

S.Nardone HPCS 7003

Assignment 2

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Modern Day Celts, Do They Exist?

In modern day, England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, the Isle of Mann, Brittany and Cornwall make up what is generally agreed upon to be the Celtic Nations. The question that arises though is centered around if, today, there is any basis on which being a Celtic Nation can still be claimed. The answer to this question is rather fluid for the fact that it would depend on who you are asking and what their relation to the 'Celtic culture' is. For this reason, it is only fair to examine both possible answers because they both can be supported with historical facts as well as non-concrete social classifications.

To argue that the classification and ability to identify as being a Celtic Nation is obsolete or has no basis on which it can be claimed in modern-day is possible because, as Tolkien has said before, the term 'Celtic' within itself is a magical bag term that you can take to mean or identify anything that you wish in order to support your point or motive. When a term is used in such a manner that allows it to be molded at will to fit a specific agenda can lead to authentication issues. This is solely possible because so much happened from the time that the ancient Celts came into existence to modern-day with much of the information being lost, skewed or a secondary source. To further elaborate on this claim, that 'Celtic' can be a catch all term and that claiming to be a Celtic Nation within the 21st century is a far reach, it will be discussed how each 'Celtic Nation' came to be in their modern form and why that does not uphold their Celtic past enough so that they, as a whole, can claim it today.

It is often said that humans are a compilation of ideas and habits that come from every single person that they meet. I believe this is true for societies as well and the Celtic Nations are a prime example of that. Similarly, to the United States, the Celtic Nations were formed from various different groups of people, which will be discussed, and each of these groups left values, habits, and essentially a bit of their culture on the newly formed group they make up which was the Celts. "By 500AD, some hundred years after the end of the Roman Empire, we find three distinct Celtic peoples, the Britons, Gaels and Picts, each of which was divided into separate and independent small kingdoms. By 1100AD, some six hundred years later, Celts remained only on the western and northern fringes of Britain. The Picts had disappeared, the Britons had split into the Welsh, Cornish and Bretons, whilst the Gaels had even then hardly begun to split into the later Irish Gaels, Manx Gaels and Scottish Gaels," (Curie, 2021) these are the core nations within the category of Celtic however, how 'Celtic' are they really? And is it fair to group them all as Celtic even though they are, for the most part, separate countries? This then brings in the question are they ethnically Celtic or are they culturally Celtic? To justify the argument that claiming to be a Celtic Nation in the 21st century is a hyperbole, there has to be the discussion of the background of the Celtic Nations and its people and who they were before they were 'Celtic' and if being 'Celtic' in the 21st century is even possible.

Many of the 'Celtic Nations' were first inhabited by the Romans once they were in their now homeland however, along the way the 'Celts' picked up many different cultures and are a mix of many different peoples. For each of the Celtic Nations, their history is similar but all different. The Britons, whom are now known as the British, lived under Roman rule and were Roman citizens for over 350 years (Curie, 2021). It is important to mention, that many other nations share this same narrative yet are considered not Roman, but these people will keep many

of the cultural characteristics from the Romans as well as see their mark on each of the nation's narratives and them together as a whole. While it is thought that the Romanized populations may have left around 410AD many of their characteristics are left like with the Celtic language that is formed, it has a mixture of terms that are of Latin origin and names that are influenced by Latin, but they are adapted and changed into words that are purely 'Celtic'. So while Briton was occupied and made up of Roman citizen for hundreds of years, the people who remained in that area took the culture and characteristics of the Romans and adapted them to fit their needs better, which is seen with the existence of the law of kinship which owes nothing to the Romans. Nevertheless, the question around are there still 'Celts' today is not answered with this because through ancestry these people may appear to be ethnically Roman or Gauls from various other parts of Europe.

