

The Celtic Languages

In his lecture to the Warren Scholar's Seminar, given on November 11, 1997, Provost David Jordan, of the University of California at San Diego's Anthropology Department, addressed the history of the English language. In passing, he mentioned that the set of languages that were spoken on the British Isles prior to Roman acquisition were of the Celtic sub-family. Saying that these languages "left no linguistic background"¹ on the English language, he passed over them and moved on to periods of English history that are more glorious. The Celtic languages, however, are an important set of languages, complete with their own culture and history. Through their language, the Celtic people have maintained their desire to retain their cultural identity, much of which has affected the history of the English people.

The classifications within the Celtic sub-family of languages help one to see, not only the relations between the various languages, but a little of the history of these languages, as well. The first designation of the Celtic language sub-family is referred to as the Continental group. The Continental group contains the Celtic languages that were spoken on the European continent by the early Celtic people during their period of existence, while their territory stretched from the Iberian Peninsula and Gaul to Asia Minor. These include the various languages that were spoken by the people in Gallicia² and Gaul, as well as many other local languages, such as Celtiberian and Leptonic. All traces of these languages, "appear to have died out on the European continent by AD 500."³

The seven surviving Celtic languages⁴ are all of the Insular designation, referring to the fact that these languages all have their origins on the British Isles. The Insular group is considered to be a more modern group than the Continental, although the Insular group did not result from the evolution of the Continental group. There are two linguistic sub-divisions within the Insular designation of the Celtic languages. The first sub-division,

¹ Provost David Jordan, 11 November 1997, to Warren Scholar's Seminar

² Gallicia was a region in Asia Minor whose people Paul addressed as "Galatians" in his epistle.

³ Macaulay, David, *The Celtic Languages*, Cambridge University Press © 1992, pg. 2

⁴ *Ethnologue*, <http://www.sil.org/ethnologue/families/subfamily/Indo-European/Celtic>

Goidelic, consists of the modern Irish, Scots Gaelic, Manx, and Shelta⁵ languages. These four languages are the modern descendants of so-called “Q-Celtic” language, which refers to a particular shift in the *k^W sound of Indo-European to what is transliterated to a *q* sound in Latin. The other sub-division, Brythonic, consists of three languages: Breton, Cornish and Welsh. The Brythonic group also has its origins in the same *k^W shift, although the Brythonic group assumed a transliterated *p* sound and is, for this reason, called “P-Celtic.”⁶ The three modern “P-Celtic” languages have many loanwords, especially from Latin, because of the Roman occupation of Britain and the close proximity of France.⁷ This understanding of the Celtic languages provides one the foundation to understand how these old, yet living, languages have developed with their own unique history.

Much of the geographical history of the Celtic people has been deduced from linguistic data such as these. The proximity of these Celtic people and the English-speaking people set the stage for the interaction between the two groups. When the Romans arrived in England in 55 BC they brought with them the Latin language that was the basis for all of the Romance languages. The Latin language also left a lasting influence on the Celtic languages. Those groups that were close enough in proximity to the Romans to feel the effects of *Romanization*, such as the Britons (in modern-day England) and the Welsh (in modern-day Wales), were left with many linguistic marks of Latin on their language. The Picts, to the north of the Romans, on the opposite side of Hadrian’s Wall, are not know to have been *Romanized*, although nothing definite can be said about nearly any aspect of the Picts. It is known, however, that the *Hibernians*, as the Romans called the Irish, were never *Romanized*. When the Angles, Saxons and Jutes arrived in Britain, they found that the Britons living there spoke a combination of a Brythonic Celtic language and Latin. This language was almost entirely displaced by the Anglo-Saxon invaders, whose kingdoms superceded nearly all aspects of Celtic life in Britain. Outside of what was to become England, however, something different was going on.

⁵ *Ibid.* A “Traveler’s” Irish language, although not a gypsy (Romany) language.

⁶ Macaulay, pg.4

⁷ Macaulay, pg. 373

Many of the Britons retreated over the Cambrian Mountains, into Wales, where they joined other Brythonic Celts. These people retained their own culture and were relatively unaffected by the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms to the east. They were, however, converted to Christianity in the very early days of Anglo-Saxon occupation. This conversion brought in an influx of Church related words, as well as a new source of Latin. In the south, the Cornish people, considered mystics by many Anglo-Saxons, were also isolated from the Anglo-Saxon conquests. They too retained their own distinctive culture and language and were later converted to Christianity by monks from Wales.

In what the Romans called *Hibernia* and *Caledonia* (modern-day Scotland) several things were taking place. Many Irish, mostly from the northern province of Ulster, left Ireland for various reasons. They formed a group of people known as the *Scotti* (Latin for Irishman) who colonized the land of Scotland. They displaced the Picts, who were of a much older stock of possibly Celtic people, although little is actually known about these people. Shortly thereafter, missionaries from Wales began to Christianize Ireland, whose people were being converted to Christianity more rapidly than nearly all other peoples at that time. This brought new Latin lexicon into the Irish vocabulary, which had remained unaltered for seemingly centuries, due to the remoteness of the island. This signaled a change for the Celtic world.

