

The Celts Origins to Modern Era (HPCS7003) Assignment 2

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**The Celts: Origins to Modern Era
(HPCS7003)
Assignment 2**

Anne Tod

*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?*

Any concept of a 'Celtic nation' has to have its antecedents in the histories of the various nations who, by popular consensus, are deemed to be Celtic. The development of these histories is linked, but have been influenced by various differing outside forces, although this does not mean that there was no cohesion between the nations.

The Roman presence in Britain ended in the 5th Century CE and by 500 CE there were Britons, Gauls and Picts living in their own kingdoms within the Islands of Britain, with all three branches living in pre-Scotland at this time. By 1100 CE the Brythonic speaking tribes were Welsh, Cornish and Bretons, and the Goedelic speaking were Irish Gaels, Manx Gaels and Scottish Gaels. The Picts had all but disappeared.

Ken Dark suggests that the Romans did not leave suddenly but, as their influence subsided, there was an assimilation of Roman culture into the pre-Roman tribal cultural identities and the Celtic language. He suggests that it was the influx of the Anglo-Saxons that had more of an effect on the westward movement of the Celtic diaspora.¹

The Brittonic languages of Wales, Cornwall and Brittany had already begun to be distinctly separate by the 6th – 8th Century. The languages were not confined to their current geographical borders and a mutually intelligible language would have spread from the south west of Britain, through Cumbria and into lowland Scotland as far as Edinburgh. Place names such as Penrith in Cumbria and Penicuik in Midlothian are the legacy of this Brittonic language. Language similarities crossed boundaries and were not constrained by disputes and power struggles. The south east of Britain had been more affected by the presence of the Romans and so may have lost their strong connection to the Brittonic languages even before the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons. It was the Anglo-Saxons who were responsible for labelling the native population of Briton as being Welsh, or 'Foreigners', a term that the Brittonic speakers would not have used for themselves. The Cornish and Breton peoples did not

¹ Ken Dark, *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire*. (Tempus, 2002)

apply nationalistic terms to themselves either. As the people in the West gradually became isolated after defeats by Anglo-Saxon Germanic speaking peoples, a Brittonic speaking group from the far south west of Britain that is now Cornwall, left for France and over time, established Brittany, which still keeps links with the P-Celtic languages.

However, John Davies suggests:

It has been argued that it was Irish raids upon Devon and Cornwall which caused the first wave of migration to Brittany between about 460-480, for the language introduced into Brittany was the Brythonic of south-western Britain rather than that of the regions threatened by the English.²

The term Celtic is also applied to those nations using the Q-Celtic Goidelic languages that developed in Ireland, the Isle of Man and what subsequently became Scotland, although P-Celtic had been prevalent in lowland Scotland before Scots Gaelic arrived. Although there had long been separate branches of the original Proto-Indo-European language, there was no recognition of a shared heritage at this time. In fact, relations between Goidelic speaking and Brittonic speaking areas were often riven with wars, skirmishes and land grabs. The Gaels of Ireland expanded eastwards into Scotland where continual confrontations between the Picts, Britons, the Anglo-Saxons and subsequently Norsemen, eventually led to the formation of Scotland with a majority of the Gaelic speaking population being in the north and the west of the country. Bede, writing in the 8th Century, described the inhabitants of Britain as being English, Britons, Picts and Scots with no mention of the Gaels of Ireland. Place names such as Aberdeen and Aberystwyth appear to have a common root with Pictish, often described as a P-Celtic remnant.

The 'Myth of the Celt' has been in existence long before the present age. Geoffrey of Monmouth embraced its mystery in his writings which, although founded in historical accuracy, had

² J. Davies. *A History of Wales*. (Penguin, 1995) p.56

embellishments which have proved to be fertile grounds for further extrapolations. Gerald of Wales also set out numerous folk tales of the medieval Welsh period which he collected during his travels.³

Lady Charlotte Guest's translation of the *Mabinogion*, between 1838 and 1849, taken from the *White Book of Rhydderch* and the *Red Book of Hergest*, referenced tales common to both in Ireland and Wales so opening the door to the magical world of the Celts, and the imagination of the populous has been captured ever since.⁴

Although Roman and Greek influences are evident in the languages, without the Celtic P and Q analysis and the identification of linguistic patterns, as devised by Edward Lhuyd in *Archaeologia Britannica* (1707), it would be difficult to distinguish as to how the populations had developed across the islands that made up Britain at the time. His division of the Celtic languages into P-Celtic for Welsh, Cornish and Breton and Q-Celtic for Irish, Scots Gaelic and Manx is still the linguistic definition of Celtic languages today. This is the unifying factor between the nations deemed to be Celtic, and although their languages differ, each nation is committed to preserving their language and, although coming from differing perspectives, and this does indeed bind the 'Celtic' nations together. However, to explore the course of these shared histories, each nation has to be addressed individually.

