

A Language that Never Was Never Dies
The Death and Rebirth of Cornish

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Introduction –Inside the Numbers

According to the 2021 Office for National Statistics (ONS) Census, there are over 300 languages currently used in Great Britain and Ireland. Although numbering less than 500 speakers, Cornish, an insular Celtic language categorized in the same family as Welsh and Breton, is cited amongst these. While the census data shows only 0.8% of the population of Cornwall speak Cornish, 99,754 or one fifth of all residents identified themselves as ‘Cornish-only’, a surging rise from 13,045 just ten years ago.¹ Given that the language fell to extinction in the 18th century, these statistics are both material and favorable and, due to intentional efforts of cultural and linguistic revitalization, the Cornish language has a pulse, and the Cornish identity is thriving.

Introduction - Language or Dialect?

Amongst those labeled as *Celtic Nations*, to include Wales, Ireland, Scotland, the Isle of Mann, Brittany, Cornwall and sometimes Galicia, the story of the Cornish language has unique and paradoxical features. Namely, the language, which contains far more English and French words than its Brythonic counterparts, certainly and emphatically exists *today*, having a system of orthography, phonetics, grammar and applied use, but may not have existed as a separate and distinct historical language at all. Rather, those occupants living in Cornwall, the southernmost horn of the British Isles, whom, according to author and editor of Historic UK, Ben Johnson, the Saxons referred to as ‘*Westwalas* (West Welsh)’² may have instead simply spoken and written in a fluid and frequently transitioning dialect of Welsh, which, as author Janet Davies states frequently in her foundational scholarly work *The Welsh Language A History*, is the predecessor or source language of the British Isles. Quoting JRR Tolkien, she echoes his sentiment that ‘Welsh is the senior language of the men of Britain.’³

Modern Cornish might be formalized and more stabilized than its predecessors, a contemporary construct to help strengthen the identity of an ancient people. If this is the case, then it explains much about why Welsh has an unbroken continuum traceable back to the pre-Roman era whilst some of its derivatives, dialects, or sister-tongues such as Cornish, have diffused, diluted, or disappeared, only then to be reimagined or created anew.

This work provides a brief overview over what is known about the language described as Old and Middle Cornish, then considers its modern construction, purpose, and value. Lastly, it examines some of the geographical, political, and religious factors that contributed to the continuous survival of Welsh in contrast to the extinction of Cornish.

A Historical Overview of Cornish

¹ Office of National Statistics, *Census 2021*. (2022) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/maps?lad=E06000052> [accessed 18, December 2022].

² Ben Johnson, ‘The Cornish Language’, *Historic UK, History Magazine, Culture UK*, <<https://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/The-Cornish-Language/>> [accessed 17, December 2022].

³ Davies, Janet, *The Welsh Language A History*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014), p. 13

Editor John Koch, explaining the development of the Cornish dialect from a southwestern Brythonic parent language, provides the following development phases along with the observation that, from its onset, Cornish being more akin to a dialect of Welsh versus a separate language:

Cornish may be usefully divided into four phases of development. (1) Old Cornish denotes the phase between about 800 and 1250, when the language was first emerging from its parent south-west Brythonic. Some scholars, following Jackson (LHEB), refer to a Primitive Cornish period at c. 550-800, but this usage is potentially misleading because of the dearth of evidence that Cornish and Breton were separate dialects at this early period, or even that Welsh was by then very distinct from more general Brythonic.⁴

The associated references to Breton, which occur voluminously in research on Cornish occur because Cornwall is positioned as a figurative sandwich between insular South Wales and Continental Brittany. As neighbors it is probable that from the dialect's onset, Cornish was a type of transitory linguistic border town between the two kingdoms. Over the process of time, additional phases of Cornish developed. Koch goes on to write:

Middle Cornish refers to the phase of the language between c. 1250 and 1550. (3) Late Cornish is the label most often given to the phase from c. 1550 to the period of decline in the 19th century, while (4) Revived Cornish is applied to the language between 19th century and the present time.⁵

A Composite, Fluid Dialect from the Beginning and Through the Centuries

As Koch states, there is no existing evidence to aid understanding of how Primitive Cornish was utilized. However, a remarkable list of 122 slaves (of these, 98 were Cornish) is recorded within an early Medieval manuscript called The Bodmin Gospels (named after the town of Bodwin, an important Christian religious center in 9th and 10th century Cornwall). This extant treasure opens a window to the past that allows for some understanding of Old and Middle Cornish.⁶

The Bodmin Gospels, originating in Brittany, was written primarily in Latin and Old English, and includes land grant and manumission recordings on blank leaves and in the margins of the Scriptures. The Cornish connection is significant, including the names of up to four bishops who served in Cornwall spanning from approximately c. 941 to 1043. In addition to the list of freed slaves, animals and celestial bodies are also described in what is believed to be Cornish, or a transitional dialect of Breton and Cornish.⁷

Sample names and nouns in Cornish include:

⁴ Koch, John T, *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, Vol 2. (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, Inc, 2006), p. 488

⁵ Ibid, p. 488

⁶ Ibid, p. 489

⁷ British museum or online article

- Aedan, which corresponds closely to the Welsh *Aeddan*
- Loumarch, which more closely aligns with Breton and corresponds to the Welsh *Lywarch*
- Budic, which is a connective match without derivation between Welsh, Breton, and Cornish
- Devi, which closely matches the Welsh *Dewi*

The manuscript provides strong evidence that there was a well-developed Cornish culture, having a Bishopric, town centers, priests, gentry, and commoners with a dialect that fell somewhere between Welsh and Breton.

