

Is there any basis on which it can be claimed that there is still such a thing as a ‘Celtic nation’ in the 21st century?

Just as scholars have long debated the origins of the ancient Celts,¹ there is also much discussion as to whether it can be confidently stated that there is such a thing as a Celtic nation in the 21st century. Here, through an exploration of the development of modern Celtic identity we will seek to determine whether there is validity to the idea that a Celtic nation exists today. There will be a focus on Wales as a case study of how national identity has developed within the Celtic regions, though reference will be made to the other Celtic regions of Ireland, Scotland, Brittany, Cornwall and the Isle of Man. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this essay to deliver a full history of the modern period of these regions, several key figures and incidents will be addressed to build a portrait of the development of Celtic identity and to ascertain the basis for the claim of a modern Celtic nation.

Firstly, let us set out how the term ‘Celtic’ will be used here. As Barry Cunliffe states ‘celticness does indeed seem to be all things to all men’² showing how the term has perhaps become distorted over time. Simon Rodway finds that ‘linguists, historians, archaeologists, art historians, geneticists etc. (not to mention “the general public”) use the term “Celt” in sometimes very different ways’³ illustrating how the distinct fields within Celtic studies and wider culture can have varying opinions on the use of the term. The standard academic usage of ‘Celtic’ is the people defined by the common languages termed Celtic, both ancient and modern, and the study of the movement of these people and their culture. Therefore, this is the context in which we shall be using the terms here.⁴ However, as the idea of what a Celtic nation

¹ For an overview on the differing theories on origins of the ancient Celts, see Patrick Sims-Williams, ‘An Alternative to Celtic from the East and Celtic from the West’, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, (2020), pp. 511- 529.

² Barry Cunliffe, *The Celts: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 4.

³ Simon Rodway ‘Celtic- Definitions, Problems and Controversies’ in Ljudmil Ferdinandov Vagalinski ed. *In Search of Celtic Tylis in Thrace (III C BC): Proceedings of the Interdisciplinary Colloquium Arranged by the National Archaeological Institute and Museum at Sofia and the Welsh Department, Aberystwyth University Held at the National Archaeological Institute and Museum Sofia, 8 May 2010*, (NOUS Publishers, 2010), p. 24.

⁴ For a detailed discussion on definitions of Celts see Collis, J., ‘Celts Ancient and Modern: Recent Controversies in Celtic Studies’ *Studia Celtica Fennica*, (2017), pp. 58-71.

means today is being explored, differing notions of Celtic identity and definitions will be examined.

We must also look at what defines 'nation'. The Oxford English Dictionary lists 'nation' firstly as;

A large aggregate of communities and individuals united by factors such as common descent, language, culture, history, or occupation of the same territory, so as to form a distinct people. Now also: such a people forming a political state; a political state⁵

Therefore, we can say that nation refers to people united by several factors and does not necessarily constitute a country, which is a geographical measurement of land. However in terms of practical use, René Grotenhuis tells us that 'there is no international agreement that unambiguously defines the concept of the nation'⁶ showing the difficulties in the use of the term. Lowell Barrington offers the definition of nation to signify 'groups of people linked by unifying traits and the desire to control a territory that is thought of as the group's national homeland'⁷ and, as we shall explore, this might best fit the description of the current Celtic regions. According to the Celtic League,⁸ a Pan-Celtic organisation founded in 1961, the areas currently deemed Celtic nations are those of Wales, Ireland, Scotland, Cornwall, Brittany and Isle of Man. Their inclusion is primarily on the basis that languages deriving from the Celtic language family are still spoken or in memory in these places. Rodway surmises that 'the modern Celtic countries can only really be defined as such on account of their languages'⁹ displaying the argument for nation being based on a linguistic foundation.

⁵ Oxford English Dictionary entry for 'nation' <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/nation_n1> [Accessed on 01/04/2026].

⁶ René Grotenhuis, 'Nation and State' *Nation-Building as Necessary Effort in Fragile States*, (Amsterdam University Press, 2016), p. 25.

⁷ Lowell Barrington, "'Nation' and 'Nationalism': The Misuse of Key Concepts in Political Science." *PS: Political Science and Politics*, vol. 30, no. 4, (1997), p. 713.

⁸ Founded in 1961 at the Welsh Eisteddfod, the Celtic League . For the website of the Celtic League see. <http://celticleague.net> [Accessed on 23/04/2026]. For discussion see Stewart, I., 'From the Pan-Celtic Moment to the Present' *The Celts: A Modern History*, Princeton University Press, (2025), pp. 363–96.

⁹ Rodway, 'Celtic- Definitions, Problems and Controversies,' p. 23.