This same group of Britons that we discussed before, then split into various other groups like the Welsh, Cornish, and Bretons which then would adopt their own take on their cultures and change it to fit them as a society which makes each time they do this, further and further from the original 'Celts' so how 'Celtic' are these later societies where there are many that may not have the same characteristics anymore. An example of this is the Colonized areas of modern England, America was first colonized by the English, yet they have a very different culture today because of the societies individual experience. The Cornish, Welsh and Bretons all were able to separate from the Britons around the 5th to 10th centuries however, even if they were able to establish their own cultural practices and societies until they were eventually subjugated by the English and they eventually underwent a degree of anglicization. Each of these Medieval societies developed at their own pace and in their own way due to the different influencing groups they came in contact with, so their languages all differ and the way that the original Celtic

language split, there really is no continuity from one society to another. Which adds to the argument that today, there is not Celtic Nation.

So, from the early days of the Celts in what is now considered Celtic Nations, they were conquered by the Romans and then at the fall of the Roman empire they were subjugated by the English and even the Vikings whom which these two would spend many years fighting over the lands. The Norsemen who conquered parts of the Celtic Nations established coastal trading towns and established control over parts of the sea trade. In what is modern day Scotland, “initially, the Norse appear to have completely supplanted the pre- existing Celtic populations of Gaels and Picts, but later as the centuries wore on they became gaelicised so that by about 1300, at the latest, the Western Isles were completely Gaelic speaking,” (Curie, 2021). The fact that the Norse were so deeply intertwined with the Celtic populations at this time in Scotland, that it was thought that the Norse had supplanted the Celts just for the Norse to become gaelicised means that what we are today calling ‘Celtic’ really is Tolkien’s mix bag term and it has along with the people changed to incorporate many different cultures.

This blending and blurring of nationalities was possible because during the medieval period, national borders were not as concrete like they are in modern times. By this I mean, the United States established borders to Canada and Mexico are most likely not going to change and you know when you near the southern border you are about to enter Mexico and likewise for the northern border with Canada. A group of people are not going to be able to just decide to take land from Mexico and the United States and form its own nation. It would take more than a battle for this to succeed. During the Medieval Period, the Norse and or Anglo-Saxon’s were able to come in and simply overpower whatever Celtic settlement they wanted and claim their

territory as their own because they could defend it. This made national borders a messy idea and hard to pinpoint in modern times as they could have changed very often.

The conquering of the Celts happened over a long period of time, around 650 years in which the medieval Celtic countries were absorbed into England and France with England taking most of them. During the period in which the English began to take over much of the 'Celtic world' ethnic cleansing became a goal in regard to the different societies. Ethnic cleansing is the forced expulsion, killing of, or forced assimilation of a group of people of the same ethnic group in efforts to achieve the desired population according to the invading society. This period of time is when we see the most loss of information about the individual groups of Celts, like the seemingly insignificant cultural practices they had but were forced to hide or quit all together because of it not fitting the anglicized ideal.

"The confident nascent 'European civilisation' associated with the twelfth-century Renaissance (which began in the eleventh century) allowed the French and the English to view their ethnic neighbours to the west – the Bretons, Welsh, Irish and Scots – as barbarians, notwithstanding the fact that these people had long been Christian," (Curie, 2021). The French and English used the idea that those with ties to their Celticity, namely like using a Celtic language was for the peasant class which drove people to use the English and or French language because they were deemed lesser if they used their Celtic languages. However, "it is somewhat ironic that in 20C Gaelic survived only in areas which had once been predominantly or even completely Norse, and anthropologists, linguists and historians have been quick to link certain features – both physical and cultural – of the 20C Scottish Gaels to their surmised Norse ancestry," (Curie, 2021). This is ironic because the Norse seemed to be one of the early conquerors of Celtic nations and appeared to have pushed out the Celts but these areas were the

ones who were able to better hold on to their “Celticity” however, the signs of the attempted ethnic cleansing is still visible.

