys Parry Jones), an Argentine Falklands veteran. A tempestuous snooker match between him and Rhys turns into a re-enactment of the Falklands war, with a drunk and unhinged Martin declaring “I was there” before firing make-believe shots at Rhys with his snooker cue. He attempts to steal Rhys’s photography equipment, as if trying to deny him the traditional Welsh “tourist gaze” of the Patagonia of chapels and tearooms, and forces him to confront a darker Welsh and Argentine history. Later, Martin reveals the war’s destructive effect on him, saying to him in Welsh, “I would have killed you, you know. No, not last night. The Falklands, during the war. Maybe you would have killed me. Maybe you did.”

For Rhys, the war is a piece of history—“I don’t even remember that war. I was nine years old at the time”—but for Martin, the war will continue to define him. He is the embodiment of the grim history of the Malvinas conflict, which was a particularly difficult episode for Patagonia’s Welsh descendants such as Martin, with Welsh speakers among British and Argentine troops, and for the Welsh Guards, who suffered significant loss of life in the conflict (BBC Wales 2012). While Cerys searches futilely for her drowned, ancestral home, schizophrenic Martin is fated to travel forever, the bitter irony being that the war destroyed for him the very concept of home and homeland. From a Welsh point of view, not only was

there no acknowledgment of the “Welsh dimension” in the Malvinas conflict, but the British victory elevated Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to great heights, for which Wales’s heavy industries and societies would pay a significant price. In this way, the film underlines how what Lucy Taylor (2018) would call Wales’s and Patagonia’s “peripheral position in global politics” has the potential to offer an alternative way of thinking about global issues of loss of land and displacement by acknowledging the ambiguous affinity between such places.

As this chapter demonstrates, Welsh hinterlands in Wales and elsewhere have provided screen fictions with aesthetic, genre, and opportunities to question extant binaries and colonial / postcolonial orthodoxies by seeing the location as a hinterland which connects with other histories of land loss. In Wales, the Llyn Celyn reservoir continues to be a potent symbol. In July 2021, it was the location for protests against second homes in Wales, with hundreds of protestors lining the damn responding to the fact that almost half the homes sold in the Dwyfor-Meirionydd area in 2020–2021 were to be used as second homes, leading to concerns about the future of Welsh as a language of the community. Similarly, the words “Cofiwch Dryweryn” (Remember Tryweryn) have been used in the context of bitter debates around rewilding in the Cambrian Mountains.

Two words painted white on a red background have been visible to passers by on the main road between Aberystwyth and Llanrhytud since 1963, “Cofiwch Dryweryn,” a plea to remember the drowning. Vandalized in 2019, a group of young people ventured out at night to repaint it. This act of defiance and of restoration resulted in a phenomenon of almost 150 murals bearing the two words appearing all over Wales and beyond. These hastily painted slogans demonstrates that in the case of Capel Celyn and Wales, the experience of the hinterland is firmly rooted in the national consciousness.

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