R.S. Thomas's often quoted words that 'There is no present in Wales/ And no future;/ There is only the past'¹⁰ express feelings of a repeated turning to history in the creation of a modern identity. However, to understand present Celtic identity we must look to the past and there are a number of key figures who have shaped the notion of Celticity as it exists today.¹¹ An emergence of awareness of Celtic identity began in the early 18th century and to determine how this took place, we must begin with Edward Lhuyd (1660-1709). As Ian Stewart writes, Lhuyd is often cited as the 'founder of Celtic studies'¹² highlighting his legacy. Brynley Roberts describes how the 'geographical breadth of his collecting, his structured approach, and his critical responses make him the foremost pioneer in the field'¹³ demonstrating how Lhuyd's scholarly approach transformed thinking about the Celtic languages. In his *Glossography*, Lhuyd identified the commonalities between the Celtic languages, noting their divergence into the Q-Celtic (Goidelic- Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Manx) and P-Celtic (Brythonic-Welsh, Cornish, Breton) strands. Stewart tells us that 'Lhwyd's major innovation was to prove the kin-ship of Welsh and Irish'¹⁴ showing just how pivotal this early linguistic analysis was and how Lhuyd's findings altered the trajectory of the Celtic nations in terms of self-awareness and relation to one another. Also at this time in Brittany, Paul-Yves Pezron¹⁵ (1639-1706) was developing his idea of the Celtic language family with Raimund Karl stating that his 1703 work *Antiquité de la nation, et de langue des Celtes*, is 'probably the founding study of the discipline of Celtic Studies.'¹⁶ In his study, Pezron set out his genealogy of Brittany, with the aim of, as Cunliffe observes, giving the Bretons 'an honourable ancestry'¹⁷ and popularising the connection between Brittany and Wales. Pezron's work, however is now noted for its lack of scholarship, described by Stewart as filled with 'dubious etymologies tracing the names of figures in ancient history and classical mythology to Breton'¹⁸ yet still takes its place in the history of Celtic

¹⁰ R.S Thomas 'Welsh Landscape' in *Collected Poems 1945-1990* (London, 2000), p. 37.

¹¹ What follows is not intended to be a comprehensive historiography of this time, for a more detailed chronological discussion of this period see Stewart, I., *The Celts: A Modern History*, (Princeton University Press, 2025).

¹² Ian Stewart, 'Celtic Linguistic Antiquarianism: Paul-Yves Pezron, Edward Lhwyd, G. W. Leibniz, and Their Legacies.' *The Celts: A Modern History*, (Princeton University Press, 2025), p. 59.

¹³ Brynley Roberts, 'Edward Lhwyd (c . 1660-1709): Folklorist,' *Folklore*, vol. 120, no. 1, (2009), p. 51.

¹⁴ Stewart, *The Celts: A Modern History*, (Princeton University Press, 2025). p. 71.

¹⁵ For further discussion of Pezron see Stewart, I. 'Celtic Linguistic Antiquarianism: Paul-Yves Pezron, Edward Lhwyd, G. W. Leibniz, and Their Legacies' *The Celts: A Modern History*, (Princeton University Press, 2025), pp. 59–91.

¹⁶ Raimund Karl, 'The Celts From Everywhere and Nowhere: A Re-Evaluation Of The Origins Of The Celts And The Emergence Of Celtic Cultures' *Celtic from the West: Alternative Perspectives from Archaeology, Genetics, Language and Literature*, ed. by Barry Cunliffe and John T. Koch, vol. 15, (Oxbow Books, 2010) p. 39.

¹⁷ Cunliffe, *The Celts: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 113.

¹⁸ Stewart, *The Celts: A Modern History*, p. 63.

studies as shaping thought surrounding Celtic identity and particularly that of Wales and Brittany.

At this time, the construction of identity and ideas of nation were focused on genealogical, rather than racial origins, thus explaining the motivation behind Pezron and others' work to establish suitable origin stories for their respective lands. Just as a personal lineage could dictate societal standing,¹⁹ as Sommer tells us 'the length of documented history could be taken to indicate the rank of a nation'²⁰ revealing the importance placed on perceived ancestry. Taking inspiration from Pezron's Biblical genealogy,²¹ in his 1716 work *Drych y Prif Oesoedd*²² (A Mirror of the Early Ages), Theophilus Evans (1693-1767) aimed to instil national pride throughout Wales. John Davies writes that Evans sought to rouse his countrymen by 'portraying their history as a glorious epic,'²³ because, as Adam Coward states, 'the idea of a noble and ancient past remained important to ideas of Welshness.'²⁴ Drawing on Pezron's genealogy and the earlier pseudo-histories of Britain by Geoffrey of Monmouth²⁵ (109?-1155), Evans devised an updated origin story for Wales. Jerry Hunter points out that Evan's repetition to his readers that 'it is their language which makes them and keeps them who they are'²⁶ places Welsh speech at the heart of Welsh identity. Following the 1536 Act of Union,²⁷ wherein Wales was

¹⁹ Genealogy was especially important in the Celtic regions and wider Western society through the medieval period and into the early modern era. It is notable across several aspects of society including saints' hagiography, familial lines and as we see here, the origins of nations. For further analysis on the importance placed on lineage, see Pohl, Walter. 'Genealogy: A Comparative Perspective from the Early Medieval West,' *Meanings of Community across Medieval Eurasia: Comparative Approaches*, edited by Walter Pohl et al., Brill, (2016), pp. 232–70.

²⁰ Sommer, U., 'Archaeology and Nationalism' *Key Concepts in Public Archaeology*, ed. by Gabriel Moshenska, (UCL Press, 2017), p. 168.

²¹ Pezron established a genealogy that descended from Biblical Noah. For more on the importance of Noah across several cultures see Lewis, Jack P. 'Noah and the Flood: In Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Tradition', *The Biblical Archaeologist*, vol. 47, no. 4, (1984), pp. 224–39.

²² *Drych y Prif Oesoedd* or *A Mirror of the Early Ages* was first published in 1716 with a revised edition in 1740. For further discussion on the impact of the work see Hunter, J., 'Myth and Historiography: One Hundred and Sixty Years of Madog and the Madogwys' *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 46, (2016), pp. 37–55

²³ John Davies, *A History of Wales*, (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 303.