In Wales the attempts at ethnic cleansing were seen as separating the natives and ostracizing them from their own country. “The authorised inhabitants (burgesses) were usually outsiders and the native Welsh were often forbidden from residing within the towns. In some rural areas – usually the most fertile lowlands – natives were replaced by English inhabitants thus constituting a form of ethnic cleansing (these Englishries were contrasted to the Welshries, the native areas of a lordship where Welsh laws and customs were preserved and the inhabitants simply paid an annual tribute paid in cattle to the foreign lord),” (Curie, 2021). This makes one think that maybe those who are Welsh today do not actually have Welsh ancestry their ancestors came and colonized a group of people and imposed their culture on them while adopting some of the native culture yet, they cannot claim they are Celtic because they may have come from the Norse or Romans. The amount of invading and conquering that occurred to the Celtic nations results in a mix of different cultures that have, over time made their modern cultures but they are essentially an ethnically mixed nation of Gaels, Britons, the Norse, Romans and the English. I again make the connection between this situation and America. Americans are in fact American; however, the majority of nationals today do not have deep American roots. Many people are only second, third, or fourth generation Americans so the tendency of Americans to name a different ethnicity when asked what they are. So, while yes, they are American, they are also ethnically what their ancestors were and in the case of proving if Celtic Nations can be claimed in the 21st century I believe the same rule applies but, how far down the ancestry line can you still use this argument?

Much of what we consider to be Celtic culture in modern day is not a continuation of what may have been Celtic culture during the periods of its history in which we just discussed, it is a result of the Celtic Revivals in which past Celtic culture was reimagined and romanticized and shared with those interested. It is said that “By 1750 all the Celtic peoples were dominated directly by either the English or the French as a consequence of which the speakers began abandoning their languages for either English or French (indeed Cornish was already obsolescent by this time even if a few of its speakers survived into the late 18C),” (Curie, 2021) and the Celtic Revivals gained a following in the late 19th century when many writers began to take ancient Celtic works and use them in theater or when they would write about Celtic mythology. Augusta Gregory’s “The Only Son of Aoife” (1903) and William Butler Yeats’ “The Kings Threshold; On Baile’s Strand” (1903) are two of the works and authors that were driving forces behind the Celtic Revivals, especially in Ireland however, similar revivals took place in all of the ‘Celtic nations’ and spread worldwide.

During the revivals, the Celtic languages began to be seen more in the light as being exotic and less associated with the lower class. People began to push for Celtic language courses in lower schools and used in different forms of media and entertainment. However, if there is not a large population of people consuming this media and entertainment then it really is not being used as it is intended which is why it was presented that, “concerning the apparent progress of both Irish and Scottish Gaelic, Ken MacKinnon, the sociolinguist of Scottish Gaelic, told a conference in 1998: We may have the media, we may have the arts, we may have the broadcasting, we may have education going forward and developing, we may even have secure [legal] status. But if there is not an actual community of speakers, and if there is not an oncoming generation, this will be merely an overcoat around an invisible man. There will be a lot of quite

impressive outer garments and if they are revealed, nothing inside,” (Curie, 2021). The Celtic languages waxed and waned throughout this period of time, but this time period is when many individuals were self-proclaiming as Celtic and wanting to connect to what they thought that meant and learning the language helps a great deal in the building of that identity.

The Celtic Revival does not equate to an actual Celtic Nation full of Celtic people existing today. It simply is the learning about, appreciation of, and spreading of what modern day historians and other scholars interpret to be Celtic. It is important to remember that what one would deem to be Celtic from these types of sources will most likely not be what the ancient Celts, the Keltoi, the Guals, ones who originally began on the coast of the Mediterranean and eventually spread over Europe then to the British Isles, were like and their culture. Since this is the precedent and knowledge upon which being ‘Celtic’ is based upon today, it is a fair assumption to say that what is Celtic today is not what was Celtic before they migrated to the British Isles. If we are going to accept the idea of modern Celtic nations in a sense of them being a continuity of the culture and people of their past, then we must accept that ‘Celtic’ is a culture formed by the influences of many other pre-existing cultures.