Ireland

Ireland was historically divided into four provinces, Ulster, Leinster, Munster and Connacht, ruled by minor monarchs with Meath denoting a central geographical area in the middle which was the seat of the nominal High King of Ireland. Trade had been enabled in Ireland by the extensive coastline and the abundance of rivers which enable goods to travel far into the interior. Christianity came to Ireland in the 5th Century through Patrick, after he returned to Ireland to promote Christianity, and from there,

³ Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales/The Description of Wales*. (Penguin Books, 1988) pp.133-136

⁴ Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press, 2007). p.ix)

Gaelic speaking Christian influences spread to Scotland. This led to the preponderance of Scots Gaelic being spoken in the northern and western areas of Scotland, whilst the east and south hung on to the P-Celtic tongue before it was eventually supplanted by Scots and subsequently English.

The political makeup of Ireland has been largely influenced by religion and colonisation by settlers from England and Scotland. Ireland was the main source of the expansion of the Celtic Church which led to the Christian religion becoming established throughout the British Isles. The irony of this is that it also brought about the turbulent history of Ireland as the powers of the Royalist and Parliamentary factions in Britain saw Ireland as a source of dissension and sought to overcome any threat from their nearest neighbour. This came to a decisive point when the Catholic monarch, James II was deposed in England and the Protestant William of Orange was invited to take the British throne. The subsequent defeat of James II by 'King Billy', at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, is still iconic for Protestant supremacy in Ulster and has been the cause of much bloodshed throughout Ireland and beyond ever since. The effect of 'The Plantation of Ulster' in the 17th Century led to a permanent division between the Protestant-leaning Ulster that had more affinity with Scotland, and the other provinces of Ireland who were predominately Catholic and Gaelic speaking. The introduction of English settlers to these provinces created a landowning Anglo-Irish ruling class of English speakers, and the removal of Gaelic speaking tenants, many of whom were forced to leave their land of Ireland for the New World. This has resulted in groups of people worldwide who can trace their roots back to Ireland and still have a strong affinity and nostalgia for the country from where their ancestors originated. To bring this up to date, the current U.S. President Joe Biden's family originated from the eastern border area between Ireland and Ulster and it has already been indicated that any suggestion that the Good Friday Agreement might be annulled would not garner favour with the present administration in the U.S.A.

Across Ireland, the Irish language largely gave way to English because of the presence of the ruling class of Anglo-Irish who for so long dominated Irish politics. However, there is now an initiative to bring back Gaelic into use throughout Ireland, not just in the *Gaeltacht* of the West. Article 8 of the Constitution of Ireland states that Ireland is a bilingual State in which Irish is the first official language.

However, the British Government and the Northern Ireland Executive have not yet given Irish the same status in Northern Ireland, as Scots Gaelic and Welsh have under Part 3 of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, as requested in the 20 year Strategy document.⁵

Scotland

Scotland had been populated by diverse tribes who came under the umbrella term of Picts, a term which was really only applied when the Romans started to invade. In the 6th Century the area of Argyll was the stronghold of the Dal Riata tribe who originated from Antrim in north east Ireland and who were a Gaelic speaking people.⁶

The Gaelic speaking western seaboard and the Northern Isles had been frequently invaded by the Vikings who left their mark in place names and archaeological remains. The Northern Isles remained under Viking control until the 15th Century and still have an affinity with their Scandinavian neighbours. They never used Gaelic as their language and, even now, have a certain antipathy to Scotland, whom they see as not truly representative of themselves and their culture. However, Gaelic became the spoken language in the islands and west coast of Scotland and in the Highlands whereas in the Lowlands and border areas a P-Celtic language predominated. Over time, the Picts became assimilated but the Highland and Lowland divisions remained.

