



## **Y Wladfa Stamps from the Patagonian War**



In 1865 a small boatload of 132 intrepid and expectant Welsh settlers arrived in Patagonia, inspired by a nationalist preacher from Bala, a promise of free land from the Argentine government and lured by tales of a land of milk, honey and bara brith. They found none of these, just a semi desert with little fresh water. The new colony had tailors and brick-makers, miners and cobblers, wig-makers and perfumers, but lacked farmers (0 out of 10 for planning). They also only possessed one wheelbarrow for transport of goods and often squabbled about whose turn was it to push. Yet against the odds they survived. The Welsh colony, *Y Wladfa*, founded Porth Madryn in a sheltered bay and then spread up the Chubut Valley, eventually reaching the Andean foothills which seemed a good place to stop. Being capable of teaching stubbornness to a mule they remain staunchly independent and nationalistic, retaining the use of the mother-tongue.

The stamps of Y Wladfa get little attention from the philatelic community so you probably have not got one in your collection - until now. While not recognized by the UPU the Y Wladfa Post Office has produced stamps for over 100 years and they are often used on local, national and international mail. The best known issues are perhaps the Llama definitives of the 1920s and these may feature in a later issue, but here are some special issues that will be of interest both the local stamp collector and those who specialise in war philately.

In 1960 war broke out between the colonists and Spanish speaking rebels in the west of the province, in the shadow of the mountains. It became the Welsh Vietnam. Thousands of young men volunteered for the Welsh Foreign Legion and sailed across the Atlantic to support their brother Welsh. There were many stories of bravery and valour in the official reports, but little in fact was achieved and many of these soldiers returned home broken men. Patagonian Vets could be seen sitting around camp fires at night on the coastal dunes of West Wales, shunned by the community in general. This and much more has featured in the Aberystwyth books of Malcolm Pryce, the one author who has dared to tell the War as it was.

One real hero did emerge. Clip the sheepdog, known as the Welsh Lassie and star of numerous newsreel shorts as well as the feature film of his final mission depicted in *Bark of the Covenant*. Clip is featured on a 5 Doubloon stamp issued in 1962. The design harks to the Welsh national flag. It features Clip in his most famous pose as immortalized by his stuffed remains in Aberystwyth Museum, with one ear cocked and an enigmatic smile that is the subject of much debate. Behind him is the Angel that appeared at the height of battle and inspired the Welsh troops in their suicide mission during the Mission House siege of Sierra Machynlleth. The inscription 'Hero of Pasadizo Secreto' refers to the secret passage Clip used to relay message past enemy lines

between the Mission House and HQ. Clip himself perished in the final battle, leading to a national outcry. Almost immediately all the dogs were brought back home; the men followed three years later.

A set of stamps released in 1971 commemorates the audacious bombing raid, on Christmas Day 1961, on the rebel base at Rio Caerlog. A small unit penetrated deep into rebel territory disguised as UN peace keepers and deliberately lost a Rolex watch in a game of cards with the rebels. The watch hid a homing device used to locate the rebel base by the Lancaster bomber. The three stamps were the 3 Doubloon in camouflage green, a 5 Doubloon in midnight blue and an 8 Doubloon in desert earth. The latter shows the crew; Lovespoon who became an Arch-Druid, Herod Jones who channeled his military training and experiences in Patagonia into a career as a school games teacher, Dai Custard-Pie who later opened his own Joke Emporium and Frobisher, the man who never made it back.

Conspiracy theorists have used these stamps as evidence that the official reports did not tell the truth about the war. Who is the mysterious woman pictured with the crew? Was she an acquaintance of one of the crew or a secret agent? Some theorists, after research of old school photos, say that the names on the 8D stamp are in the wrong order. And others suggest that the bombing raid picture, taken from a sketch by a local man and drawn at the time, is suggesting that the raid was not what all it seemed. To get closer to the truth, with testimony from those involved, read the Aberystwyth books and make your own minds up.

Just to show that philately is impartial and takes no sides also included is a rather gaudy label issued by the filthy rebels and purporting to be a postage stamp – presumably within the area they over-ran at the beginning of the war. The propaganda slogans, in typical rabble-rousing style, urge the motley collection of Latinos to fight like their forefathers did. It states “Free Patagonia”, but they must have known that their aims would only come at a heavy price.