The Significance of Pumlumon

The following is from an article from Wales Online (see link below) which explains why Pumlumon is important in Wales. Key passages are highlighted by NRW.


Welsh History month: Pumlumon and the Elenydd

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That all the Cambrian hills, which high’st their heads doe beare
With most obsequious showes of low subjected feare,
Should to thy greatness stoupe ...

... is how Michael Drayton addressed Pumlumon in his great topographical work of 1622, the Poly-Olbion. His assertion that ‘all the neighbouring hills Plynillimon obey’ might, however, be considered unduly modest. The mountain’s great ridge commands not just the surrounding topography; rather, it has dictated the course of Welsh history.

OM Edwards asserted more than 100 years ago that Wales was a ‘land of mountains’ that have ‘determined throughout its history what the direction and method of its progress were to be’. Pumlumon may not be the highest, or the most dramatic of them. It is, though, without doubt the most important.

Pen Pumlumon Fawr, the highest of Pumlumon’s five peaks, is located roughly half way between Aberystwyth and Llanidloes. At 2,467 feet, it is the highest point between Snowdonia and the Brecon Beacons. On a clear day, from the Bronze Age cairn on its summit, the mountain’s primacy quickly becomes apparent. All of Wales unfolds to the gaze. To the west, Snowdonia is linked to Preseli by the great arc of Cardigan Bay. To the east, the Berwyn and Aran ranges draw the eye round to the English border, along which the Long Mynd, the Breidden and the Radnor Forest connect the view to the Black Mountains, which in turn merge into the great South Wales escarpment. No-one who has stood upon the summit of Pumlumon and studied this view would deny that, regardless of its measured height, the mountain is the true apex of Wales.

It was from here, in the story of Culhwch and Olwen, that Cai and Bedwyr sat (to use the English of Charlotte Guest) ‘in the highest wind that ever was in the world’, and saw the smoke rising from the fire of Dillus Farfwaw. They then fell upon him in his sleep, threw him into a pit, plucked out his beard with a pair of wooden tweezers and killed him. Pumlumon is no ordinary place.

Borderland

More prosaically, the guide who took George Borrow, author of Wild Wales, to Pumlumon’s summit in 1854 questioned ‘whether there is a higher hill in the world’. It may have been the highest hill in his world.

Borrow, though, with his customary air of superiority, commented that it did not appear particularly grand from its immediate southern slopes. This may be true, but as Borrow’s guide explained, this is because the mountain rises in the south from an already considerable elevation. Indeed, Pumlumon’s pre-eminent position in Welsh topography cannot be understood without remembering that it is but the culmination of a much greater tract of upland that stretches from the Tywi and Llandovery in the south to the Dyfi and Machynlleth in the north.
The west of this region is bounded by the River Teifi and the settlements of Lampeter, Tregaron and Pontrhydfendigaid, and its eastern boundaries are set by the Wye and Irfon valleys, and the settlements of Rhayader and Llanwrtyd.

Within this quadrangle lies roughly 800 square miles of what some have called the ‘Green Desert of Wales’. The features of this great wilderness include the most remote of all Welsh hills, Drygarn Fawr, the presence of which has been accentuated since the bronze age by the huge beehive cairns on its summit. The land is not exceptionally high. Only in a few places do the contours break 2,000 feet. It is, however, unremittingly desolate. Except where the plateau is unexpectedly broken by wild valleys such as the Pysgotwr or the Doethie, or covered by modern conifer plantations, it is uniformly open and windswept. From its fastness flow some of the great rivers of Wales and Britain: the Wye, the Severn, the Rheidol, the Teifi, the Tywi, the Cothi, the Elan and the Irfon. This stretch of land is most often referred to as the ‘Cambrian Mountains’. The real name for the greater part of it, though, is the Elenydd.

The name is ancient. In another of the Mabinogi, the story of Math, the magician Gwydion drives a herd of swine he has stolen from Pryderi, king of Dyfed, back to Math, king of Gwynedd, across the Elenydd – the land that effectively separates the two kingdoms. This would suggest that the name was used by the very earliest of Welsh people.

Gerald of Wales also uses the term in his topographical works, the Journey Through Wales and the Description of Wales, written around the end of the 12th century. Significantly, both the Mabinogion and Gerald refer to Elenydd as a borderland, and it is in this respect that its primary influence upon Welsh history has been felt.

The Elenydd is the great watershed of Wales. It divides east from west and north from south. Its own core defines the furthest reaches of the economic and administrative influence that has historically emanated from the population centres on its margins. Five of the historic counties of Wales – Cardiganshire, Carmarthenshire, Brecknockshire, Radnorshire and Montgomeryshire – are separated by it; their borders dictated by the most remote geographical features in Wales.

