

What is known about the death of languages such as Manx and Cornish and why, in your view, has the Welsh language survived and been continuously spoken by native speakers?

The Death Of Cornish

The term 'death' when used in reference to the Cornish language could seem to suggest an abrupt and sudden halt. Nevertheless, the depletion of Cornish is a gradual process which can be attested to a period spanning hundreds of years. The death of the last native speaker, Dorothy 'Dolly' Pentreath, in 1777 is unanimously considered to be the point at which Cornish officially died, and by employing a sociolinguistic analysis, we can understand the factors that led to this outcome. Both the politicisation and anglicisation of Cornwall are themes which consistently appear throughout the chronology of the Cornish language. These processes are demonstrable through the enforcement of a homogeneous 'British' identity, as well as the impact of organised religion on Cornwall's primarily rural and agricultural population.¹

As mentioned above, it is near impossible to discuss these ideas without recognising the direct role of the Christian Church as an instrument of the depletion of an intrinsically Celtic Cornish identity. While there is no distinct written attestation for the origins of a Christian presence in Cornwall, we do know that following the 5th century, the marring of an ancient Celtic culture with a new religious order starts to become visible. Ogham inscriptions discovered in Cornwall, which can be dated to somewhere between the 5th and 11th centuries, were found bearing symbols pertaining to contemporary Christian practices. It is also important to mention the arrival of a new ruling class, heralded in by the Anglo-Saxon invasion, which occurred during the 5th century. The establishment of this new social and political order inevitably had momentous consequences on the structure of the Cornish Church. This is evident in the increased appointments of Saxon clergymen in Cornish churches, many of whom enjoyed some level of political power. Concurrent with this was the arrival of Celtic Christian missionaries; Saint Ia, for instance, as well as other figures of post-Patrician monastic Ireland. This only furthered the diminishment of the pagan faith in Cornwall and symbiotically assisted the introduction of latinised (and later, subsequently anglicised) ecclesiastical literature and religious practice.²

It is almost impossible to underestimate the impact of the Reformation on the Cornish language. A year of particular significance is 1549, during which the Act of Uniformity led to the Prayer Book Rebellion, known also as the Western Rising. With the implementation of the English medium Book of Common Prayer, the act demonstrated the monarchy's intention to minimise the use of spoken Cornish in everyday life. At the subsequent battle of Fenny Bridges, Cornish and Devon armies opposed to the act met with forces of the Crown, who massacred over 4000 rebels in an effort to quash the rebellion and deter any potential rebels from taking up arms.³ In a region where Churches served as the heart of community and everyday life, it comes as no surprise that monoglot Cornish speakers declined drastically in

¹ P.A.S Pool, *The Death Of Cornish, 1600-1800*, (Penzance: Self Published, 1975)

² Siarl Ferdinand, 'A Brief History Of The Cornish Language, Its Revival And Its Current Status', *Journal of Interdisciplinary Celtic Studies*, 2:6, 2013.

³ P.A.S Pool, *The Death Of Cornish, 1600-1800*, (Penzance: Self Published, 1975)

number in the months and years after the rebellion. The imposition of English rather than Liturgical Latin also had wider consequences; with the Anglican Church eroding Cornwall's ties to its Celtic past creating a distance between the Cornish and their Celtic cousins on the continent. The once close cultural and, more significantly, linguistic links shared by Breton and Cornish speakers alike were broken over time due to religious changes throughout Britain.

The enculturation of Cornwall manifests plainly during the civil war, throughout which Cornish forces are seen championing the royal cause to such a great degree that they are held up as an example loyalty to the King. The irony here is evident, considering the events of the previous century, however, one must not forget that Charles I and his army were viewed as having a universally British identity and so this was more easily received than the notion of an English aggressor in the form of the parliamentary cause. By 1646, the war had ended, the parliamentarians had won, and the King's defeat was felt deeply by his most loyal of forces, the Cornish army. Mainstream use of spoken Cornish began to dwindle even further, and by 1700 only 5000 native speakers remained, the majority of which resided in smaller communities on the western fringes of Cornwall.⁴

Nearly 8 decades later, the language disappeared from use completely amongst traditional native speakers with the death of Dolly Pentreath. On the contrary, one should note that there is a lack of clarity with regards to exactly how much Cornish Pentreath was able to speak. There also remains some uncertainty over the verification of her claims as the last native speaker. The village of Boswednack in Zennor, became known as one of the last communities of Cornish speakers in the 19th century, which already clouds judgement over Pentreath's statement. One figure of note is John Mann, who had claimed that in his infancy, he had communicated in Cornish with other local children. He died at the age of 80 in 1914, a whole decade after the publication of Henry Jenner's '*A Handbook of the Cornish Language*' in 1904, which is widely agreed to be the point of the Cornish revival.⁵