Another surviving work, the 15th-16th century medieval manuscript, *Beunans Ke* (The Life of Kay), was discovered in Aberystwyth, Wales in 2000 by Graham Thomas. Hiding in an unbound collection of manuscripts donated to The Library of Wales, this Middle Cornish Arthurian work, likely written as a play,⁸ demonstrates that the transitory nature of Cornish remained true five to six hundred years after the Bodmin Gospels. *The Celtic Encyclopedia* emphasizes the significance of the finding. Koch writes ‘The importance of this substantial recent discovery to both Cornish and Arthurian studies cannot be overemphasized.’⁹ As with its predecessor, the later work shows a significant number of loanwords, or direct gap words that strongly hint at transitory, or composite dialect instead of a formal language. Koch summarizes this:

There is a considerable admixture of Anglo-Norman French, Middle English, and Latin in the text, especially in the Arthurian episode, with one stanza containing two lines each of Cornish, French, and English.¹⁰

These two paramount pieces of Cornish history combine to paint a portrait of an ancient Celtic people who could interact equally well with the Welsh, especially the kingdoms of what is now Southeast Wales, and Brittany: a collage of South Brythonic dialects stemming from a common, senior tongue. The Cornish dialect, being the most fluid of these, died out for several reasons, fading into extinction prior to c. 1800.

Political Savvy Saves Welsh, Catholicism Kills Cornish

The Celtic Encyclopedia estimates the height of Cornish language adoption and usage to have reached its zenith in the late 15th century, where approximately 30,000 of 50,000 residents of Cornwall and neighboring Devon spoke, wrote, and engaged in commerce in Cornish. By the end of the same century, use of the language had retreated into Bodmin and a few scant western locations.¹¹ From there a steady decline ensued, its final speaker being Dorothy Pentreath, who passed away in 1777. Koch gives several reasons for Cornish’s

⁸ Koch, John T, *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, Vol 1. (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, Inc, 2006), pp. 203-205

⁹ Ibid, p. 204

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 204

¹¹ Ibid, pp. 488-489

cataclysmic 16th century, many of which, in turn, allow a sharp contrast and comparison for the continuous survival of the primary or senior Welsh language. He writes:

Its decline may be attributed to several key historical events, among them the War of the Roses, during which many old Cornish families disappeared,¹²

By contrast the Tudors, the ultimate benefactors of that bloody strife, took advantage of their Welsh lineage (making claims back to King Arthur) to solidify claims to the throne. Although Henry Tudor's complex relationship to the bloodline he claimed is outside the scope of this work, the declarations of Welsh heritage, be they propaganda or fact, did provide space for the language to continue during this tumultuous time. Although wrong stating Arthur as a 'myth' (the Tudors and Plantagenets found Arthur's lineage back through South Wales of gravely serious important) In a journal essay prepared for *E-Keltoi*, Siarl Ferdinand of University of Wales, Trinity Saint David properly emphasizes the Tudor position, writing:

In 1485 a new dynasty took over the English Crown, the Tudors. Its first king, Henry VII (1485-1509) was half Welsh and apparently felt a strong attraction for his Celtic heritage, based on the fact that he fought the battle of Bosworth under the emblem of the Welsh Red Dragon. Moreover, Henry promoted the ancient legend of King Arthur, suggesting that there was a connection between himself and the mythic king of Camelot.¹³

The Arthurian thread helped the Welsh, for a time, and although Henry nominated his son, Arthur, as 'Duke of Cornwall, that connection did little for the Cornish, whose influential royals and leaders suffered great loss at that time, primarily through King Henry VII's centralized controls and oppressive taxes to fund war interests of his own.¹⁴

Koch cites additional reasons for the decline of Cornish:

...the discovery of America (many Cornish people traveled west), and the An Golf Rebellion of 1497, the Renaissance of learning (which spread English into Cornwall), the Reformation- which meant that the age-old intercourse between Cornwall and Brittany (Breizh) ceased to function within the framework of the common church, and the English Civil Wars.¹⁵

¹² Ibid, p. 489

¹³ Siarl Ferdinand, 'A Brief History Of The Cornish Language, Its Revival And Its Current Status', *E-Keltoi Journal Of Interdisciplinary Celtic Studies*, Volume 2/Cultural Survival (2013), <https://moodle.uwtsd.ac.uk/pluginfile.php/521656/mod_resource/content/1/Brief%20History%20of%20Cornish.pdf > [accessed 18, December 2022], p. 8

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 8

¹⁵ Koch, John T, *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, Volumes 2. (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, Inc, 2006), p.489

Although emigration to Colonial America did adversely impact an already small country, The Reformation perhaps did the most damage to Cornish, and the least damage to their kinsmen in Wales.

