

The Welsh Bible Saves the Language from the Sword and Pulpit
A Welsh Language Overview with Focus on Early Modern Welsh

Prepared For

An Introduction to Celtic Languages, Course HPHP4902
University of Wales, Trinity Saint Davids

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November 25th, 2022

Introduction – The Language of Heaven Has Gone Through Hell, But Survives

‘While hope springs eternal in the story of the Welsh language, it is rarely unalloyed,’¹ writes Janet Davies, author of *The Welsh Language A History*. For one of Europe’s oldest surviving languages, the scholar’s sentiment captures both the resilience and struggle of a language that has *gone through past hell so that present people can speak the language of heaven*.

The 2011 census found that 19 percent, or approximately 562,000, people in Wales claimed to speak Welsh, a number that has experienced peaks and valleys over recent decades, having improved numbers in the North and alarmingly decreasing statistics in the South of Wales.² But the language survives, and Davies forecast for its continued survival is favorable. She continues, ‘it can be prophesied with complete confidence that are people still unborn who will speak Welsh as their first language, an assertion that cannot be made in relation to at least half of the languages spoken in the world today.’³

The primary credit for the ultimate stabilization or creation of Modern Welsh, which then developed into the Contemporary Welsh used today, and its longevity into the 21st century, is the translation and publication of the Welsh Bible. Completed in 1588, this keystone accomplishment at crucible of high political and religious conflict and drama, came at the exact right time to both set the vanguard for individual liberty and free agency of thought, and to potentially save the language itself.

This work provides an overview of the history, impact, and influence of the Welsh Bible as the bridge between Middle Welsh to the formalized, brilliant, and poetic language Welsh speakers enjoy today.

Early Modern Welsh’s Ancestors – From Lingua Britannica to The Acts of the Union

Early Modern Welsh is a linguistic designation given to the spoken philological and orthographical words and writing system utilized in the late 14th through the end of the 16th century. Its most immediate ancestor is Middle Welsh, which was in use between the 12th and 15th centuries. Middle Welsh was in turn preceded by Old Welsh, spanning from 850 CE to 1100 CE. Prior to Old Welsh was Early Welsh, which emerged from the antiquity of the Brittonic tongue to the middle of the 9th century.

Brittonic, then becoming Welsh, was the language, although sharing cousins and variants, of the British Isles prior to the Roman invasions of the 1st century BCE. It endured the Saxon invasions of the 6th century. It lived through relentless Viking raids a few centuries later and lastly, the Norman Conquests of the 11th century which regionalized but in no way stamped out the surviving and developing versions of the Briton tongue.

¹ Davies, Janet, *The Welsh Language A History*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014), p. 162

² Ibid, pp. 162-170

³ Ibid, pp. 168-169

For Early Welsh there is very little extant manuscript or inscription evidence. *The Welsh Language A History* does document one example, which demonstrates a recurring thread running through all developmental phases of the language; what was spoken may have been very similar fifteen hundred years ago to what Welsh speakers say and hear today; only the written language, lacking standards, consistent spelling, and form, was far different.

For example, the Early Welsh sample, a 9th century inscription from a parish church of Tywyn in Meirionnydd concludes with 'CUN BEN CELEN TRICET NITANAM'.⁴ Although appearing nothing like Contemporary Welsh, when verbalized, words that are recognizable today emerge and are understandable; 'celain' (corpse), 'trigo' (dwells) and 'dan' (beneath).⁵

As Early Welsh matured to Old Welsh, key written samples include a land dispute documented in the margin written in a bible known as the Surrexit Memorandum and the great epic elegies known as *Y Goddodin*. A poem contained in *The Book of Aneirin*, layered with iterations and later juxtapositions, most scholars believe to have been written contemporary to the late 6th century it describes. Along with later accompanying poetry associated with Llywarch Hen composed around 850 CE, this work is paramount to understanding the very beginnings of what is now known as Welsh.⁶

Next, a sentinel event, the defeat of the Welsh Kingdom of Powys by the English near the end of the 8th century, resulted in the hewing of Offa's Dyke and retreat of the *Lingua Britannica*, (the language of the Britons, or Welsh) from much of what is now England. More isolated and inward focused, the insular island language became *more insular*, and Middle Welsh emerged.