Tensions between Highland and Lowland Scots became more evident through the division of land rights leading to the Clearances which were not just the responsibility of the English but also of the landed Scottish gentry wishing to maximise their estate incomes by introducing sheep. This is still the case today where vast tracts of land are kept solely for the purpose of providing game shooting for wealthy participants. Some of these estates are now owned by wealthy outsiders who have no connection with Scotland at all. Again, the Clearances led to a marginalisation of Scots Gaelic speakers to the western seaboard areas of Scotland where the quality of land could not sustain the ousted population. Many

⁵ 20 year strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030 Section 6.7 p.29

⁶ Sally M. Foster, *Picts, Gaels and Scots*. (B.T Batsford Ltd/Historic Scotland, 1998). p.14

Scots were forced to emigrate to America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand where there are still communities who identify with their ancestral home

There is now a strong move to bring Scots Gaelic into the mainstream of Scotland rather than just the western parts and the Gaelic speaking community in Glasgow. Across Scotland road signs are now bilingual which is a comparatively recent move and there is a strong cultural presence. The annual musical event, Celtic Connections, brings together the musical community exploring the common roots of music and involves ex-pat Scots in the New World as well as musicians from other 'Celtic' nations, such as Galicia. The emphasis on the development of the Gaelic language as an economic benefit is also being highlighted:

It is clear that Gaelic plays an important part in increasing employability and providing employment, and that it is generating wealth for Scotland, well in excess of the level of public investment. Put simply, Gaelic contributes and adds value to the Scottish economy.⁷

Isle of Man

Manx is a Goidelic language akin to Irish Gaelic and Scots Gaelic. The island has an independent status from the United Kingdom apart from defence issues and can set its own taxes and laws through its parliament, the Tynwald. Although Manx was declared extinct by UNESCO in 2009, it is now classed as 'critically endangered' by those speakers who still remain. The importance of its native language to this independent island is summed up as such:

Learning is a treasure that will follow its owner everywhere; learning Manx isn't just about language it's about history, learning about the places we live, understanding why things are done the way they are and most importantly a pride and identity of being part of the Isle of Man.⁸

⁷ National Gaelic Language Plan 2018-2023 p.27

⁸ Strateysh son y Ghaelg 2017 - 2021/Manx Language Strategy 2017 – 2021 p.2

Wales

The annexation of Wales by England by Henry VII in 1536 sought to bring Welsh law in alignment with English law. English became the dominant language in the courts, but strangely it was due to the authorisation of Elizabeth I that the Bible was translated into Welsh that gave new impetus to the revival of the language. However, the 'Welsh-Not' movement, forbidding the use of the Welsh language in schools, effectively robbed generations of Welsh families of their access to their own Welsh language.

Through religion, chapel and non-conformist, and politics, Liberal and then Labour, Wales has always had a more homogenous social make-up to the more diverse one of England. The industrial heartlands of 'The Valleys' although no longer Welsh speaking in the main, are fiercely Welsh and it is from here that some of the stereotypes of Wales have originated - coal mines, male voice choirs and rugby. Whether they would consider themselves 'Celtic' is debatable, but they certainly consider themselves Welsh and not English.

The benefits of the development of the Welsh language in terms of economics is set out in the Cymraeg 2050: A million Welsh speakers 2020-21 initiative which places a huge emphasis on providing early years and school based learning, opportunities for teachers to gain standards in Welsh and for young people to have on-going exposure to learning Welsh. The Welsh Medium education system was set up in 1956 and is still in the process of spreading throughout Wales. There is also a need to look at the wider context for Wales in an increasingly difficult economic context.

Campaigns executed as part of our brand work often use and promote the Welsh language, in order to promote a strong and distinctive message about Wales and to emphasise that Wales is an outward facing, bilingual nation. As part of our engagement activity with the tourism industry, we also highlight the importance of these businesses in providing consumers with personalised, local experiences and promoting the Welsh language as a key aspect of making their product, area and Wales stand out.⁹

Work is being undertaken to continue the links with the Welsh speaking community in Patagonia. Links have also been forged with the Basque community in 2018 and with the Quebec Government in 2020

⁹ Cymraeg 2050: A Million Welsh Speakers. Action Plan 2020-21. Section 10.2 p.30

to promote diverse languages and culture. In 2021, financial support is being given to Ysgol Gymraeg Llundain to provide language education for primary aged school children living in London. The Welsh Government currently chairs the British-Irish Council's Indigenous, Minority and Lesser Used Languages Group and is Vice Chair of the European based group, Network to Promote Language Diversity.¹⁰

Cornwall

Cornwall was of great importance in the Bronze Age and the Iron Age owing to the mining and exportation of tin, gold and silver. There were active sea routes between western areas of France and Britain, and to the eastern coasts of Ireland.

Christianity developed in Cornwall in around the 5th Century CE and Cornwall remained Catholic with Cornish being widely spoken. However, Protestantism became the official denomination of England and by the 18th century the Cornish language was in sharp decline.