With this influx of Christianity, and new contact with other nations, Ireland rose to a status that it has never again achieved. This caused an ensuing spread of Celtic culture beyond the borders of Ireland, Scotland, Wales and Brittany. Around the year 700, monks from Ireland became some of the most active missionaries ever. Several Irish missionaries, mostly from the famed monastery in Iona, traveled to mainland Europe to Christianize the so-called barbarians. Famous works that had seemed to have been lost during the Dark Ages of Europe were painstakingly recopied by monks of various religious orders in Ireland. An Irish monk was even responsible for the founding of the famous Abbey of Cluny, in central France, during this time period. As a result, Ireland was dubbed the "Island of Saints and Scholars." Word of the prosperity of these Irish monasteries spread quickly; soon attackers from the north began to raid the Irish and Scottish coastlines.

With the Norse attackers came a new influx of language. Not only did the Irish and the Scottish, now separate nations, adopt much of the language of their conquerors, but there was a flow of language between the two Celtic nations. For nearly a hundred years, during the Norse raids, many Irish would flee Ireland for Scotland, and vice versa when Scotland was under attack. This continuous flow of people back and forth across the Irish Sea ensured the similarity of the languages spoken by the two nations, although Irish and Scots Gaelic are actually distinct languages.

Literally between the two languages was Manx – spoken on the Isle of Man, which lies midway between Ireland and the borderlands of Scotland and England, in the Irish Sea. This geographic location allowed Manx to develop as a distinct language that was “lexically impoverished as a result of isolation and a lack of literary cultivation,”⁸ that lacked the influx of Latin vocabulary that the other Celtic languages had.

Shortly after the raids of the Norse upon Ireland and Scotland, a descendant of the Norse, a Norman by the name William, conquered England. With this conquering came a tremendous influx of Latin based words from the Norman’s Old French language. The Norman’s, eager to replace the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, established their own system of duchies and baronies to deal with land. For the first time, the Norman king, William I, established baronies near the Welsh border and moved into Cornwall. Doing so drove many of the Brythonic Celts out of Wales and, particularly, Cornwall. These people went across the English Channel to Brittany, where they still live today, speaking the Breton language. The Norman invasion and subsequent expansion of English territory also led to the eventual decline of the Cornish language, which has been extinct for over nearly two hundred years. The last of the Brythonic languages, Welsh, has persisted, despite years of efforts by British government to suppress the use of Welsh.⁹

A similar fate befell the Scots Gaelic and Irish languages as their homelands came under British rule. The number of native Scots Gaelic speakers was reduced heavily by the British government over a one hundred year period, which many Scottish dub as the period of proscription. This was accomplished through the alliance of the nations under a

⁸ Macaulay, pg. 101

⁹ *Act of Union* (1536) under first Tudor King, Henry VIII (of Welsh descent)

single king in 1603,¹⁰ as well as the later *Act of Union* in 1707, which forbade the use of the Gaelic tongue, as well as other Scottish cultural practices.

When Pope Adrian granted control of Ireland to Henry II of England, in the twelfth century, the eight hundred year Anglo-Irish conflict began that has resulted in battles over language, law, religion and culture.¹¹ Under the tyrannical rule of Oliver Cromwell, the speaking of Irish was officially prohibited and under *The Act of Union* of 1800, which also dissolved the Irish Parliament, English was declared the official language. These British government actions, however, have not destroyed the Celtic languages.

Now as much as ever, the Celtic nations are striving to revitalize their languages and they are even receiving some assistance from the once antagonistic British government. Nationalist movements in Ireland, Scotland and Wales all seek the revitalization of their Celtic languages.¹² Ireland has begun offering courses in Irish to its elementary school children and creating programs that encourage literary work in the Irish language. Irish language television and radio are also supported.¹³ Welsh is also increasing its presence, despite the dwindling percentages of Welsh speaking people.¹⁴

The Celtic languages, although considered dead by many, are alive and maintain, as they always have, a strong cultural and historical presence. It is this cultural presence created by the Celtic languages that has affected the history of the English people and, if preserved, these languages will continue to serve as a wonderful means of expression for centuries to come.

¹⁰ King James VI of Scotland (King James I of England)

¹¹ *The Concise Columbia Encyclopedia*

¹² *Scottish National Party 1997 Manifesto* (available in Adobe Acrobat format from <http://www.snp.org.uk/>)

¹³ Hindley, Reg, *The Death of the Irish Language*, pg. 165 - 173

¹⁴ Macaulay, pg. 257 - 259