

Introduction to Celtic Literatures

The Renaissance

Dates

As a European movement the Renaissance has its origins in late 14th century Italy, but it does not reach Britain until around 1500, and its influence on Celtic literatures only becomes apparent from the middle of the 16th century onwards. It marks the divide between the medieval and the modern periods.

The Revival of Classical Learning

The essential impulse of the Renaissance was the desire to return *ad fontes*, to the original sources of classical civilization in Latin and Greek literature, rejecting what was regarded as the corrupt darkness of the so-called 'Middle Ages'. Scholars who promoted such an ideal were known as 'humanists', and humanism/humanities involved a liberal education aimed at the spread of moral and civic virtue.

Print Culture

Humanist learning was ideally open to all, not confined to professional elites as in the Middle Ages. The crucial innovation which made that ideal possible was printing, invented in Germany in the mid-15th century, which made books available to all who had the means to buy them and the education to read them (i.e. less than 10% of the population). *Catholicon*, a Breton-French-Latin dictionary (1499), was the earliest printing of a Celtic language.

The Vernacular Languages

Emphasis on the classical languages led in turn to patriotic desire to improve usage in the vernaculars through the standardisation of grammar and the enrichment of vocabulary through dictionaries. For the Celtic languages, the claim to ancient origins equal to those of Latin and Greek was a key argument, to be supported by the publication of old manuscripts. On the other hand, the Celtic languages were severely disadvantaged by the lack of cities and universities which were a focus for humanism in other countries of Europe.

Earliest printed books in Welsh:

John Price, *Yny Lhyvyr Hwnn* (1546) – basic religious texts

William Salesbury, *Oll Synnwyr Pen Kembero* (1547) – proverbs

William Salesbury, *A Dictionary in Englyshe and Welsh* (1547)

Gruffydd Robert, *Gramadeg Cymraeg* (Milan, 1567) – grammar

John Davies, *Dictionarium Duplex* (1632)

Religion

Humanism was strongly motivated by religion, and in particular by Protestantism which was also a reaction against the medieval Church, although Catholicism itself promoted classical learning through the Counter-Reformation. For Protestants, the supreme learned book was the Bible, which needed to be made available to lay people through translations into the vernacular languages, so that each individual could take responsibility for their own salvation. This in turn required improvement of the vernacular as a medium for God's Word.

Welsh New Testament and Book of Common Prayer 1567

Welsh Bible, translated by William Morgan, 1588

Irish New Testament 1602

Irish Book of Common Prayer 1608-9