Politically Cornwall was an enclave of the Liberal party but the population has now become influenced by English immigrants who have no roots or ties to a Cornish ancestry. There is also a large volume of second homes in the tourist hotspots of Cornwall and this is making it hard for Cornish people to live and work in Cornwall. However, there are still attempts to keep the Cornish language alive, epitomised by a recent television advertisement for Cornish ice cream, in Cornish, which may have been a revelation to many.

It is recognised that:

In order for Cornish to become a widely-spoken community language, the second strategy places greater emphasis on young people and schools. Cornish can only thrive if younger people are given more opportunities to learn and use the language.¹¹

¹⁰ Cymraeg 2050: A Million Welsh Speakers, Action Plan 2020-21. Section 10.2 p.33

¹¹ Strateji an Yeth Kernewek 2015-25 Cornish Language Strategy 2015-25 p.6

There is still an on-going debate as regards the form the Cornish language should take, but as languages are dynamic, this should not be a block to the development of a modern spoken language, with its roots in the existing surviving basis of that language.

Brittany

The struggle for autonomy in Brittany is closely linked with the Breton language. Education in France has always been delivered through the medium of French and this was the case Del. across the French colonies. It is therefore very challenging for Brittany to establish itself as an independent Celtic nation within the political structure of France. It has seemed that the Breton language was deemed to be a threat to the state of France by succeeding governments:

In 1925, the French Minister of Education Anatole de Monzie, declared: 'For the linguistic unity of France, the Breton language must disappear'.

In 1972, Mr Georges Pompidou, President of France, stated that there was no place for regional languages in France.¹²

Such was the zeal of the independence movement in Brittany that it even allied itself with the Nazi regime in Germany during the Second World War in the mistaken belief that this would enhance the chances of autonomy, something for which a heavy price in terms of public confidence was subsequently paid.

However, there is a popular move to develop the Breton language:

The role of the Breton language in education has made real progress since 2002. Against all odds, Bretons have proved to be able to establish a bilingual educational system on their own. The French state has felt compelled to change its mind with respect to a bilingual educational policy.¹³

There is a clear demand from parents, (for more provision) but this will remain unfulfilled until there will be some kind of paradigm shift in policy and attitude from the French state. It is very important to encourage and to facilitate access to Breton language education.¹⁴

¹² Mercator European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning, 2019 ISSN: 1570 – 1239 3rd edition. p.6

¹³ Ibid., p.38

¹⁴ Ibid., p.38

The struggle to maintain the provision of the Breton language continues because:

in 2018 the French President, Emmanuel Macron, refused the Corsican language to be co-official, arguing there could be only one official language in France.....The Breton language remains the only Celtic language without a legal status.¹⁵

Overall, the common theme of all the initiatives for language development is the need to bring young people into an understanding of their national languages, by early years exposure and consolidation in the education system. There is also an economic benefit to be had by an emphasis on regional differences, which capture the imagination of producers and consumers and bring inward investment into regions without the need for the control of income by the centralised power.

Nowadays, all the stereotypes of the various Celtic nations are alive and well and living in the glossy brochures of travel companies - the tartans, bagpipes and whiskies of Scotland, the leprechauns, craic and Guinness of Ireland, the leeks and daffodils and ladies in Welsh hats in Wales, the piskies of Cornwall, the Manx cats of the Isle of Man, and the onion sellers and cider drinkers of Brittany. These superficial scenarios are different but underlying them are also the historical links to the lands of forebearers, the shared legends, the mystical past, the standing stones, the deeply ingrained reverence for the mysteries of life and death, the possibilities of an 'Otherworld' and the sense that there are more powerful forces at work outside of people's consciousnesses. These sensibilities are universal and transcend time, and books have been written throughout the ages satisfying the need people have to link themselves to their ancestral past, perceived or otherwise. All nations do this, and although the Celtic nations are fragmented, they share a common heritage which gives them a readily identifiable cohesion through linguistic and geographical proximity. Culture underpins this and both a musical and a shared appreciation of it is well known. Easily recognisable Celtic art is well established, as is noticeable in all gift shops in tourist regions throughout the Celtic nations. The Celtic concept is a vital part of the economies of the regions, as peoples from the Celtic nations have been spread across the world by the various disasters and persecutions that have resulted in emigration. The descendants of these emigres

¹⁵ Mercator European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning, 2019 ISSN: 1570 – 1239 3rd edition. p.9

come in search of their roots, happy to soak up the nostalgia of an age before their ancestors were forced to flee their lands and pondering of what their lives might have been like if that had not occurred.

In conclusion, at the moment there is no such thing as a 'Celtic Nation' but the politics in the islands of Britain are in a state of flux.