²⁴ Adam Coward, 'Exiled Trojans or the Sons of Gomer: Wales's Origins in the Long Eighteenth Century' *The Roots of Nationalism: National Identity Formation in Early Modern Europe, 1600-1815*, ed. by L. Jensen, (Amsterdam University Press, 2016), p. 168.

²⁵ In Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, a faux history of Britain is proposed wherein Brutus of Troy landed on Albion (Britain) which was inhabited by giants and founded a long lineage including an explanation for the origins of Arthur and King Lear. For further analysis of *Historia Regum Britanniae* see *A Companion to Geoffrey of Monmouth* ed. by Henley, Georgia, and Joshua Byron Smith, (Brill, 2020).

²⁶ Jerry Hunter 'Myth and Historiography: One Hundred and Sixty Years of Madog and the Madogwys' *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 46, (2016), p. 52.

²⁷ For further discussion on the 1536 Act of Union, see Jones, J. G., 'Post-Union Wales' *The History of Wales*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014), pp. 55–72

incorporated into England, as Davies summarises, the Act decreed that ‘English would be the only language of the courts in Wales,’²⁸ amongst other public spaces. Therefore, Evans placing a focus on the Welsh language offered a unique cultural identity serving to separate Wales from England. A work which followed soon after Evans would be Henry Rowlands’ (1655-1723) *Mona Antiqua Restaurata* and would reignite a Druidic interest. As Martin Johnes says ‘druids were employed to build a picture of the Welsh as a mysterious and poetic people, the true ancient Britons’²⁹ yet would rekindle a utilisation of stereotypes from the classical era³⁰ that would build through the Romantic period, shaping Celtic identity and ideas of what a Celtic nation should be.

Later, during 18th century Wales, another figure would provide a revised past with a Druidic focus. Despite being a capable scholar in his own right, Iolo Morganwg³¹ (1747-1826) is now best known as a forger of ancient manuscripts and inventor of ‘traditions’ on the premise that these were the long forgotten customs of the ancient Welsh. Ian Stewart tells us of Morganwg’s motivation that;

‘Bardism’ was designed to distinguish his native county of Glamorgan and Wales more generally, where, in his opinion, ‘Celtic civilization began’ and then spread to the rest of Europe³²

Thus showing an intention of strengthening a particular type of Welsh identity perhaps. One of the ‘traditions’ created by Morganwg that is still in use today is that of the *Gorsedd*. Stewart discusses this with ‘like the rest of Iolo’s Bardism, the *Gorsedd* mixed elements of fact and fantasy together’³³ showing how this amalgamation of historical truth and imagination allowed for a believable reality. The legacy of Morganwg’s forgeries also has implications for modern politics, illustrating how easily opinions can be swayed with ‘evidence’ and how even historical

²⁸ Davies, *A History of Wales*, p 235.

²⁹ Martin Johnes, ‘History and the Making and Remaking of Wales’, *History*, vol. 100, no. 5, (2015), p. 668.

³⁰ For discussion on stereotypes within the classical sources see Rankin, D., ‘The Celts Through Classical Eyes’ in Ed. Aldhouse-Green, M. *The Celtic World* (Cardiff: Cardiff University Press, 1996), pp. 21-33 and Isaac, Benjamin. ‘Proto-Racism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity’, *World Archaeology*, vol. 38, no. 1, (2006), pp. 32–47.

³¹ Iolo Morganwg is the bardic name of Edward Williams For discussion on Morganwg see Hutton, R. ‘Iolo Morganwg’ *Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain*, (Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 146–82.

³² Stewart, *The Celts: A Modern History*, (Princeton University Press, 2025), p. 165.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

narratives can be changed under the influence of a single person. During the preparation for his work *Celtic Researches*, Edward Davies (1756-1831), a contemporary of Morganwg, became suspicious of the authenticity of Morganwg's manuscript collection. Yet still, his work contains several elements of inaccuracy due to the skill with which Morganwg was able to bring genuine historical manuscripts and his forgeries together. As Ronald Hutton states 'although he probably did not know it, Iolo had already done enough while in London to change the history of Britain, and of Wales in particular'³⁴ highlighting the legacy of Morganwg's work and how many of his invented practices are still held as symbols of Welsh identity today. The *Gorsedd* has also been emulated by other Celtic nations, with *Goursez Breizh* being founded in Brittany in 1899 and *Gorsedh Kernow* founded in Cornwall in 1928. The Irish *Feis Ceoil*, taken from Gaelic for 'festival' also based itself on the Welsh Gorsedd,³⁵ illustrating that the construct of identity is rarely done so in isolation.

As the discipline of Celtic studies began to advance, ideas of Celticity further developed through literature across the other Celtic regions too. Also during the 18th century James Macpherson (1736-1796) contributed to this with the creation of the *Ossian* poems³⁶ shaping a view of the ancient Celts, as well as the present people of Scotland. Upon reception, Macpherson's work was immediately questioned, notably by Samuel Johnson.³⁷ Kristine Louise Haugen notes that 'the Ossian poems served a potent mixture of scholarly and political concerns'³⁸ displaying the wide ranging impact of the text. What the *Ossian* episode does highlight is that at this time, the Celtic nations were very much finding their own identities and that included doing so in opposition to one another. In elevating Scottish history, Macpherson reinforced stereotypes of the other nations being barbarous, particularly the Irish people. As

³⁴ Ronald Hutton, 'Iolo Morganwg' *Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain*, (Yale University Press, 2009), p. 162.

