

Cymru Nationalism



Cymru is the Welsh name for Wales. As you read the following passage about Welsh history, consider what it tells us about Welsh culture and identity. Identify specific elements, words, or expressions that suggest Welsh nationalism.

Around 2000 BC a migration of people from the area of the Rhine River in Germany to Wales occurred. They brought with them their battle axes, bronze knives, and other weapons. They also brought a distinct language. The Greeks called these people, with their organized culture and developed social structure, *Keltoi*. The Romans called them *Celtae*. Today we refer to them as *Celts*.

In a poem dated 633, the word *Cymry* appears, referring to the country; it was an early example of self-awareness among the Welsh, and it was not long before they themselves came to be known as *the Cymry*. Today the Welsh people themselves still prefer to call themselves *Cymry*, their country *Cymru*, and their language *Cymraeg*. The Welsh language is a Celtic language related to Gaelic, which is still spoken in Scotland.

In the middle of the eighth century a long ditch was constructed beside a high earthen rampart running from north to south and dividing the Celts of the west from the Saxons to the east. Today it marks the symbolic boundary between those who consider themselves Welsh from those who consider themselves English. The boundary is known as “Offa’s Dyke” in memory of Offa, the king who ordered it built. According to Welsh historian John Davies, “Offa’s Dyke was perhaps the most striking man-made boundary in the whole of Western Europe.” For hundreds of years, to cross the ramparts from east to west meant bloody defiance, and signalled an attack on Wales itself.

King Hywel Dda reigned in Wales from 904 to 950. He is remembered for his codification of Welsh law. Professor John Davies calls the Law of Hywel “among the most splendid creations of the culture of the Welsh,” for it contained proof, not only of the Welsh identity, but also of their unity. The law was enlightened for the time, but what is most significant is the fact that the majority of the surviving documents are in Welsh, with only a few in Latin—another sign of the legitimacy of the language of the Welsh. The Law of Hywel survived until it was replaced by the provisions of the Act of Union of 1536, at which time English law replaced it.

After the Battle of Hastings in 1066, when William of Normandy took possession of the English throne, the Norman invaders set about establishing a strong centralized kingdom in England. It is around this time that the great Norman castles were built that still dot the landscape of Wales today.

In 1216, Llewellyn Fawr took advantage of feuds between England’s King John and his barons, and established control over most of Wales, which had previously been claimed by a number of feuding princelings. Llewellyn Fawr became known as the first Prince of Wales. In 1282, Llewellyn Fawr’s grandson Llewellyn Gruffydd was assassinated. Today, his memorial stone

reads “*ein llyw olaf*” (“our last prince”), reflecting the ascendancy and dominance of the English after his death.

Of crucial importance to keeping alive the great pride of the Welsh in their ancient traditions is the work of Geoffrey of Monmouth. It is to Geoffrey of Monmouth that we owe the basis of the Arthurian tradition, that of a noble, wise, and benevolent king presiding over a chivalric court. His compilation, *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain), completed in 1136, claimed to be a history up to the time of the Saxon invasions. Its impact upon the Welsh was to remind them of past glories and to inspire them with hope for the renewal of their heritage.

In an act of defiance against the English King Henry IV, Owain Glyndwr, Lord of Glyndyfrdwy was crowned Prince of Wales in 1400 by a small group of supporters. Owain’s supporters were easily put down by the English and scattered across Wales. In a punitive act, Henry IV brought in a series of repressive measures that restricted Welsh civil rights. Instead of subduing the Welsh further, these measures gave Owain and his independence movement renewed support. A popular description from the time captures the nationalist fervour of the Welsh: “The English fight for power; the Welsh for liberty; the one to procure gain, the other to avoid loss. The English hirelings for money; the Welsh patriots for their country.” Owain’s open rebellion went well against Henry IV, and he was given support from Ireland and Scotland. He even received support from many English nobles who believed Henry’s crown had been falsely obtained. It seemed as if independent Wales was about to become a reality. However, a series of coincidences, untimely deaths of supporters, and the eventual betrayal of Owain brought about the end of Owain’s vision of an independent Wales. The failure of Owain’s dream was a crushing disappointment for the people of Wales. The rebellion had been no mere peasant uprising but a general uniting of feeling and action. It served to raise the consciousness of the average Welsh person and instill a nationalist sentiment against English control.