Today, the term ‘Celtic Nation’ is used to describe a group of countries that all may at one point come from the same group of people but are now established in their own cultures and have their own languages. These countries do not have a common native language, outside of English, they do not share the same culture or and mainly they all identify as different countries with different people. They have all fought their own wars and forged their own way. Today, in the 21st century the idea of having Celtic Nations no longer exists, what we do have is nations who at one point all had groups of Celts living there, but they also had the Romans, the Vikings, and the Britons. Utilizing the term ‘Celtic Nation’ gives people a term to lump together the

similar histories and similar narratives, it gives people a tangible concept to grasp when the concept of being 'Celtic' is such an unknown idea. Utilizing the term 'Celtic Nation' allows individuals to claim a culture in which they connect but may not necessarily has ancestors from but their feelings of connection to these ancient people are valid. Beyond the individual level, in today's world, Celtic Nations no longer exist; there are simply 6, 7 if the Cornish are included, nations that exist as individuals with similar stories of their formation.

Works Cited

Currie, Andrew. The Celts. HPCS 7003, University of Wales Trinity Saint David. Course Notes.

S.Nardone HPCS 7003 Assignment 2

GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

50/100

GENERAL COMMENTS

Instructor

Looking first of all at the *content* of the essay, it should be noted from the outset that England is *not* one of the Celtic nations (p. 1). Also, the quote by Tolkien should not be taken too literally, as it was originally meant to refer to the labelling of artefacts and so on. That is, if it isn't Roman, Saxon, Viking or Norman, then it must be Celtic. This was the attitude that he was criticising.

Regarding the question as to whether it is "*fair to group them all as Celtic even though they are, for the most part, separate countries?*" (p. 2), this is purely a matter of taxonomy, where smaller elements may belong to larger categories. For example, there would be no problem with grouping Ukraine, Slovakia and Serbia together as "Slavic" despite their being separate countries, or grouping France, Germany and Poland together as "European".

As for the Romanisation of Celtic languages, the number of Latin loanwords that entered the Brittonic language (p. 3) is around 800, a relatively small number, and much fewer, for example, than the many thousands of French words that entered the English language following the Norman Conquest (which rarely, if ever, leads anyone to suggest that there is no such thing as an English nation).

If we take the view that continuity ends when a language splits (p. 3), then not only is there no such thing as a Celtic nation, there is equally no such thing as a Germanic nation, a Slavic nation, a Romance nation and so on. Also, the Norse (p. 4) did not completely supplant the pre-existing Celtic population of Gaels and Picts *over all of Scotland*, but only in the fringe coastal and island areas that would become part of the Kingdom of the Isles.

On the point of national borders (p. 4), these are in fact changing all the time in today's world (34 out of the 193 members of the United Nations are no more than 30 years old and literally hundreds of national borders have changed in the last 100 years or so). The United States, probably the most powerful nation-state in the world, is perhaps not the best example to use in this regard.

While it is true to say that the Celtic nations have all seen a mix of different cultures within their boundaries, one would be hard pressed to find any country in the world where that is not the case. Their domination by the English or the French (p. 7) is of course true, but also true is that four of the Celtic languages are still with us. Welsh, in fact, was the *majority* language of Wales until the turn of the 20th century, and if there is any basis on which to claim that such a thing as a Celtic nation still exists it is surely via the survival of a Celtic language (this being the very reason, no doubt, why they are called Celtic nations in the first place). However, given that these are now all minority languages in their own countries, whether or not they should *still* be called Celtic nations is nevertheless a relevant question.

With regard to the *style and presentation* of the essay, unfortunately, it is rather too short, there is *no bibliography* included other than the course notes, and these are incorrectly referenced. Despite the course booklet listing an extensive bibliography for further reading, none of these have been used. Consequently, in order to fully maximise potential for any future modules, attendance at tutorial sessions when offered is highly recommended.

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