³⁵ For more on the Feis Ceoil and Feis Ceoil Association see De Barra, Caoimhín. 'A Gallant Little 'Tírin': The Welsh Influence on Irish Cultural Nationalism' *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. 39, no. 153, (2014), pp.65-66.

³⁶ Macpherson debuted his apparent translations of ancient Gaelic saga poems of Ossian between 1760-63. They are still in print today, with some published versions contentiously listed under the authorship of Ossian, and translated by Macpherson. For an example see *Ossian The Poems of Ossian* trans. by James Macpherson, (Legare Street Press, 2023), though post modern publication list Macpherson as the author. For further discussion see Gaskill, H., 'Introduction: The Translator's Ossian,' *Translation and Literature*, vol. 22, no. 3, (2013), pp. 293–301.

³⁷ For discussion on Samuel Johnson and the Ossian poems, see Lynch, J., 'Samuel Johnson's 'Love of Truth' and Literary Fraud,' *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 42, no. 3, (2002), pp. 601–18.

³⁸ Kristine Louise Haugen, 'Ossian and the Invention of Textual History' *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (1998), p. 310.

Stewart states, ‘this was an especially sensitive issue for the Irish, who had long been castigated as savage’³⁹ demonstrating how literary depictions can be inflammatory, reinforcing stereotypes. The idea of the ‘noble savage’ then, was one that would remain for some time, featuring throughout the 18th and 19th centuries and later in the poetry of W. B. Yeats (1865-1939).⁴⁰ Incorporating the Scottish Enlightenment Stadial Model⁴¹ of civilization into the poems, Macpherson created a picture of ‘primitively virtuous lives in nature,’⁴² as Stewart tells us, compounding stereotypes. However, recent scholarship has pivoted to find value in the *Ossian* poems, with Dafydd Moore writing that ‘Macpherson activates an awareness of alternative types of cultural tradition and knowledge, and the arbitrary nature of received history’⁴³ highlighting that, despite the inaccuracies contained and political motivations underpinning the work, there is still much to be studied.

The travel writers of the 18th and 19th century also began to shape ideas of the ‘otherness’ of the Celtic speaking nations. Writers such as Thomas Pennant (1726-1798) added to this ‘othering’ of the Celtic peripheries by relating regional customs, often conflating and exoticizing them in the process.⁴⁴ In relation to Wales, Desdemona McCannon points out the particular gaze of the 18th century travel writers in that it ‘refuses to acknowledge the march of progress, and markers of modernity in the form of quarries, mines and factories are rarely depicted’⁴⁵ often equating Wales and the other Celtic regions solely with a natural landscape

³⁹ Stewart, *The Celts: A Modern History*, p.120.

⁴⁰ For discussion on Yeats and national identity see Regan, S., ‘W.B. Yeats: Irish Nationalism and Post-Colonial Theory’ *Nordic Irish Studies*, vol. 5, (2006), pp. 87-99.

⁴¹ The Stadial Model proposes four stages of the development of civilizations; 1. Hunting period 2. Pastoral 3. Settled agricultural 4. Commercial, with a focus that each stage is somehow more civilized and therefore ‘better’ than the previous, thus open to misuse when applying to different societies. For discussion of the Stadial Model and theory see Laibman, D., ‘Theory and Necessity: The Stadial Foundations of the Present’ *Science & Society*, vol. 69, no. 3, (2005), pp. 285–315 and Wolloch, N., ‘The Civilizing Process, Nature, and Stadial Theory’ *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2, (2011), pp. 245–59.

⁴² Stewart, *The Celts: A Modern History*, p. 126.

⁴³ Dafydd Moore, ‘“As Flies the Unconstant Sun”: Tradition, Memory and Cultural Transmission in *The Poems of Ossian*,’ *Eighteenth-Century Ireland / Iris an Dá Chultúr*, vol. 23, (2008), p. 81.

⁴⁴ For discussion on Pennant’s cultural conflations, see Mary-Ann Constantine ‘The Shape of Things to Come’ in *Networks, Narratives and Nations: Transcultural Approaches to Cultural Nationalism in Modern Europe and Beyond* ed. by Brolsma M, Drace-Francis A, Lajosi-Moore K, et al., (Amsterdam University Press; 2022), p. 270.

⁴⁵ Desdemona McCannon, ‘The Time-travelling Antiquarian: Illustrated Tourist Guides to North Wales from Pennant to Piper’ *Journal of Illustration*, 5, (2018), p. 44.

and therefore as being less civilized perhaps than England, perpetuating the ‘noble savage’ idea. Kenneth Morgan asserts that ‘Wales continued to be widely regarded as a remote tribal backwater, economically backward, obstinately adhering to its antique language’⁴⁶ emphasising this perspective. More recently, Mary-Ann Constantine states that ‘postcolonial theory has helped to lay bare the ideologies, the imbalances in power and agency, which structured much travel writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’⁴⁷ demonstrating how the early modern travel writers compounded stereotypes and how these narratives have now been deconstructed in the framework of post-colonialist theories.

