



A few more stamps from Welsh Patagonia



Collectors of the Welsh Oddities will be familiar with the Welsh colony, known as Y Wladfa, founded during the 1860s in deepest Patagonia. And how this autonomous Welsh speaking province has its own stamps. And if you don't I urge you to read the Malcolm Pryce *Aberystwyth* novels to get the true stories behind the myths. Especially the the Patagonian War and the stories behind the official history from those that were there and saw what happened; the bits they don't teach you at school.

This month's stamps commence with the 1958 definitive issue. That was the year that Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales issued their regional Wilding portrait definitives. Missing from that list are the Welsh Patagonia regionals which were issued officially on the same day, but having been sent to South America by surface mail the earliest use recorded is 27th October for the 3D and 2nd December for other values. They follow a similar pattern to the other regionals with a 3D purple, a 6D mauve and a 18D green, except the



"D" is for Doubloon rather than the "d" for the old UK pence. The striking difference though is the replacement of the Queens portrait by that of a llama. Perhaps this heresy is why the stamp catalogues refuse to list these beautiful stamps. The replacement is because for the Welsh Patagonians the llama is a sacred animal. It supplies their milk, cheese, butter and a rather fragrant fromage frais, it is their beast of burden and transport of choice, its dung provides fertiliser for the meagre crops and a substrate for some dubious mushroom culture, the wool provides clothing and scouring pads, they make affectionate child substitutes yet can act as guard animals down on the farm, they are strong enough to pull a plough, but most of all they are revered for the double 'l' at the start of their name. Naturally they also retain those timeless symbols of Wales; the leek and the dragon.

Some of the 3D stamps have a constant printing flaw. This error has a punning name, so I will let you find it for yourselves though you will need a magnifier to spot it. I should at this point inform you to take off those silly spectacles with red and green filters. By saying 3D stamps I mean the value of the stamp, not some strange optical illusion created by printing trickery.

These stamps had a limited lifetime in use because in 1960 the civil war broke out and much of the Welsh territory was over-run by rebel forces. The town of Llansantbethan in the shadows of the Sierra Machynlleth was promptly renamed San Isadora and became a rebel stronghold. The post office was commandeered and stocks of some the 1958 regionals were overprinted with slogans and used for post within rebel-held territory. The overprints were applied stamp by stamp using a Juan Toro printing set

in a range of typefaces. A number of different overprints have been noted (some too vulgar or political for a family hobby), but you are unlikely to find any but the commonest ones with LIBRE or the inevitable and not very original VIVA LA REVOLUCION. Even so there is variation for the specialist with inverted overprints, double LIBREs and look out for a small Ó used in some REVOLUCIÓNs. These stamps were only in use for a few weeks while the rebels were consolidating their stranglehold on the region, so mint examples are by far more common than used. It has been estimated, from government records that some 40,000 sheets were overprinted, but the actual numbers of each type of overprint is unknown. When replaced the unused examples, perhaps over 38,000 sheets, were sold to the more unscrupulous philatelic dealers in Asunción and Bogota.

Like any military dictator worth his salt the rebel leader General Sánchez liked to see his face staring out from posters, hoardings, newspaper, those little labels you get on cheese triangles, pamphlets and of course stamps. Using a captured printing press and ancient perforating machine equipped with porcupine quills a set of definitives was issued. The design is considered rather old-fashioned for 1961. This is probably because of the lack of sophistication amongst the rebels, the primitive equipment used and that they had reused and modified an old stamp design (shame on them!).

There were five values in the first issue; 1 centesimo (Chubut River blue), 2c (Atacama gold), 5c ((cactus flower mauve), 10c (Guanoco green) and (inexplicably) a 19c (armadillo blood crimson). The 1c is unusual in that it often is found in Tête-bêche pairs. This came about through a story of illogical logic. Sánchez himself came to inspect, and admire, the proofs of the stamps and took exception to one of the plates used for this value. No-one knew what had upset him so much and he was in such a temper no-one dared ask. He ordered them to be printed as tête-bêche pairs, and only to be sold in those pairs so that the offending stamps could not be directly compared with the others. He also adjusted the postal rates so that no-one would have the need to separate the stamps from these pairs. There is a philatelic legend that even on his death bed Sánchez was still obsessed by that stamp. It is said he put a curse on anyone who split one of these pairs and to this day no-one had admitted to seeing a Patagonian 1c blue of 1960 as a single stamp.

There was one more thing Sánchez didn't like. Though the artist had, knowing certain sensitivities, and had carefully omitted the General's bald spot from the portrait, he had not included his famous and trademark hat. The artist protested that had he included this rather large and broad brimmed adornment the General's face would have had to be shrunk so small to be unrecognisable on the stamps. Sánchez accepted this, and commuted the artist's prison sentence to life, and handed the task of illustrating him and The Hat on a stamp to a new artist. The result was the 1 Peso stamp, nicknamed 'the mushroom' for reasons that escape me, the highest value issued. Even so the artist still couldn't accommodate all of The Hat!