The Death Of Manx

It can be argued that the story of language death on the Isle of Man takes a more complex route. Both the etymology and orthographic structure of Manx have been influenced by its long history under foreign rule and its close relationships with its Goidelic cousins. The Isle of Man came under Anglo-Saxon control in the 7th century. Its new ruler, King Edward of Northumbria, used the island as a means to exact raids upon the East coast of Ireland, taking advantage of the close relationship between the Isle of Man and the Irish province of Leinster. Around 200 years later, the ruling class changed again with the Viking invasion in the 9th century. Hiberno-Norse culture had an immense impact on the British and Insular Celtic world, and the Isle of Man was no exception. To this day, the remnants of Old Norse are found in Manx place names, for example, 'Snaefell' meaning 'snowy mountain' and 'Laxey' meaning 'salmon river'.⁶ It is widely believed that Tynwald was established during this period, supporting its claims of being the world's oldest parliamentary assembly. The island consequently came under the authority of the Kings of Norway, who held suzerainty over the Isle of Man until the death of Magnus Olafsson, the last Norse King of Mann in

⁴ P.A.S Pool, *The Second Death Of Cornish*, (Redruth: Tor Mark, 1995)

⁵ Jenner, Henry, *A Handbook Of The Cornish Language*, (Project Gutenberg, 2008)

⁶ George Broderick, *Language Death In The Isle Of Man*, (Tubingen: Niemeyer, 1999)

1265. In 1266, the Treaty of Perth entrusted rule over Mann to the Scottish. Throughout the years that followed, domain over the island was continually contested between English and Scottish rule respectively. This changed in 1405, when the Stanley family took feudal control of the isle, appointing Sir John Stanley as the new King of Mann. During the Stanley family's feudal jurisdiction of the Isle, several ties with Scotland and Ireland were broken, subsequently causing the population of Man to become isolated from their Goidelic neighbours as the Anglo-Norman, and later English linguistic presence overpowered the Gaelic speaking communities.⁷

The development of Manx into its current form as a tongue sue generis (rather than a mere dialect of Irish Gaelic) is a process which cannot be attributed to a specific period or even a singular century. Nevertheless, many scholars agree that this occurred between the years of approximately 1400-1900. It may come as a surprise to some that the language's evolution took place in conjunction with its gradual demise and subsequent death in 1974.⁸

English colonial forces in Ireland did much to diminish the number of Gaelic speakers there, namely through the Penal Laws, which sought to outlaw the presence of spoken Gaelic. This acutely impacted numbers of Irish speakers close to the seat of British power in Dublin and the surrounding areas within Leinster and the East coast of Ireland. This effected the Manx language and may have contributed to the actualisation of a distinct orthographic structure, which is believed to have taken place during the Middle Ages. It is also important to mention the extinction of Galloway Gaelic during the 18th century and its impact on Manx's spoken tradition. The dialect was also known as Galwegian Gaelic and was more akin to forms of Gaelic spoken in Ulster and the Isle of Mann and shared less linguistic similarities with other Scottish dialects. The collateral damage of these factors reached Mann as it became geographically alienated from other speakers of Goidelic tongues.⁹

Moving into the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution and subsequent economic boom enjoyed by Britain's upper and middle classes ushered in an influx in tourism. The majority of visitors to the island were English speaking and so the gentrification of communities that followed was geared towards that specific demographic, taking cultural influence away from Mann's Celtic population. The movement also prompted an exodus of native Manx speakers who journeyed to Britain's big cities in search of opportunities that the island's rural communities could no longer offer.

The Survival of Welsh

The Welsh nation and its population alike possess a long held tradition of social activism, the likes of which is seen in other parts of Britain, some of which have similar cultural traditions and socio- political experiences within the union. I am inclined to make reference to the Northeast of England as an example of this; a tradition of folk music and storytelling, a largely working community which has been dismissed by Westminster and political activism pertaining to workers' rights and education are all things that these two regions have in common. Local traditions in both of these regions remain strong and are still celebrated to

⁷ Jennifer Kewley Draskau, 'Language Death And Resurrection In The Isle Of Man: The Continuity Of Manx Gaelic Exemplified By The Use Of Inflected Verb Tenses', Harvard Celtic Colloquium, 25:25, 2004-2005.