Celtic identity came to be further romanticised during what is now termed the *Celtic Revival*,⁴⁸ with Stewart noting that ‘Celticism as it exists today is in many ways indebted to the Celtic Revival’⁴⁹ demonstrating how more recent historical events have impacted the present. Justin Dolan Stover writes that ‘a selective reconstruction of the Celtic race was most apparent in the poetry and literature of the Celtic Revival’⁵⁰ showing a bias within the culture during this period. Yeats’ poetry exemplifies this with Stephen Regan stating that ‘Yeats succeeds in creating a version of Irish life untouched by contemporary political realities,’⁵¹ demonstrating that, much like the earlier travel writers, an over simplified view of the modern Celtic nations was being devised at this time. Stover further states that ‘many cultural nationalists applied various romanticized elements of a Celtic past toward their own ends’⁵² showing how the utilisation of Celtic stereotypes was used to further individual aims. Most notably in Ireland, this was seen with the Easter Rising and the subsequent Irish War of Independence where

⁴⁶ Morgan, ‘Welsh Nationalism: The Historical Background’ *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 6, no. 1, (1971), p. 154.

⁴⁷ Mary-Ann Constantine ‘The Shape of Things to Come’ in *Networks, Narratives and Nations: Transcultural Approaches to Cultural Nationalism in Modern Europe and Beyond* ed. by Brolsma M, Drace-Francis A, Lajosi-Moore K, et al., (Amsterdam University Press; 2022), p. 273.

⁴⁸ The *Celtic Revival* is the term given to the period roughly 1880s to 1930s, with key figures being W.B Yeats (1865-1939) and John Duncan (1866-1945).

⁴⁹ Stewart, I., *The Celts: A Modern History*, (Princeton University Press, 2025), p. 363.

⁵⁰ Justin Dolan Stover, ‘Modern Celtic Nationalism in the Period of the Great War: Establishing Transnational Connections’ *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, vol. 32, (2012), p. 288.

⁵¹ Stephen Regan, ‘W.B. Yeats: Irish Nationalism and Post-Colonial Theory’ *Nordic Irish Studies*, vol. 5, (2006), p. 92.

⁵² Justin Dolan Stover, ‘Modern Celtic Nationalism in the Period of the Great War: Establishing Transnational Connections’ *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, vol. 32, (2012), p. 288.

stereotypes of passionate Celts were employed.⁵³ Stover tells us ‘the impact of the 1916 Easter Rising was felt throughout the Celtic world’⁵⁴ illustrating the ripple effect the revolution had. As Colin Kidd observes, ‘rapid changes in circumstances or decisive reconfigurations of thought and culture can lead to bewildering estrangement from the more recent past’⁵⁵ showing how quickly accepted ideas can alter and be adopted to form new ideas of identity and nationality.

Also emerging at this time were different theories surrounding the origins of the Celts which moved from a genealogical focus to a racial one. Racism and nationalism have had a long and complex relationship and it is no different in terms of Celtic studies. By the late 19th century, the awareness of Celtic identity began to take shape in the form of ethnic nationalism and as Kidd notes ‘race became a mainstay of medical and scientific research’⁵⁶ at this time. In terms of Scotland, Kidd states that ‘subscription to racist ideas in nineteenth-century Scotland took different forms’⁵⁷ further noting that ‘some lowland commentators regarded the Highland Celts as a totally distinct race’⁵⁸ showing the division even within the same country. Perhaps in an attempt to address these individual stereotypes during this period, a Pan-Celtic movement started with the intention to unite all the Celtic regions, with Stewart describing it as ‘a self-conscious movement operating on the principle that the Celtic nations are fraternally bonded’⁵⁹ with the foundation that ‘the collective rights of all Celtic nations were more important than any nation’s individual Celtic past.’⁶⁰ Ironically, however, attempts to organise a Pan-Celtic movement largely proved unsuccessful due to the individual aims of each nation and the interest in their own history, language and culture with Stewart commenting that ‘Pan-Celtic interests were always ancillary’⁶¹ to issues such as Home Rule and language preservation. Presently, the Pan-Celtic movement survives more as a cultural connection, fostered by arts

⁵³ For further discussion on the Irish War of Independence and other conflicts at this time see Stover, Justin Dolan. ‘Modern Celtic Nationalism in the Period of the Great War: Establishing Transnational Connections’ *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, vol. 32, (2012), pp. 286–301.

⁵⁴ Justin Dolan Stover, ‘Modern Celtic Nationalism in the Period of the Great War: Establishing Transnational Connections’ *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, vol. 32, (2012), p. 296.

⁵⁵ Colin Kidd, ‘Race, Empire, and the Limits of Nineteenth-Century Scottish Nationhood’ *The Historical Journal*, vol. 46, no. 4, (2003), p. 873.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 879.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 878.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 879.

⁵⁹ Stewart, *The Celts: A Modern History*, p. 333.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 362.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 365.

organisations such as Celf Cymru (the Arts Council of Wales) hosting events which are then attended by the other Celtic nations and those who support Celtic based arts and culture, maintaining a pan-Celtic bond yet supporting the individual identities of each place.

