

The Celtic languages have undergone their own histories and developments. Unfortunately, many of them have declined in usage, even resulting in the death of Manx and Cornish. This essay will examine the history and death of Cornish and Manx and compare it to Welsh. It will then lay out the potential reasons why Cornish and Manx suffered ‘language death’ but Welsh survived. Finally, it will touch on the revitalization efforts regarding Cornish, Manx, and Welsh and how their differing histories have led to unique approaches and struggles.

Cornish is a part of the P-Celtic branch, related to Breton and Welsh. It potentially developed from the south-western dialect of Brythonic¹, and it lies between Breton and Welsh, linguistically and geographically. While Breton is influenced by French, Welsh and Cornish have both been influenced by English.² Old Cornish, c. 800-1250, was spoken in west Devon and Cornwall; Middle Cornish, between the Tamar River and Land’s End; however, by the 1500’s, the language was spoken only in Bodmin and the west.³ The population of Cornish speakers declined at that time as well, going from 20,000 of Cornwall’s 21,000 inhabitants to around 30,000 out of 50,000.⁴ Cornish was brought under English rule in AD 931⁵ and John T. Koch points out that Cornish Literature is often critiqued as not being “Celtic enough” because the early inclusion into the English state affected the character of its literature.⁶ However, this does not discount the rich history of plays, festivals, and drama that make up the Cornish literary culture. Beyond the encroachment of English which pushed Cornish, eventually, all the way to end of the Cornish Peninsula, the Prayer Book Rebellion of 1549 was also a major factor in the deterioration of the Cornish language. West Cornwall was particularly primed for rebellion.

The fact that West Cornwall was Cornish-speaking can only have made its inhabitants even more stubbornly resistant than were other West Country folk to the message of the Reformation—preached, as that message invariably was, in English.⁷

The protest began when the Cornish refused to use the new Prayer Book in English and wished for the usual mass in Latin. It ended in bloodshed as the ‘slaughter of the insurgents had been so great that it would serve as a brutal object lesson to anyone who might be tempted to rebel again’⁸ and the effect was church services in the English language. Further, during the Civil War, the population of Cornwall decreased. With the religion and culture of Cornwall under such pressure, the language suffered, exacerbated by the severing of ties with Brittany during the

¹ John T. Koch (ed.), *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 2006), p. 488.

² Henry Jenner, *A Handbook of the Cornish Language: Chiefly in its Latest Stages with Account of its History and Literature*, (2008), [ebook #26192], p. 6 < <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/26192/pg26192-images.html>>

³ Koch, *Celtic Culture*, p. 489.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 489.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 182.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 489.

⁷ Mark Stoye, 'Fullye Bente to Fighte Oute the Matter': Reconsidering Cornwall's Role in the Western Rebellion of 1549,' *The English Historical Review*, 129, 538, (2014), p. 551.

⁸ *ibid.*, 572.

Reformation.⁹ Lastly, the attitude towards Cornish was decidedly negative. It was viewed as ‘the language of the poor and illiterate.’¹⁰ The gentry themselves had little interest in reviving or keeping the language alive as many of them could not understand or speak it and English was seen as the language of commerce and the ruling society.¹¹ All these factors contributed to the deterioration and eventual death of the Cornish language in 1777 when Dolly Pentreath, the last native speaker, died.

Manx developed from Old Irish alongside Irish and Scottish Gaelic. Unlike Cornish, Manx was spoken until the end of the 20th century when its last native speaker, Ned Maddrell, died in 1974.¹² It was not acquired by the English state until the 14th century¹³ and because of its remote location and the dependance of the English settlers on the Manx people, Manx was initially exempt from the pressure that Cornish was subject to.¹⁴ Even though, Manx was spoken by much of the population at this time, official documentation was written in English or in Latin. We have no evidence of written Manx before the Reformation; the first writings date to 1610 and the first book was not published until 1707.¹⁵ One of the great achievements was the translation of the whole Bible into Manx during the 18th century, necessary because most of the lower classes of the Isle of Man were monolingual at the time.¹⁶ It was in the 18th and 19th century that Manx began to deteriorate as, due to the impoverishment of the Isle, many Manxmen emigrated elsewhere. At the same time, English speakers began to move into Man, tipping the population of speakers in Man from Manx to English.¹⁷ Much like with Cornish, economics and trade were inherently tied to English while the language of Manx designated ignorance and poverty.¹⁸ The theories of language death, especially in the case of Manx, emphasize the fatality of a language as it adopts foreign idioms and lexemes¹⁹ and many considered the late stages of Manx as simply a coded version of English.²⁰ One could argue that a language with no monoglot speakers and so heavily mixed with other languages does ‘not merit survival.’²¹ Yet, it is important to note that English influence on Manx may have emerged in the medieval period.

⁹ Stuart Dunmore, ‘Language Decline and the “Theory of Cornish Distinctiveness”: The Historiography of Language and Identity in Early Modern Cornwall,’ *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 31 (2011), p. 103.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 182.