The noteworthy writings in Middle Welsh, an era where writing is assumed to have been voluminous, are *The Mabinogion* (a collection of Arthurian, folkloric, and astrological lore) and the codification of law as found in the Middle Welsh work *The Laws of Hwyl Dda*.⁷ Of this period, Davies writes:

'By the end of the eleventh century, Welsh was a rich, supple, and versatile language. It had an oral literary tradition which was one of the longest in Europe. It had an enviable coherence, for the literary language was the same in all parts of Wales.'⁸

As the Normans came, bringing with them thousands of Bretons, who are the ethnic cousins of the Welsh, being those Britons who migrated to the Continent starting in the 4th century, the French language became formidable, but in no wise threatened Welsh.

The French settled many English speakers in Wales and a plurality of different languages co-existed at the time. Loanwords contributed to changes, and the development of principalities and counties resulted in variant dialects and diversity of form, but the Welsh language thrived from 1066 (the infamous date associated with the Norman Invasion) to 1536, when were enacted the Acts of the Union:

⁴ Ibid, p. 16

⁵ Ibid, p. 16

⁶ Ibid, pp. 16-18

⁷ Ibid, pp. 18-19

⁸ Ibid, p. 21

‘Despite the influx of French and English speakers, Wales remained overwhelmingly Welsh-speaking throughout the Middle Ages.’

The British Isles have ever, it seems, been a multilingual kingdom. During the Roman invasions the British tongue ran parallel with Latin, loaning and borrowing from Latin. Then came the Saxons, then the Danes, followed by the Normans. Through all these the native tongue of the ‘Coveted Isles’ developed, and often thrived. The first existential threat to the language came, not so much by way of foreign invader but by Welsh aristocrats and its wealthier classes, who preferred a resurging English language in law and in transactional commerce. By the time that Wales was formally annexed into England, a joint effort by both English and Welsh gentry put the language at risk:

‘Section 17 of the 1535 Act made English the only language of the law courts and said that those who used Welsh would not be appointed to, or paid for, any public office in Wales unless they used English when carrying out their work:

Also be it enacted by the Authority aforesaid, That all Justices, Commissioners, Sheriffs, Coroners, Escheators, Stewards, and their Lieutenants, and all other Officers and Ministers of the Law, shall proclaim and keep the Sessions Courts Hundreds Leets Sheriffs Courts, and all other Courts in the English Tongue; and all Oaths of Officers, Juries and Inquests, and all other Affidavits, Verdicts and Wager of Law, to be given and done in the English Tongue; and also that from henceforth no Person or Persons that use the Welch Speech or Language, shall have or enjoy any manner Office or Fees within this Realm of England, Wales, or other the King's Dominion, upon Pain of forfeiting the same Offices or Fees, unless he or they use and exercise the English Speech or Language.’⁹

Fifty-three years hence, and in this treacherous environment, did putting the Bible, and the power of reading and thinking in the hands of the Common Man, come on the scene to save the day, and the language.

The Threat Shifts from the Sword to the Pulpit – The Permeance of a Temporary Strategy

The Welsh language is connected to the Welsh people, and the Welsh people to ongoing invasions. And not only invasion of land and soil by would-be conquerors, but of mind and soul by way of State Religion.

Armenia and Georgia notwithstanding, Wales is the longest place of continuous Christian worship in the world and its primitive Christianity has ever been at variance with Romanism.¹⁰

⁹ Wikipedia contributors, *Laws In Wales Acts 1535 And 1542*, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, November 19th, 03:57 UTC <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laws_in_Wales_Acts_1535_and_1542> [accessed November 23rd, 2022]

¹⁰ Richard Williams Morgan, *St. Paul In Britain*, (Abridged Reprint from 1861, Thousand Oaks, California: Artisan Sales, 1984), pp. 50-55

But as history, and the language strived to progress and develop into the 1500s, a new rival emerged, Anglicanism.

And just as England would see its insistence on English-only at court, and in commerce, diminish the speaking and writing of Welsh, so too its pews, hymnals, and prayer books. Professor Eryn White, Senior Lecturer in Welsh History at the University of Aberystwyth speculates upon England's next move following the 1536 Act of Union, 'it seemed likely, therefore, that the authorities would insist on the uniform use of English in the church as they had in matters of government.'¹¹ 'Protestantism,' she continued, 'posed a potential powerful long-term threat to the survival of the Welsh language.'¹²

This risk was certainly valid and the Welsh, for whom the Scriptures were from ancient times locked away from the common person in Latin, sat a great linguistic fork in the road. Instead of acquiescing to yet another foreign language to rule over their souls, the kindred spirit of Wales's own form of politics outmaneuvered the English Establishment, and Modern Welsh was born.¹³

Anglicanism, which rolls up to the broader category of Protestantism, had a "Welsh problem'. Protestantism is based upon *Sola Scriptura*, or 'what sayeth the Scripture', not 'what sayeth the bishop?'. And as a matter of practice Protestantism demanded that the individual be able to read, comprehend and make his or her own conclusions regarding doctrine.