Following World War II, a shift in focus took place towards the preservation of the Celtic languages, with language seen as a primary focal point for Celtic identity. In Wales, Saunders Lewis (1893-1984) in his 1962 speech on BBC Radio Cymru,⁶² entitled ‘Tynged yr Iaith’ or ‘Fate of the Language’, called for preservation of Welsh speech to be the focus, as opposed to campaigns for Home Rule. Perhaps subconsciously, but nevertheless, Lewis’ speech echoed Theophilus Evans reiteration that language is the heart of the Welsh identity. Davies writes that Lewis’s speech provided the ‘catalyst’⁶³ for Cymdeithas Yr Iaith Cymraeg (the Welsh Language Society), to form, with Davies noting it was rooted in ‘the frustrations felt by younger members’⁶⁴ in the uncertainty of Plaid Cymru, the Welsh political party.⁶⁵ The Welsh language Act was formed in 1967 with the Welsh language channel S4C launching in 1982.⁶⁶ Darryl Jones cites Lewis’s speech as a ‘major contributing factor’⁶⁷ to the language policies that followed. The languages of the other Celtic regions were also being considered at this time, with the foundation of their own policies and strategies, for example leading to the launch of BBC Alba, the Scottish Gaelic channel in 2008. Caoimhín De Barra states that ‘Wales was held up as an example by some Irish nationalists of how a nation could revive its traditional culture and language’⁶⁸ demonstrating how the strategies employed by Wales have influenced other regions. Currently the Welsh language is listed as ‘vulnerable’ according to UNESCO

⁶² For an English translation see <https://morris.cymru/testun/saunders-lewis-fate-of-the-language.html>. [accessed on 21/04/2026] To listen to a recording of the original speech see <<https://parallel.cymru/tynged-yr-iaith/?lang=en>> [accessed on 21/04/2026]

⁶³ Davies, *A History of Wales*, p. 649.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 649.

⁶⁵ For more on Plaid Cymru see Richard Wyn Jones, *Putting Wales First: The Political Thought of Plaid Cymru (Volume 1)* (University of Wales Press, 2024)

⁶⁶ S4C stands for Sianel Pedwar Cymru, translated as aChannel Four Wales, and launched in 1982 and still producing a wide range of television programmes in the Welsh language today. For further information see Price, E. *Broadcasting for Wales: The Early Years of S4C*, (University of Wales Press, 2022)

⁶⁷ Darryl Jones, ‘I Failed Utterly’: Saunders Lewis and the Cultural Politics of Welsh Modernism’ *The Irish Review* (1986-), no. (19, 1996), p. 39.

⁶⁸ Caoimhín De Barra, ‘A Gallant Little ‘Tírín’: The Welsh Influence on Irish Cultural Nationalism’ *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. 39, no. 153, (2014), p. 58.

classifications.⁶⁹ Following devolution after the Government of Wales Act⁷⁰ in 1999, there has been a growth in focus on campaigns to increase the number of Welsh Speakers. The Welsh Language and Education Act 2025⁷¹ seeks to improve the status of the language, with the aim of 1 million speakers by 2050.

With regards to the languages of the other Celtic regions, on the Isle of Man, there were no native speakers by the 21st century, following the death of Ned Maddrell in 1974.⁷² A. J. Hughes observes that ‘his passing was a landmark, closing a chapter in the linguistic life of Europe’⁷³ yet fortunately the language has been preserved, with Maddrell being a large contributor through the work of *Yn Cheshaght Ghailckagh*, The Manx Language Society. Receiving a listing as ‘extinct’ by UNESCO, Manx is now listed as ‘critically endangered’ following efforts to revive it.⁷⁴ Similarly in Cornwall, as Stuart Dunmore notes, ‘though Cornish continued to play a varied role in definitions of Cornish distinctiveness’⁷⁵ the language is also currently listed as ‘critically endangered.’⁷⁶ Breton is currently listed as ‘severely endangered.’ The status of Scottish Gaelic and Irish are both listed as ‘endangered.’ The statistics on the current status of the Celtic languages are complex to decipher. Figures are collected by census data, yet these are not infallible as they do not offer a view of speakers outside of the country the census was conducted. Conversely, nor do they take into account census participants over or, indeed, underestimation of ability to understand a language. The following figures were attained from the 2021 census; in Scotland, 2.5% of people aged 3 and over had some skills in Gaelic in

⁶⁹ UNESCO is a UN agency with a focus on cultural preservation, for more see <https://www.unesco.org/en/brief> [Accessed on 28/04/2026].

⁷⁰ To read the full Government of Wales Act see <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/32/contents> accessed on 02/04/2026. For further discussion see Jeffery, Charlie. ‘Devolution and Local Government’ *Publius*, vol. 36, no. 1, (2006), pp. 57–73.

⁷¹ For the full legislation of the The Welsh Language and Education Act 2025 see <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asc/2025/2> [Accessed 27/04/2026].

⁷² For an overview on the work of Ned Maddrell in preserving the Manx Gaelic language see Hughes, A. J. ‘Manx Speaker N p.ed Maddrell and Irish Gaelic Author Liam Mac Reachtain’ *Seanchas Ardmhacha: Journal of the Armagh Diocesan Historical Society*, vol. 15, no. 2, (1993), pp. 125-29.

⁷³ A. J. Hughes, ‘Manx Speaker Ned Maddrell and Irish Gaelic Author Liam Mac Reachtain’ *Seanchas Ardmhacha: Journal of the Armagh Diocesan Historical Society*, vol. 15, no. 2, (1993), p. 125.

⁷⁴ For a report on the Manx language revival see <<https://www.gov.im/news/2026/feb/05/manx-language-and-biosphere-status-showcased-at-celtic-forum-in-glasgow/>> [Accessed on 23/04/2026].

⁷⁵ Dunmore, S., ‘Language Decline and the ‘Theory of Cornish Distinctiveness’: The Historiography of Language and Identity in Early Modern Cornwall’ *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, vol. 31, (2011), p. 105.

⁷⁶ For a report on the Cornish language see <<https://www.cornwall.gov.uk/council-news/environment-culture-and-planning/cornish-language-officially-granted-part-iii-status/>> [Accessed on 23/04/2026].