Its dividing influence, however, runs much deeper than mere politics or administration. It is also cultural and linguistic. Its presence has been a major factor in the separate evolution of the different cultures that characterise north and south Wales, and helps to explain the difficulties that have so often beset attempts to create national unity in Welsh history.

There is, however, another dimension to the influence of the Elenydd upon Wales. If its presence has divided the nation, it has also worked to preserve native Welsh culture from the anglicising influences that have emanated from the east. Its mountainous geography so effectively slowed the march of the English language that by 1801, when almost nine out of 10 of the inhabitants of Radnorshire were English speakers, Cardiganshire, across the hills, remained a bastion of the Welsh language.

In the same year fewer than one in 10 of that county’s population had learnt English, and despite the spread of bilingualism during the 19th century, the counties west of the Elenydd remained a heartland of the Welsh language. It might thus be argued that one of the primary factors in the survival of the Welsh language has been the Elenydd.

**Heartland**

It is perhaps puzzling that a region of such historical importance has not occupied a more central position in Welsh national consciousness. Even its name seems to have lapsed into disuse after the medieval period.

In 1903 the travel writer A.G. Bradley remarked upon the inexplicability of such a compact, distinct and historically influential mountain range apparently having no commonly recognised name, and he advocated the revival of what he anglicised as ‘Ellineth’. It took the best part of a century for the idea to
catch on, but during recent decades ‘Elenydd’ has gradually been restored to the topographical lexicon of Wales.

Even officialdom has now adopted it, in the form of an ‘Elenydd Designated Special Area of Conservation’.

This resurrection is worthy of celebration, for it is not only as a borderland that this region has influenced Welsh history. Paradoxically, the Elenydd and Pumlumon comprise the true heartland of Wales. It is significant that Cistercian monks chose the haven of the Elenydd for the site of one of their most important Abbeys: that founded under the patronage of Rhys ap Gruffydd, Prince of Deheubarth, at Strata Florida in 1164.

As another article in this series has shown, the sanctuary provided by the surrounding mountains created the conditions for a remarkable flowering of Welsh culture in the medieval period. It was here that Brut y Tywysogion – the most important of all sources for early Welsh history – was compiled. The wealth that enabled such cultural achievements was directly derived from the sheepwalks of the great Elenydd upland. In other words, without the influence of the Elenydd our knowledge of the early history of Wales would be greatly diminished.

It was not just the monks of Strata Florida whose culture flourished in the haven of the region’s hills. The poet Dafydd ap Gwilym was certainly no cenobite. He was born around 1320 at Broginin, a plas situated among the western foothills of Pumlumon, and his exquisite cywyddau, with their intertwining themes of love and nature, were a direct product of the mountain environment that was his bro. Although he travelled widely throughout Wales during his (to judge by his work) amorous and colourful life, he was (according to tradition at least) ultimately buried at Strata Florida. Arguably the greatest of Welsh poets, then, was a son of Pumlumon.

Dafydd ap Gwilym provides just one example of the culture that has flourished across the centuries in this great heartland. The region and its bordering communities have produced such diverse and influential figures as the outlaw Thomas Jones (Twm Sion Catti, c. 1530-1609), the educationalist Kilsby Jones (1813-1889) and the politician Henry Richard (the ‘Apostle of Peace’, 1812-1888). It rivals any other part of Wales in the creation of the culture of the weiri, and, although the last century has been increasingly hostile to the cultural life of the uplands, the communities around Pumlumon and the Elenydd remain among the most significant cradles of rural Welsh culture.

**Inspiration**

In addition to nourishing and sustaining a rich native culture, the Elenydd has also inspired those who have come from afar. In 1811 Percy Bysshe Shelley walked from England to its heart at Cwm Elan, where he stayed at a mansion owned by his uncle. ‘Astonished by the grandeur of the scenery’, as he put it, he subsequently attempted to buy the nearby house of Nantgwyllt and settle there.

Shelley was, in his own words, ‘not wholly uninfluenced’ by the magic of the place. There is an element, therefore, of sublime Welsh upland beauty in what would generally be considered to be the quintessentially English work of one of Britain’s greatest romantic poets.

More than a century later, a visionary of a wholly different type was inspired by the uplands of Pumlumon. Reginald George Stapledon was a Cambridge-educated botanist who, in 1919, was appointed first Director of the Welsh Plant Breeding Station at Aberystwyth.