As Tyndale, the first translator of the English New Testament declared, that every boy that drives the plough ought to have a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures, this demanded too that every person be able to first read the Scriptures.¹⁴ In their own language.

Thanks to the great success of Middle Welsh, the population of Wales spoke Welsh, and those who could read, read in the same.

Ultimately deciding that defeating Roman Catholicism was more important, as an initial strategy, than imposing a monoglot kingdom the Isles over, the authorities yielded to the various Welsh protestant sects. A temporary maneuver that the Welsh might learn Scripture and then, having both English and Welsh hymnals in the pews, convert at some point, exclusively to English.¹⁵

Underestimating the sheer brilliance of first Richard Davies and William Salesbury's (and several other scholars and contributors, most of whom were passionate volunteers for religious freedom) Welsh New Testament, published in the mid-1560's and culminating in William Morgan's full and complete Welsh Bible, the temporary maneuver proved most permanent, and Early Modern Welsh was born.

A Paradox of Literary Genius and Standardization – Early Modern Welsh, and English, Made by Majestic Bible Translations

¹¹Eryn M. White, *The Welsh Bible*, (Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing Limited, 2007), p. 18

¹² Ibid, p.19

¹³ Ibid, p. 9-11

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 15

¹⁵ Janet Davies, *The Welsh Language A History*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014), pp. 33-36

Although the Welsh version preceded history's most recognized piece of literature, *The Authorized Version of the King James Bible* by over twenty years, descriptions of what the latter did to, as William Tyndale said of his kinsmen 'made a language for England',¹⁶ can equally be said of Morgan's great work.

The parallels are remarkable, and what the King James Bible did to ignite an age of reason, individual liberty, and freedom of conscience for the world (by reason of it being in the more popular international trade language), the same was done for more insulated Wales. Only the Welsh were first.

First, both Bibles used distinctive bible language which was at first, mocked, then embraced, then memorized and ingrained.

The importance of this cannot be understated in his paradoxical value and is best described by using easy examples from the King James Bible.

Although the King James Bible uses suffixal distinctives:

I run – First Person

You runnest – Second Person

She runneth – Third Person

No one spoke in this manner at the time. Such use of those distinctives, although a beautiful window to the underlying Greek, would be considered already archaic in the 17th century.

The benefit of using a poetic literary device with a distinctive archaic language was that readers could easily memorize the work. A bible language that is beautiful, but takes some effort to memorize, has the impact of improving the overall readability and intelligence of the reader.¹⁷

William Morgan, and Salesbury before him, took the same approach in the Welsh translation of the Bible. At first it received criticisms and sneers, then deep regard and reverence as the population began to master the reading and writing of 'regular Welsh', having benefited from studying their Scripture.

Next, as with the King James Bible, the Welsh translation contained an authoritative structure of grammar.

Again, this is a paradox that can lead even the most ardent atheist or agnostic to see divine or supernatural fingerprints within the work of translating Scripture. For both sets of Scripture, the language usage is at once archaic and poetic, but at the same time perfect and authoritative on sentence structure, diction, and definition.

Uncanny nuggets such as the self-contained dictionary within Scripture, whereby a word is clearly defined by its first usage, allowing for ease of understanding later, more complex uses. The use of the word 'even' to mean 'equal to' so that a schoolboy could understand that David's scrip was a shepherd's bag and thousands of other examples reveal that the Bible, whether in Welsh or the more well-known English, is '*the School Master*'.

Poetic, distinctive, literary and at first difficult to memorize then impossibly easy to memorize combined with formal rules and structure for grammar. This combination elevated

¹⁶ Eryn M. White, Eryn M. White, *The Welsh Bible*, (Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing Limited, 2007), p. 10

¹⁷ Ibid. pp. 33-37

an already ancient, mystical, and special Celtic language, and gave it staying power in an iteration closely related to what Welsh speakers use today:

The Bible established a pattern of standardized prose for the literary language, thereby avoiding the danger that Welsh would decline into a number of disparate dialects without a common written language to sustain its unity.

The Welsh Bible, and the New Testament, partial translations (such as the Ten Commandments or Psalms) ignited the fire that would bring about the Celtic Revivals a few centuries hence. And what the King James Bible did for English, the Welsh Bible first did for Wales, giving the people a language that would long endure.

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