2022, an increase from 1.9% in 2001.⁷⁷ In Ireland, the census of the Gaeltacht⁷⁸ areas showed an increase of 6%.⁷⁹ In Cornwall, 563 people reported that that could speak the language.⁸⁰ In Brittany, 2.7% of the population said they spoke Breton in 2024.⁸¹ On the Isle of Man 2.6% of the population have skills within the language.⁸² In Wales, figures show 17.8% of residents aged 3 and over can speak Welsh, a decrease from 19% at the 2011 census. Of course, apart from Ireland, these figures are for the whole of each region and so, again, do not tell a full picture as some areas have a far higher percentage of engagement with Celtic language.

The argument against there being a Celtic nation in existence has largely been an academic one. In the 1990s, academic thought began to question the usage of the term ‘Celts’ and ‘Celtic,’ debating their accuracy. Patrick Sims-Williams employed the term ‘Celto-scepticism’ to capture this idea. As Stewart observes ‘the radical Pan-Celticism of the second half of the twentieth century was increasingly out of step with academic Celtic studies’⁸³ demonstrating the divergence between scholars of Celtic studies and politics of the time. Sims-Williams determines that ‘whatever may be its strength today, self-conscious Celtic solidarity cannot be traced back beyond the modern period’⁸⁴ displaying the belief that Celtic identity began with the advent of Celtic studies in the early 18th century and the following revival. The subtitle of ‘Ancient People or Modern Invention’ to Simon James’s *The Atlantic Celts*, is provocative yet does seek to ask questions of the validity of the terms. James himself writes that Celtic is ‘too compromised even to be useful as a more general label’⁸⁵ showing the feeling that the term has

⁷⁷ Census data on language for Scotland < <https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/2022-reports/scotland-s-census-2022-ethnic-group-national-identity-language-and-religion/> > [Accessed on 20/04/2026].

⁷⁸ The Gaeltacht areas are districts in Ireland where the language is recognised as being spoken more widely and so are supported by the government to maintain the language. For more discussion on this see Ó Ghadhra, Nollaig. ‘The Gaeltacht and the Future of Irish’ *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, vol. 90, no. 360, (2001), pp. 433-44.

⁷⁹ Census data for Ireland <https://www.cso.ie/en/csolatestnews/pressreleases/2023pressreleases/presstatementcensus2022resultsprofile8-theirishlanguageandeducation/> [Accessed on 20/04/2026]

⁸⁰ Census data for Cornwall <https://www.ons.gov.uk/datasets/TS024/editions/2021/versions/3> [Accessed on 20/04/2026].

⁸¹ Breton data <https://www.bretagne.bzh/presse/communiqués-dossiers/transmission-et-usage-du-breton-et-du-gallo-resultats-de-letude-sociolinguistique-2024/> [Accessed on 20/04/2026].

⁸² Census data for the Isle of Man <https://www.gov.im/media/1375604/2021-01-27-census-report-part-i-final-2.pdf> [Accessed on 20/04/2026]

⁸³ Stewart, *The Celts: A Modern History*, p. 364.

⁸⁴ Sims-Williams ‘Celtomania and Celto-scepticism’, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, Vol 36 (1998), p. 11.

⁸⁵ Simon James *The Atlantic Celts : Ancient People or Modern Invention?* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1999) p. 136.

become too broad to provide any meaningful definition. In 2022, Simon Jenkins would rekindle the argument in his book *The Celts: A Sceptical History* going even further to claim that ‘the Celts were simply a myth.’⁸⁶ Jenkins states that his ‘intention is to dispel the concept of a single Celtic people, language or nation,’⁸⁷ displaying the idea that a common Celtic identity does not exist. Following his article in 2025, it seems Sims-Williams is more accepting of the terms now as he states ‘there remains no reason for British archaeologists to continue to ‘recoil from the term “Celtic”’⁸⁸ and states that the Celto-sceptic works of the 1990s ‘were written at a time when the potential of aDNA was underestimated’⁸⁹ thus showing how advancements in the field can alter accepted views.

Bringing us to the 21st century then, we see that the stereotypes of the Celtic revival and Romantic period are still in force in the present day. As is the case with the tourism industry across the world, the countries that comprise the Celtic language speaking areas are no different in that they often lean into cultural stereotypes when it comes to appealing to travellers. Speaking upon Wales, Juliette Wood describes that;

Among the many souvenirs available in Welsh shops is a colourful tea towel showing a girl wearing the "typical" Welsh costume of high-crowned black hat, paisley shawl and check-patterned dress in red wool, and holding a daffodil or a harp. She is surrounded by a selection of Welsh words with English translations, proclaiming Welsh to be the oldest language in Europe⁹⁰

This is a much repeated image appearing throughout souvenir shops across Wales, with each Celtic region also having their own version of a national stereotype.⁹¹ As well as the romanticized Celt of the 18th and 19th centuries, many of the present day caricatures associated with Celtic regions are those that were established in the classical texts. The image of the drunken and over sexualised Celt can be found in the writings of Diodorus⁹² (fl. 60-30 BC)

⁸⁶ Jenkins *The Celts: A Sceptical History*, (London: Profile Books, 2022), p. 17.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

⁸⁸ Sims-Williams, ““Celtic Britain”” In Pre-Roman Archaeology, Reconsidered’, *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 44, (2025), p. 458.

