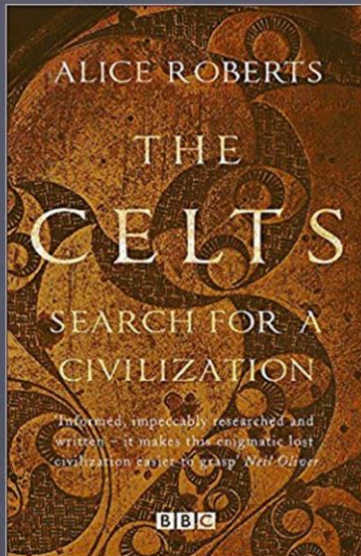


The Celts: ancient people or modern invention?



According to John Collis:

'archaeologists have a duty to inform the general public of the hidden agenda behind this modern use of the "Celts"'

It is difficult to disagree with John Collis' assessment that any attempt to make political capital out of the Celtic label or to push a hidden agenda should be exposed. What is less apparent is whether or not any such duty is required in the case of any other group.

Simon James does at least have the decency in the conclusion of his book to question the validity of numerous 'ethnic labels' such as British (that is, in the context of the modern nation-state) Germanic, Nordic and so on, as well as Celtic. However, he does this, whilst pleading not-guilty to accusations of bias, from the inside pages of a book with only the name of the Celts emblazoned on the front cover in large capital letters. His stance would have been much more convincing (and made ideal reading for the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic at the University of Cambridge) had he called his book '*Anglo-Saxons, Norsemen and Celts: Ancient Peoples or Modern Inventions*' – but he didn't.

He is keen to assert that '*....the idea of insular Ancient Celts is not being singled out for special attack....scrutiny of Celticity is actually just one facet of a range of similar critiques of other familiar 'peoples' in our past...*' (p.142). The Celts are the only ones in the title of this book though. Perhaps including critiques like the ones on the following two slides would have led to a more balanced debate.

The Germans: ancient people or modern invention?



'During the medieval period, a self-designation of "Germani" was virtually never used; the name was only revived in 1471, inspired by the rediscovered text of *Germania*, to invoke the warlike qualities of the ancient Germans in a crusade against the Turks.'

The 'rediscovered text of *Germania*' referred to above is the book by Tacitus written in the first century CE. It was lost throughout the Middle Ages and not found again until the 15th century.

In the same sense that no classical source ever labelled the inhabitants of Britain or Ireland as Celtic and no one in those islands ever referred to themselves as a Celt before the early modern period, much the same could be said about the extent to which 'German' or 'Germanic' are used today. In the context of 'Germanic' we can be fairly certain that no classical source ever referred to the inhabitants of Norway as 'Germani' which, in keeping with the stance on the Celts, should lead to a questioning of the basis upon which we label Norwegian as a 'Germanic' language. In similar fashion, the medieval peoples of much of what is now Germany did not refer to themselves as Germani. This situation is of course complicated further when names in other languages are included. In French, for instance, the Germanic languages are called *les langues germaniques* whereas the country of Germany is called *Allemagne*, named after the Alemanni. A work in French along the same lines as those in English questioning the Celts could ask whether classical sources referred to all those peoples in today's *Allemagne* as 'Alemanni'. Such is the nature of insisting on 'self-identification'.

The quote in the above slide comes from the entry on Tacitus' *Germania* in the Wikipedia (accessed 04/11/18). It was chosen because it mirrors the 'Celtic' situation so well. The Wikipedia is not a source that should normally be used for academic purposes, however, we can be reasonably confident that it echoes the true situation, given that John Collis has made a comment of a similar nature, namely:

'This raises the problems of the Germani as an ethnic group, with many of the same questions we have for the Celts, e.g. how were they defined? For Caesar they were the people on the east bank of the Rhine, except for those on the west! Tacitus mentions Germani who we know spoke Celtic languages (e.g. the Treveri), or where he himself states that they spoke Britannice.' (JC p. 104) Again, this comment is tucked away inside his book, with no mention of 'myths' or 'inventions' of the Germani on the cover.

The Anglo-Saxons: ancient people or modern invention?