Ireland, with its bloody and fractured history, still has not be able to solve the hundred year old problem of Ulster. The strong sense of history in Ulster has nothing to do with any Celtic concept but more to do with religious partitions although there is now a more secular society in the Republic of Ireland. The political and economic differences between the two cultures have recently resulted in the Northern Ireland Protocol. This is supposed to solve the problem of the border between the European Union and Britain brought about by the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement in 2020, as it could possibly threaten the fragile peace brought about by the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Although the Republic of Ireland is an independent country, Ireland is still a divided nation, and is not the Island of Ireland that it aspires to be.

Scotland has found its voice, and the move toward independence has gathered momentum with the refusal of the Westminster Government to recognise that taking the British Isles out of the European Union constituted a material change to the terms of the Scottish independence referendum in 2014, because the majority of Scots voted against Brexit in 2016.

In **Wales**, where for so long the dragon has slept contentedly next to its more powerful neighbour, there is a growing realisation that the neighbour does not necessarily have the interests of Wales at its heart. Now that the coal industry has gone, Wales does indeed have to protect itself by creating a new economic basis if it is to keep any semblance of an identity outside the holiday parks and second homes of its English neighbours.

Cornwall, long a holiday destination for English tourists, is now becoming an escape route for people wishing to de-centralise from towns, fuelled by the ability to work from home during the Covid-19 pandemic. Whilst this may also boost the tourist industry, it may, without careful management, detract from attempts to enhance the fragile status of the Cornish language as it could result in a diversion of the resources that will be needed to deal with the increase in population.

The Isle of Man has long had its own tax laws and is to a certain extent protected by having a more robust devolution of powers than the other devolved nations, powers that the present Westminster Government may have a mind to rescind for the other nations. However, the Manx language is in urgent need of revival if it is to survive at all.

Brittany continues to have a long struggle against a French government who, historically, has always wished to centralise its power through the education system. With an easily identifiable opponent of Breton language development, it may be that its proponents become even more determined to foster its survival.

The various 'Celtic nations' on the Western fringes of Europe are embracing their histories in different ways, but the one unifying factor is that they are striving to resurrect their unfulfilled national identities, and to protect their linguistic heritages. Although these are nationalistic aspirations, there is a shared Celtic concept through their historical, cultural and linguistic antecedents which serves as a common bond. If these nations individually succeed in establishing true independence they could also define their economic and social bonds under a Celtic identity which might lead to some form of a 'Celtic brotherhood of independent nations'. Whether this could indeed be translated into a politically united Celtic nation in the future is a journey in the making.

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GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

GENERAL COMMENTS

62/100

Instructor

Looking firstly at the *content* of the essay, with regard to John Davies' point about the language introduced to Brittany being that of the south-west (p. 2), we cannot know this for sure, as the language of the regions threatened by the English further east may have been the same, but no record of it has survived.

As far as Bede (p. 3) and the "Gael of Ireland" are concerned, these would have been represented by the Scots, who, at the time in question, were one and the same people.

On page 5, concerning the expansion of Christianity, the reverse to what is noted is the case, with the already Christian Britons (via Patrick) converting the Irish. With regard to the European Charter, the UK has now afforded the same cover to Irish as it has to Welsh and Gaelic (i.e., Parts II and III).

Concerning Scotland (p. 6) and the Highland/Lowland split, a P-Celtic language was spoken in the Lowlands until early in the medieval period, but this was replaced by English. Incidentally, roadsigns are not bilingual across Scotland (p. 7) but only in those areas of the Highlands where Gaelic has traditionally been spoken until recently.

Wales was annexed to England by Henry VIII, rather than his father (p. 8). The point made about that the people of The Valleys area definitely considering themselves Welsh (but possibly not Celtic) is central to the essence of this assignment, as it allows for the possibility of a distinct "Welsh" identity which is *not* "Celtic".

As for Breton (p. 9), unlike the UK (which is hardly a shining light of linguistic pluralism) France has not even ratified the European Charter due to its "one nation, one language" policy. Any small advances made in, for example, the field of education, have been achieved despite, not because of, the French state.

The conclusion that there is no such thing as a Celtic Nation (p. 12), even if not the only possible one, is nevertheless perfectly valid.

It is interesting to note that the essay places much emphasis on the Celtic *languages* in its *historical* appraisal of the individual nations, but *political* independence when looking toward the *future* (p. 13). However, as noted in the case of "The Valleys", there is no necessary link between the two, and a politically independent Wales or Scotland does not necessarily imply a Celtic one.

In terms of *style*, the essay does have the feel of a "potted history" about it in parts, but is nevertheless well written in the main with evidence of analytical thinking and wide background reading.

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