⁸⁹ Sims-Williams, ““Celtic Britain”” In Pre-Roman Archaeology, Reconsidered’, p. 457.

⁹⁰ Juliette Wood ‘Perceptions of the Past in Welsh Folklore Studies’ *Folklore*, vol. 108, (1997), p. 93.

⁹¹ For further on studies on national stereotypes see McGrath, Robert E., et al. ‘How to Measure National Stereotypes?’ *Science*, vol. 311, no. 5762, (2006), pp. 776–79.

⁹² Diodorus Siculus *Bibliotheca historica*, 5.32.7.

and the volatile, bloodthirsty Celt can be found in *De Bello Gallico*, written by Caesar (100 BC-44 BC)⁹³ as military propaganda. However, Sims-Williams finds that ‘racial stereotypes of the Celts are not solely invented and maintained by non-Celts in an imperialist context,’⁹⁴ revealing that they often they are internalised as the tourism example shows. Wood observes that ‘a sense of marginalisation is undoubtedly a factor in creation of national identity’⁹⁵ showing that the feeling of being on the periphery of wider society can invoke the desire to create a stronger definition, thus strengthening stereotypes. As Silke Stroh also notes,

A main shared feature among all the cultures which, over time, have been labelled ‘Celtic’ is their shared ‘peripherality’ and otherness in relation to some hegemonic centre (Greek, Roman, English or French)⁹⁶

This then displays the power imbalance between these peripheral cultures and those that have dominated them at various points in history.

Media representations also play a large role in reinforcing identity with films such as *Braveheart* (1995) driving a Scottish nationalist ideal and more recently *Fisherman’s Friends* (2019) feeding stereotypes surrounding coastal Cornwall and *Wild Mountain Thyme* (2020) invoking the previously mentioned trope of a simplistic, rural Ireland. Regarding Wales, television programmes such as *Gavin and Stacey* (2007-2024), whilst attempting to situate Welsh culture in an urban setting, still over exaggerate accents and ideas of particular types of Welsh people. Angela Piccini observes that ‘Television and audio-visual media generally have immense power to alter or reinforce people’s perceptions’⁹⁷ illustrating the impact of stereotyped media representations of Celtic past and present. Rodway finds that ‘the Romantic Celt was essentially by and for non-Celts, but he has to a certain extent been internalized in the Celtic countries’⁹⁸ further highlighting how modern Celtic people have identified with the stereotypes cemented through history. Patrick Sims-Williams, terms this wider interest in all

⁹³ For more discussion on Caesar’s ethnographical writings see Schadee, H, ‘Caesar’s Construction of Northern Europe: Inquiry, Contact and Corruption in ‘De Bello Gallico,’ *The Classical Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 1, (2008), pp. 158–80.

⁹⁴ Sims-Williams, ‘The Visionary Celtic Church’ *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* Vol 11 (1987), p. 77.

⁹⁵ Juliette Wood ‘Perceptions of the Past in Welsh Folklore Studies’ *Folklore*, vol. 108, (1997), p. 95.

⁹⁶ Silke Stroh ‘Celticity and the Gaelic Voice in (Post)Colonial Discourse’, Paper given at ESSE conference 2010, Torino (24-28 August), p. 2.

⁹⁷ Angela Piccini, ‘Filming Through the Mists of Time: Celtic Constructions and the Documentary’ *Current Anthropology*, vol. 37, no. 1, (1996), p. 97.

⁹⁸ Rodway ‘Celtic- Definitions, Problems and Controversies,’ p. 13.

things deemed Celtic, the ‘celtic industry’⁹⁹ showing that there are political and economic aspects associated with the historical and modern people we term ‘The Celts.’ Similarly, As John Collis notes, ‘The Celts are still a potent force, culturally, economically and politically’¹⁰⁰ displaying that the term has beneficial uses when applied to certain spheres, yet these applications do not always add to the clarity within Celtic studies. The attachment to the term is often based on exaggerated claims and so as Sims-Williams notes, exploration “has to be done by questioning every such stereotypical assumption”¹⁰¹ demonstrating that the meaning of ‘The Celts’ or ‘Celtic’ is difficult to define and so too is the idea of a modern Celtic nation.

In conclusion, as we have seen through the example of Wales, as well as the other Celtic regions, it is a valid statement that a Celtic nation does exist in the 21st century, being based on the areas where a Celtic language is spoken. However, the idea of a single, homogenized Celtic nation is not apparent, with each area having their own unique story, both historically and presently. Though there are many similarities between the different Celtic nations, as we have discussed such as a common language branch and similar accounts of subjugation, there is no monolithic Celtic nation. One thing is certain, the intertwined history of the Celtic regions of Wales, Ireland, Scotland, Cornwall, the Isle of Man and Brittany is a long and extremely complex narrative. Turning to R.S Thomas’s words again, can there be a present identity without looking to the past? Perhaps not and yet to move forward we must look to the future. As the political field is in constant flux, it will be intriguing to see the developments made in terms of language and identity within the Celtic nations as we progress further into the 21st century.

⁹⁹ Sims-Williams, ‘Celtomania and Celtoscepticism’, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, Vol 36 (1998) p. 7.

¹⁰⁰ John Collis, ‘The Origin and Spread of the Celts’ *Studia Celtica*, Vol 30, (1996), p. 17.

¹⁰¹ John Collis, ‘The Sheffield Origins of Celtic Art’, *Celtic Art in Europe: Making Connections*, ed. by Christopher Gosden et al., (Oxbow Books, 2014), p. 20.

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