For the Cornish, by ancient tradition, were Catholic in their theological leanings. With respect to linguistics, Ferdinand writes:

Since the introduction of Celtic Christianity, Cornwall had been a stronghold of Catholicism. Although masses were held in Latin, as in the rest of Catholic Europe, the Roman Church had been tolerant of the Celtic language of Cornwall. In fact, the Cornish language was used in most religious contexts since this was the only way to be understood by the local population.¹⁶

As one of the great aims of the Reformations was to give the laity a Bible in English, moving away from Rome's Latin Scriptures, Hymnals and religious texts, the Cornish, faced a terminal decision of compromising on the (further) incursion of English into their culture, and now pulpits, or to cast political/theological lots with Roman Catholicism, the endurance of their language at stake.

The Church of England, inseparable from Crown politics at the time, had a clear aim to lessen the influence of Rome on its subjects, which included the vassal kingdom of Cornwall:

To that end, Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, replaced in 1549 the four old liturgical volumes in Latin with the new Book of Common Prayer, published in English. The Catholics in Devon and Cornwall reacted against that new measure and revolted against the royal power.¹⁷

The Cornish revolted, conducted failed counter-military actions against the English Crown and fought in vain to retain their Catholic faith and the preservation of their dialect. The Welsh executed a different strategy. Instead of an open revolt against English authority, the Welsh maneuvered to produce a Welsh language Bible for the purpose of ensuring that each individual could study Scripture in his or her native tongue, with the stated objective of then migrating, ultimately to the Common English as a secondary or parallel measure.

This strategy was far more effective as the Welsh Bible, fully published in 1588, resulted in an outmaneuvering of the English. The brilliance, and stylistic genius of William Morgan's Welsh Bible formalized and, in many regards, saved the Welsh language, making it impossible for the English to 'stamp out'.

The Welsh Bible saved Welsh. The lack of a Cornish Bible doomed Cornish. John Koch summarizes this as:

¹⁶ Siarl Ferdinand,, 'A Brief History Of The Cornish Language, Its Revival And Its Current Status', *E-Keltoi Journal Of Interdisciplinary Celtic Studies*, Volume 2/Cultural Survival (2013), <https://moodle.uwtsd.ac.uk/pluginfile.php/521656/mod_resource/content/1/Brief%20History%20of%20Cornish.pdf > [accessed 18, December 2022], p. 10

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 11

‘The Reformation is regarded as the main factor for shutting down large scale literary production, for destroying many extant texts, and for changing the Cornish people’s perception of themselves.’¹⁸

As he suggests, ‘With Cornwall now denied a Prayer Book and a Bible’¹⁹ the language was placed into perilous danger of dying. And it did die. However, the local population, and the culture never died, paving the way to a very ironic reconstruction of the language.

The Irony of Rebirth of the Cornish Language

Unlike Manx or other languages and dialects that have been on the verge of extinction but trickling forward with an unbroken chain of speakers, there was a hard-stop or end to Cornish.

The language ended.

The culture and people never ended.

As a result, the revival of the language required several imperatives that bare striking resemblance what the manuscript evidence reveals of the process by which the original Cornish dialect came into being. The revival of the language, although impossible to match fully and confidentially a now lost original, or even lost immediate predecessor, became a modern re-invention of the same beautiful, composite, and mixed language approach that makes Cornish distinct.

Beginning in approximately 1929, well over a century after the decease of the last Cornish speaker, a movement began, beginning with Unified Welsh and transitioning into its current condition around 2008. The features of modern Cornish draw a beautiful arc back to the Primitive, containing the same attributes:

1. Modern Cornish starts with the foundational stock of what is known of Middle Cornish, just as Primitive Cornish started with what is known of Brythonic.
2. Modern Cornish weaves in English and French words where gaps exist in reconstruction. Primitive Cornish seems to have had material amounts of gap and loanwords from Latin and then French, from the beginning.
3. Modern Cornish is the linguistic kinsmen of Breton. Primitive Cornish was a dialect that migrated south from Wales, finding its closest linguistic kinsmen in Old Breton.

Modern Cornish is a beautiful cultural continuum of a resilient Celtic People who had naught but a Welsh dialect but who now have a fully stabilizing and unique language to accompany its revived and thriving cultural identity.

¹⁸ John T Koch, *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, Volumes 2. (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, Inc, 2006) p. 493

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 493

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