Drawing upon the uplands of Pumlumon and the Elenydd as inspiration and scientific resource in equal measure, he developed new methods of grassland management that have subsequently influenced agricultural methods worldwide. He also developed ideas about land use that have played a significant role in shaping the way that we relate to this most basic of resources.
In The Land Now and Tomorrow (1935) Stapledon was among the first in Britain to advocate the extensive use of land for social amenity. His vision for Britain’s first National Park was directly inspired by Pumlumon, and the book contains detailed proposals for such a park to be established on the mountain.

His plans included driving a tarmac road through the wild valley of Hengwm, along which he envisaged the building of tennis courts and other sporting amenities.

Modern wilderness advocates may well consider them alarming. His vision nevertheless contributed to the establishment of national parks in Britain – a process that opened much of the nation’s countryside to its people for the first time in recent history. It is ironic, though, that Stapledon’s own ideal national park on the slopes of Pumlumon was never created.

Resource

There is a great tension between Stapledon’s vision of the land as an amenity for all and the attitude of those who see it as something to exploit, and its outcomes may be clearly observed in the landscape of Pumlumon and the Elenydd. Exploitation of this heartland has been a central feature of Welsh history, alongside which the 19th century south Wales coal boom appears no more than a flash in the pan. Recent archaeology has established that mining was taking place in the Elenydd more than 4,000 years ago. In the valley of Cwmystwyth the same people that built the cairns on the tops of Pumlumon and Drygarn Fawr turned the earth inside out in search of lead and copper. The Romans mined for gold on the Elenydd’s southern margins at Dolaucothi, and subsequent generations of speculators, prospectors and adventurers sank shafts and drove adits throughout the region.

The industry reached a climax in the late 19th century, when one such mine was likened to the great Potosi metal mines in Bolivia.

In more recent times other elements of the Elenydd’s landscape have been subject to exploitation; chiefly its water. A total of eight major reservoirs have been created in the last century or so from the waters of the Pumlumon and Elenydd watersheds. Two of these, Nant y Moch (1964) and Clywedog (1967), take their waters from the northern slopes of Pumlumon, and another, Llyn Brianne (1972), captures the waters of the infant river Tywi. By far the most impressive of the Elenydd’s dams and reservoirs, though, are those that form the Elan Valley system. Opened in 1904, the Elan Valley dams were built by Birmingham Corporation, and are an outstanding example of the achievements of Victorian municipal enterprise. The reservoirs they created (including the Claerwen Reservoir, opened in 1952) supply Birmingham with up to 360 million litres of water a day, and without their existence one of the greatest cities in England would have long withered of thirst. The influence of the Elenydd thus extends beyond the Welsh border to the industrial heart of England.

Battleground

Water – and the enormous condescension of dam building – is, of course, a potentially controversial subject. Pumlumon and the Elenydd are, though, no strangers to conflict. Indeed, Pumlumon is possibly most famous for the great battle that took place under its shadow in 1401.

It was at Mynydd Hyddgen, immediately to the north of Pumlumon, that Owain Glyndwr confronted and crushed the forces that had been sent to quell his famous uprising. This event, arguably the most important battle in Welsh history, initiated a brief period of national liberation that has inspired nationalists since.

Conflict is one of the key forces of history; one of the great continuities. If Pumlumon was host to one of the great battles of the Welsh past, it is also the site of one of the great battles of the present. The clash between exploitation and conservation is currently being fought over plans to turn much of the area over to massive wind farms (including one that would tower over the battleground of Hyddgen itself).
Such schemes throw the history of this heartland into sharp relief. This past and future battleground is also a mirror, in which some of the cultural and environmental issues that face Wales – and humankind – are reflected.

Together with the Elenydd, Pumlumon has played a massive part in the past of Wales. Without due regard to what happens there in the present, the Wales of the future will be greatly impoverished.

**Author biography: Dr Martin Wright**

Originally from Northamptonshire, I first came to Wales as a child.

I studied history at Lampeter, and completed an M Phil on the history of British socialism. I then taught at Lampeter and Aberystwyth, specialising in adult education.

I served as Head of Continuing Education at Aberystwyth, before completing a PhD at Cardiff on the history of socialism in Wales.

I now lecture in history at Cardiff University, where I’m responsible for Welsh medium teaching.

**And where’s my favourite place in Wales?**

Without doubt, it lies somewhere in the Elenydd, which I’ve spent a great deal of the last 30 years exploring. Exactly where is difficult to say. It could be the summit of Pumlumon or Drygarn Fawr, the bottom of Cwm Doethie or Pysgotwr, or the shores of one of the region’s many upland lakes. Its exact location changes daily.