⁸ George Broderick, Language Death In The Isle Of Man, (Tubingen: Niemeyer, 1999)

⁹ Jennifer Kewley Draskau, 'Language Death And Resurrection In The Isle Of Man: The Continuity Of Manx Gaelic Exemplified By The Use Of Inflected Verb Tenses', Harvard Celtic Colloquium, 25:25, 2004-2005.

this day; in the case of the Northeast, this is mainly visible through the folk music tradition and colloquialisms within the language. In the case of Wales, it is best exemplified through the survival of its language. The Chartist movement in Wales took place throughout the 1830s and 1840s, arguably the most infamous event of which took place in Newport where 20,000 marched through the city.¹⁰ Even The Times newspaper agreed that the education system in Wales was lacking and needed serious improvement. This attention in the mainstream media only raised awareness of the issue and heralded in a series of events which would contribute to the conservation of the Welsh language. One such example comes around a century later in 1939, when Sir Ifan ap Owen Edwards founded the ‘*Ysgol Gymraeg Aberystwyth*’, known in English as the ‘Aberystwyth Welsh School’. It was the first Welsh primary school and its existence paved the way for the enshrinement of the Welsh language within policy that we see today.¹¹ This political protection is present in many forms, for example, according to the National Curriculum, all children being educated in Wales must study the language until at least the age of 16.¹² I would argue that these factors contribute to the status of the Welsh language today, which has the largest number of native speakers (who speak the language on a day-to-day basis) of any of the surviving Celtic languages. Furthermore, I would attest that the clearest evidence of this is the fact that at present, Welsh is the only tongue within the group of Celtic languages that is not considered to be ‘endangered’ by UNESCO.¹³

Bibliography

- P.A.S Pool, *The Death Of Cornish, 1600-1800*, (Penzance: Self Published, 1975)
- Siarl Ferdinand, ‘A Brief History Of The Cornish Language, Its Revival And Its Current Status’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary Celtic Studies*, 2:6, 2013.
- P.A.S Pool, *The Second Death Of Cornish*, (Redruth: Tor Mark, 1995)
- George Broderick, *Language Death In The Isle Of Man*, (Tubingen: Niemeyer, 1999)
- Jennifer Kewley Draskau, ‘Language Death And Resurrection In The Isle Of Man: The Continuity Of Manx Gaelic Exemplified By The Use Of Inflected Verb Tenses’, *Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 25:25, 2004-2005.
- P. Sture Ureland (ed), George Broderick (ed), ‘Language Contact In The British Isles’, *Proceedings of the Eighth International Symposium on Language Contact in Europe, Douglas, Isle of Man, 1988*.
- Renko-Michelsen, Zsuzsanna, ‘Language Death And Revival: Cornish As A Minority Language In UK’, *Eesti ja Soome-Ugri Keeleteaduse Ajakiri*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2013

¹⁰ Davies, John, *A History Of Wales*, (London: Penguin, 1993)

¹¹ ‘*Ysgol Gymraeg Aberystwyth*’, Welsh Government, 2001

¹² ‘National Curriculum: Welsh Programme Of Study’, Welsh Government, 2016

¹³ ‘UNESCO International Mother Language Day: Reflections On Welsh And Breton’, *Academi Heddwch Cymru*, Blogs, 2023

- Jones, David Brian, 'The Influence Of Religion On The Survival Of The Welsh Language 1801-2011: A Tale Of Two Centuries', *The University Of Wales, Trinity Saint David*, 2013
- Williams, W. Ogwen, 'The Survival Of The Welsh Language After The Union Of England And Wales', *Welsh History Review*, Vol. 2, 1964
- 'The Vitality Of Welsh: A Statistical Balance Sheet', *Welsh Language Board*, August 2010
- Davies, John, *A History Of Wales*, (London: Penguin, 1993)
- 'National Curriculum: Welsh Programme Of Study', *Welsh Government*, 2016
- 'Welsh Language in Wales (Census 2021)', *Welsh Government*, December 2022
- 'National Assembly For Wales (Official Languages) Act, 2012', *National Archives*
- 'Ysgol Gymraeg Aberystwyth', *Welsh Government*, 2001
- 'UNESCO International Mother Language Day: Reflections On Welsh And Breton', *Academi Heddwch Cymru, Blogs*, 2023
- Jenner, Henry, *A Handbook Of The Cornish Language*, (Project Gutenberg, 2008)