'It is clear that for many people now living in England, and, indeed, elsewhere, the Anglo-Saxons are still recognised as an historic form of 'us' or 'we' in ways that other historic groups simply are not. Beginnings matter'

From the introduction to *The Anglo-Saxon World* by Nicholas Higham and Martin Ryan

The 'Anglo-Saxons' are fundamental to English identity. As the above book, (which is written in an open an unbiased manner with no sense of a 'hidden agenda') goes on to confirm, *'English history opens with the Anglo-Saxons'*. As is often the case with groups who are believed to have started a nation's history, there is a perceived continuity from them right up to the modern day. From the self-identification point of view, then, it is worth noting a quote, from the same pages of the above book, that *'Anglo-Saxon' is, however, a modern label and one that would not easily have been understood, if understood at all, by many of those to whom it was applied'*.

In addition, national narratives often downplay the contribution of 'other historic groups', in this case those who are not 'Anglo-Saxon'. Consequently, the fact that half of Anglo-Saxon England was ruled by Danes throughout the 9th century, and all of it by Danes for much of the early 10th is understated in popular historical accounts. Similarly, the fact that kings of England did not speak English for some 300 years after the Norman conquest of 1066, a time when possibly as much as one third of the entire English lexicon was borrowed from French, is downplayed for a narrative which usually states something like this:

'Modern English....began with and developed from the speech of the Anglo-Saxons...That does not mean to say that Old English is easily understood in the modern day, for it is not, but nonetheless the English we speak today is its direct descendent'. (ibid)

And so the use of the term 'Old English' as opposed to its alternative name of 'Anglo-Saxon', provides an unbroken linguistic chain from then until now. The prospect of the Norman conquest breaking that chain, and ushering in a new language, so that 'Old English' is the language of Chaucer rather than that of Alfred the Great would break that continuity and the longevity that comes with it. There is, however, nothing particularly unusual about this type of behaviour. On the contrary, it is the norm, not only for 'Celts' but for everyone else as well, at least when they are writing their own story.

Physician, heal thyself!

'the philologists who first identified the kinship of those languages they called Celtic assumed they must have spread to the isles through migration of continental Celts, because they believed languages and named peoples could be simply and unambiguously equated'

Simon James p. 82

'The basic problem lies in a continued tacit acceptance of racial stereotyping in Linguistics. Thus, the speakers of Indo-European languages, especially Proto-Indo-European, become reified into a 'people' who are then assumed to have cultural traits such as a specific social structure....'

John Collis p. 211

The philologists who first identified the linguistic links between Gaulish and the modern Celtic languages, especially Edward Lhuyd, have been subjected to criticism from archaeologists. Simon James (p. 45) notes that: *'Although not entirely explicit on the subject, in this book he attached the name 'Celtic' to this family of tongues. In the book, his usage of the term is not very consistent...'*

He goes on to ask the following question (p. 46): *'But why did Lhuyd choose the name 'Celtic' at all? So far as I can tell, no direct evidence survives regarding his motivation....but according to the venerated writings of Julius Caesar most of the Gauls were called Celtae and 'Celtic' was not politically compromised'* This comment is ironic in the extreme, given that Lhuyd has been accused by the same author of having a political motive. He continues: *'Once Lhuyd had launched the idea of Celtic-speakers, ancient and modern, in the isles, the label was quickly used also to describe cultural or national identities'.... 'By 1723... ... Lhuyd's friend and fellow-countryman Henry Rowlands was writing of 'We the Celtae'....The following year the great antiquarian William Stukeley was using the word 'Celtic' of ancient monuments in the British landscape (pp. 46-47)*

Much of this criticism of Lhuyd is quite unjustified. Henry Rowlands' comment was made 14 years after Lhuyd's death and his nationality should be of no consequence. Lhuyd may well have believed that migration was responsible for the movement of languages, but it was specifically the Celtic languages, and languages alone, that were the concern of *Archaeologia Britannica*. There is no mention of Celtic art, Celtic monuments, Celtic religion or any of the other more controversial aspects which are so roundly criticised above. Indeed, virtually the only issue not in contention is that Lhuyd's assessment that the Brittonic, Goidelic and Gaulish languages share a common ancestor was correct. James' accusation that Lhuyd had some kind of sinister political agenda can therefore appear a little paranoid, even in John Collis' opinion:

"Contrary to Simon James (1999, 49-50) who takes this as evidence that Lhuyd's statement was reflecting Welsh nationalism, I would read it as the reverse, and that Lhuyd simply considered himself as an educated Oxford scholar, a role in which one's nationality was of little importance, and was rather making an ironic statement about nationalism." (JC p. 52)

Furthermore, given that Stukeley is known as 'the father of British archaeology' it could be argued

that all of the more controversial aspects of the Celts which have resulted from applying a label, initially intended for languages, to an assortment of non-linguistic features, are the work of archaeologists, and that what we have here is a case of physician, heal thyself .

Lost in translation?

- ▶ All speakers of Slavic languages are Slavs
- ▶ Not all speakers of Germanic languages are Germans
- ▶ Not all speakers of Romance languages are Romans
- ▶ Speakers of Celtic languages are Celts but not all Celts are speakers of Celtic languages

Consistency in the use of terminology is essential to avoid misunderstandings. In this regard, linguists, and in some cases the wider public, need to use the same type of label for the same type of thing in a consistent manner. The labels ‘Celtic’, ‘Germanic’, ‘Romance’ and ‘Slavic’ are all used by linguists as names for branches of Indo-European, all of which, in these cases, consist of more than one language.

Celtosceptic and anthropologist Malcolm Chapman notes (p. 70) that ‘*Celtic linguistic continuity is in some ways the least controversial and most securely established aspect of the overall continuity. It is, indeed, often held to underwrite the others.*’ Simon James, on the other hand, is of the opinion ‘*that the Celts are apparently unique in defining themselves in terms of a group of **mutually unintelligible** languages*’ (p. 138). This shows a clear misunderstanding of what groups of languages are all about, given that all individual languages are in theory mutually unintelligible to all others which is why they have been classified as languages as opposed to dialects. James is here failing to distinguish between the overall name of the branch and the individual languages which make it up.

Similarly, John Collis informs us that ‘*It is interesting to reflect on what the difference is between being, say, ‘Welsh’ or ‘Irish’, and being ‘Celtic’. Generally the two terms are assumed to be the same....*’ Once again this is an example of confusing the category with its constituents and he is, of course, quite wrong. However he does have a point when arguing, as he repeatedly has, that being a ‘Celt’ is not the same thing as being the ‘speaker of a Celtic language’. This may seem like a rather strange distinction to make, given that it is so easy to slip into the habit of shortening ‘speakers of Celtic languages’ to ‘Celts’. Nevertheless, on the Celtic doorstep, so to speak, we have two examples of where ‘speakers of language type X’ and ‘persons labelled X’ are not treated as equivalent. The Germanic languages, apart from the obvious German, also include Dutch, English, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Icelandic and so on. However, we do not label the Swedes or the English as ‘Germans’ on the basis of their speaking a Germanic language. In similar fashion, we do not call the French, Spanish and Portuguese ‘Romans’ because they speak ‘Romance’ languages. On the other hand, ‘Slavs’ is used to refer to ‘speakers of Slavic languages’. This is the standard dictionary definition of the term. There are clear inconsistencies in the use of these ‘labels for the same thing’ which have not been particularly helpful in the Celtic case.

What have the Romans ever done for us?

The people's front of Judaea:

- ▶ Celts
- ▶ Ancient Britons and Irish
- ▶ Largely the same but with regional differences

The Judaeen people's front:

- ▶ Celtic speakers
- ▶ Ancient peoples of Britain and Ireland
- ▶ Largely different but with overarching similarities

Many of the differences between Celtomania and Celtoscepticism are ones of emphasis and semantics. Simon James, for instance, objects to references to the Ancient Britons and Ancient Irish but has no problem with *'the ancient peoples of Britain and Ireland'* (p.90). He likewise objects to philologists applying the label 'Celts' to speakers of Celtic languages but has no problem with 'Celtic speakers'.