¹¹ James Harris, ‘Language, Historical Culture and the Gentry of Later Stuart Cornwall and South-West Wales,’ *Historical Research*, 95, 269 (2022), p. 356.

¹² Koch, *Celtic Culture*, p. 1247.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 1250.

¹⁵ Katie Murphy, ‘A Very Brief History of the Manx Language,’ *History Today*, 68, 8, (2018) p. 12.

¹⁶ Tadhg ó Hífeárnáin, ‘Sociolinguistic Vitality of Manx After Extreme Language Shift: Authenticity Without Traditional Native Speakers,’ *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 2015, 231, (2014), p. 49.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 1250.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁹ ó Hífeárnáin, ‘Sociolinguistic Vitality of Manx,’ p. 52.

²⁰ Koch, *Celtic Culture*, p. 1251.

²¹ ó Hífeárnáin, ‘Sociolinguistic Vitality of Manx,’ p. 52.

That Manx had these contact features while there were still many monolinguals does not undermine its intrinsic authenticity as a named variety of a defined speech community, any more than would be the case of any other contemporary language that reveals evidence of language contact and mixing in its idiom, vocabulary, and syntax.²²

With a better understanding of Cornish and Manx and what brought their decline, let us turn to Welsh.

Welsh developed from the Brittonic language between AD 400-700, though it is hard to trace the exact transition.²³ It has a rich literary corpus including the *Gododdin* and the poems of Taliesin as well as the *Mabinogi* which was written down between 1050 and 1120. It was spoken to the west of Offa's Dyke and in some areas east of it as well and while it had borrowed words from Latin and English, 'it remained overwhelmingly Celtic in its vocabulary and syntax.'²⁴ With the conquest of Wales, there was an influx of Flemish and English settlers uprooting Welsh from many of its previous strongholds, however despite these population movements, Welsh was still spoken by most of Wales during the Middle Ages.²⁵ Unlike with Manx, official documents, such as accounts of estates and land deeds, were written in Welsh, law courts were held in Welsh, and only senior clergy who could speak Welsh were appointed.²⁶ However, as English became more prevalent, it gained a foothold in Wales and became the standard for legal transactions. In 1536, Wales officially became a subject to the English crown, and it was decreed that all courts should not only be held in English, but no one using the Welsh language should hold a public office. With the Protestant Reformation, the Welsh did not revolt against anglicization the way the Cornish did, however two religious books were published in Welsh strengthening the position of the language; these were Sir John Price's 1547 book which contained the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments and William Salesbury's 1551 *Kynniver Llith a Ban*. In 1563, a Welsh translation of the Bible was published due to the understanding that most of the population of Wales did not speak English. Even into the 1700s, 90% of Wales was still monoglot Welsh speakers²⁷ despite the fact that the upper-class had become so assimilated to English that the 'inability to speak Welsh was a mark of high status.'²⁸ The Nonconformity movement in England did much to affect the promotion of the Welsh language along with their Sunday School programs that allowed 'tens of thousands of adults and children to learn to read, and the medium of reading would be the Welsh Bible, assisted by Bible commentaries, also in Welsh.'²⁹ Edward Lhuyd's *Archaeologia Britannica* also played a major role in raising

²² *ibid.*, p. 52.

²³ Janet Davies, 'The Origins of Welsh,' *The Welsh Language: A History* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014), para. 13.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 'Welsh in the Early British Kingdoms,' para. 9.

²⁵ *ibid.*, 'Welsh in the Middle Ages,' para. 3-4.

²⁶ *ibid.*, para. 8.

²⁷ Harris, *Language, Historical Culture and the Gentry*, p. 350.

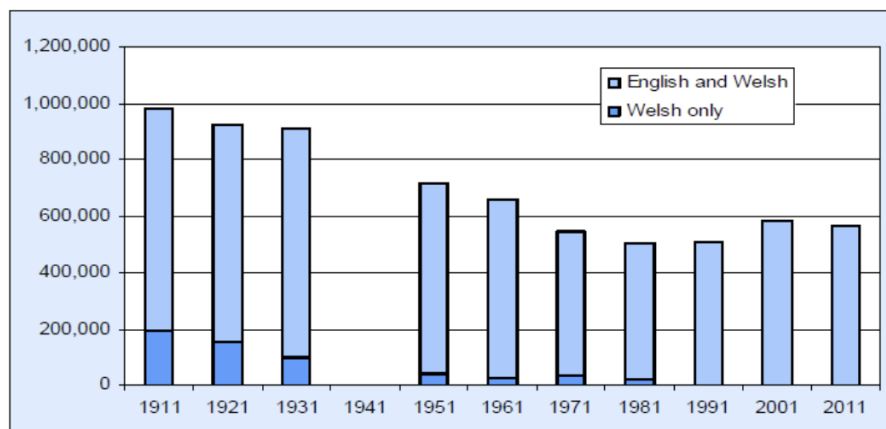
²⁸ Davies, 'From the Act of 'Union' to the Industrial Revolution,' *The Welsh Language*, para. 5.