On the 'calling themselves Celts' point, John T. Koch in his paper *Celts, Britons and Gaels – Names, Peoples and Identities*, has this to say: *'In fact, this negative detail has a special centrality in the arguments of writers like Malcolm Chapman, Simon James, and John Collis. I know of no linguist who is very impressed by this point, the Greeks did not call themselves Greeks, nor the Hittites, Hittites, nor the Germans, Germans. In short, so what?'*

[http://www.academia.edu/7142081/Celts Britons and Gaels Names Peoples and Identities](http://www.academia.edu/7142081/Celts_Britons_and_Gaels_Names_Peoples_and_Identities) '

Linguists and archaeologists working in the field of Celtic Studies (on whatever side) are, in theory at least, working towards the same end, namely a better understanding of those peoples who have been labelled, either today or yesterday, as 'Celts'. They can, however, on occasion, appear to be split along the lines of the People's Front of Judaea and the Judaeen People's Front from the Monty Python film *The Life of Brian*, both supposedly working towards the same end but with a high level of antagonism between them. Where are the Romans when you really need them?



Hope for reconciliation?

So is there any hope for reconciliation between the different camps? It is unlikely that Malcolm Chapman will help the cause by making comments like this one:

'The change from Celtic languages to English (or French in the case of Brittany) has throughout been led by demand. Speakers of Celtic languages have voluntarily and enthusiastically learnt English, and tried to ensure that their children spoke English fluently.... This process has gone on, over an ever-moving frontier, for centuries.... Concern for the preservation of languages is typically an intellectual concern...' (p. 99)

Chapman acknowledges that he has a greater personal experience of Gaelic and Breton than the other Celtic languages, and that may colour his view. In both Scotland and Brittany, these languages were never spoken over the entire territory of those countries and were competing with English and French from the outset. Had Chapman chosen Wales he might have found the story a little different. Intellectuals had very little to do with the move to provide Welsh medium education, for example.

On the other hand, archaeologist Barry Cunliffe and linguist John T. Koch seem to be collaborating happily enough, being joint editors of the *Celtic from the West* series, which has not only brought together academics from different disciplines, but also claims to be a 'paradigm shift' in our understanding of Celtic origins.

In addition, Simon James, regardless of the thread of his book, notes (p. 83), in reference to Colin Renfrew, that: *'some have already attempted to reconcile philology and archaeology'*, adding that Renfrew *'has proposed a very different model. In which the origins of the Celtic tongues are not to be found in the Iron Age, but much earlier, in the spread of the first farming populations into the islands, around 6,000 years ago. The various characteristics of, and differences between, the Celtic tongues and vocabularies are envisaged as arising in situ in continental Europe and the isles.... not radiating from any central 'homeland'. Could some such model not form the basis for comprehensive explanations encompassing both archaeological and philological evidence?'* (p.83)

Were the source not known, that quote could quite easily have been credited to Barry Cunliffe!

Celtoneutrality?

On the one hand:

- ▶ Links between Gaulish, Brittonic and Goidelic are undisputed
- ▶ La Tène does cover large areas of Celtic speaking territory

On the other hand:

- ▶ Britons and Gaels distinct since the dawn of history
- ▶ Large areas of Celtic speaking territory have alternatives to La Tène or localised variants of it

Much of the tension regarding the Early Celts is down to emphasis and exaggeration as opposed to the actual facts themselves. Neither side is (as a rule) factually 'right' while the other is 'wrong'. It is interpretations which are causing friction. Given that much of this friction takes place between archaeologists and linguists it should be remembered that neither of these fields was the first to come up with the name 'Celt'.

Scholarly work by Lhuyd and others, however, have proved conclusively that the languages included in the Celtic family are 'genetically' related to each other. That said, Brittonic and Goidelic, the only branches which have survived to our times, have likely been mutually unintelligible since the Britons and Gaels first entered the historical record, and these peoples have been antagonistic toward each other for large periods of it. Excessive promotion of 'Celtic unity' should therefore be challenged. It could be argued that the Celtic label is superfluous, other than when it is being used either to refer to those named as Celts in the historical record, or when referring to the wider language family which those Celts were undoubtedly part of.

Nevertheless, with clear guidelines and a proper respect paid to both differences and similarities in their appropriate contexts, there is no reason why 'Celtoneutrality' should not be an achievable goal.