²⁹ David Brian Jones, 'The Influence of Religion on the Survival of the Welsh Language 1801-2011: A Tale of Two Centuries,' [M.A Thesis], (2013), p. 85.

awareness of the Welsh language and the subscription list shows an interesting discrepancy between the enthusiasm of the south-western Wales gentry for Welsh history and culture while Cornwall represented only seven of the subscribers, revealing a lack of interest amongst the Cornish gentry.³⁰ However, James Harris cautions interpreting the subscription list too emphatically as numbers can be misleading.³¹ Industrialization, which came in the 19th century, allowed Welsh to move from the rural towns into an urban setting with the southern coalfields, the north-eastern smelting and ironwork, the north-western copper mining and quarrying, and the mid-Wales wool production.³² Yet the percentage of Welsh-speakers began to decrease and due to the 1861 'Revised Code,' almost all education was held in English. Welsh was eventually discarded in the classroom; the final blow came with the 1870 Education Act.³³

FIG. 1. Number of people aged three and over able to speak Welsh, 1911-2011

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While Welsh-speakers decreased throughout the 20th century, even in the 21st century, the census numbers have been in a constant push-pull of decline and survival. However, as Janet Davies points out, there are still children yet to be born who will speak Welsh as their first language.³⁵

Language, identity, and culture are integrally tied together. When people lose their language, they often lose a piece of their identity as well.³⁶ As we have seen, language death comes about

³⁰ Harris, *Language, Historical Culture and the Gentry*, pp. 362-364.

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 364.

³² Davies, 'The Welsh Language in the Era of Industrialization,' *The Welsh Language*, para. 1-2.

³³ *ibid.*, 'Welsh in the Later Nineteenth Century,' para. 10-11.

³⁴ Jones, 'The Influence of Religion,' p. 28.

³⁵ Davies, 'The Welsh Language Today,' *The Welsh Language*, para. 15.

³⁶ Zsuzanna Renkó-Michelsén, 'Language Death and Revival: Cornish as a Minority Language in UK,' *Eesti ja Soome - Ugri Keeleteaduse Ajakiri*, 4, 1, (2013) p. 180.

due to major factors such as political and social discrimination, loss of population, language shift, and even economic innovation.³⁷ Fortunately for Manx, Cornish, and even Welsh—though Welsh is not in such dire straits—there has been great efforts made to revitalize and reconstruct the languages. For Cornish, there has been much difficulty since Dolly Pentreath died in the 18th century, and the revival movement did not begin until 1904 with Henry Jenner’s *Handbook of the Cornish Language*. Due to this gap in time, there has been much debate as to which period of Cornish to draw from and how to properly reconstruct the language.³⁸ Competing versions of the revived language have led to arguments about authenticity.³⁹ Programs which offer Cornish language classes have expanded and now there are both children and adult speakers of the revived language.⁴⁰ Compared to Manx, however, the number of present-day Cornish speakers is quiet low. Manx had the benefit that its last native speaker, Ned Maddrell, was able to pass down his language while he was still alive, creating a seeming organic continuum from the traditional language that Cornish lacks.⁴¹ The government instituted the use of Manx on road signs and public buildings, and it has traveled to the home as well where parents are raising their children with Manx as their first language.⁴² In Wales, Welsh-medium schools have accomplished much in slowing the decline of the language, however, without the next step of moving Welsh into a multi-generational language, there is the threat of those who learned Welsh in school abandoning it as they age without transferring it to their children.⁴³ Overall, it is important to continue to cultivate these languages, not only as a source of identity, but also because they hold generationally acquired wisdom of the natural world, passed down orally. With the extinction of languages, ‘we lose valuable information about the natural world.’⁴⁴

In this essay, we have examined the history and death of Cornish and Manx in comparison to Welsh. We have also touched briefly on their revival efforts. The death of Cornish resulted from complicated historical events, including pressure from English, early acquisition into the English state, and replacement of Cornish with English in religious services and literature. Manx suffered due to the emigration from the Isle of Man in search of better opportunities, a flush of settlers, and a lack of usage of Manx in legal documentation. Prejudice against the poorer classes who spoke Celtic languages also resulted in discrimination against the cultures and languages spoken. Welsh, while also suffering discrimination and conquest, was able to retain its language regarding religious services, the translation of the Bible, and the industrial communities of the 19th century helped sustain the language and expand it into urban settings. While there have been

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 180

³⁸ Renkó-Michelsén, ‘Language Death and Revival,’ p. 186.

³⁹ Ó Hífeárnáin, ‘Sociolinguistic Vitality of Manx,’ p. 48.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 186.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 48.

⁴² *ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

⁴³ Viv Edwards and Lynda Pritchard Newcombe, ‘When School is Not Enough: New Initiatives in Intergenerational Language Transmission in Wales,’ *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 8, 4, (2008), p. 300.

⁴⁴ Renkó-Michelsén, ‘Language Death and Revival,’ p. 181.

many advances in reviving these languages, it is a continual fight to ensure that these languages do not sink into obscurity.

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