There is an expression from the 19th century that describes a Welshman who pretends to have forgotten his Welsh or who affects the loss of his national identity in order to succeed in English society. Such a man was known as *Dic Sion Dafydd*. In the 15th century, many Welshmen petitioned the English Parliament to be “made English” so that they could enjoy privileges given only to Englishmen. One of the rights they were denied as Welshmen was the right to buy and hold land according to English law. Such petitions were distasteful to the patriotic Welsh, but for the ambitious and the socially mobile they were a necessary step for any chance of advancement. The Act of Union in 1536 gave the Welsh people full equality before the law with their English counterparts. Although the Act was one of the most important documents in the history of Wales, it was passed without consultation with the Welsh people. Because it was the intent of the Act to abolish any distinction between English and Welsh law, English law became the only law recognized in the courts of Wales. The Act also made English the official language of the courts and of offices of the king, thus restricting the Welsh ruling class to only those who could demonstrate fluency in English. Out of this attempt to dissolve a nation and diminish a culture came something that was entirely unexpected. Although Wales had to adapt itself to momentous change in order to survive, it did not die. There was no longer any advantage in boasting of the condition of being English, and from this time on everyone who was living in Wales considered themselves Welsh.

The Industrial Revolution in Wales

In the late 18th and early 19th century, south Wales experienced heavy industrialization, which had a profound effect on the Welsh language and culture. Many Welsh migrated to the south in search of work and brought their language with them. Massive emigration out of Wales in search of work was averted, and Welsh as a language thrived in large industrial communities. But the industrialization of the south had a lasting impact on the countryside and agrarian culture of Wales. In 1847, before the industrialization, one writer described life in a pleasant valley. “The people of this solitudinous and happy valley are a pastoral race, almost wholly dependent on their flocks and herds for support. . . . The air is aromatic with wild flowers and mountain plants, a sabbath stillness reigns.”

Three years later, in 1850, the celebrated English author Thomas Carlyle described the same scene in a letter to his wife: “Ah me! Tis like a vision of Hell, and will never leave me, that of these poor creatures broiling or in sweat and dirt, amid their furnaces, pits, and rolling mills. . . . The Town might be, and will be, one of the prettiest places in the world. It is one of the sootiest, squalidest and ugliest; all cinders and dust mounds and soot. . . . Nobody thinks of gardening in such a locality, all devoted to metallic gambling.” Out of the industrial revolution a stereotypical caricature of an English-speaking Welshman emerged as a cloth-capped, heavy drinking, strike-prone, rugby fanatic. This caricature was imposed from outside the Welsh culture.

Eventually the Welsh communities in the heavy industrialized areas were unable to absorb the vast influx of non-Welsh speakers, mainly from Ireland and England. The Welsh industrialist David Davies expressed his concerns in a speech that typified the sentiments of many ambitious Welsh. He said: “I am a great admirer of the Welsh language, and I have no sympathy with those who revile it. Still, I have seen enough of the world to know that the best medium to make money is by the English language. I want to advise every one of my countrymen to master it perfectly; if you are content with brown bread, you can of course remain where you are. If you wish to enjoy the luxuries of life, with white bread to boot, the only way to do so is by learning English well. I know what it is to eat both.” Many Welsh heeded Davies’ advice, and the repercussions are felt strongly today—only one in five of the inhabitants of Wales use Welsh as a language of everyday affairs.

Discussion

1. Compare the culture of Wales before and after industrialization. Speculate as to the ways technology can influence and shape culture.
2. How has industrialization and technology shaped Canadian culture in the last century? Identify industrial and technological influences that are foreign and assess their impact on Canadian culture and our Canadian identity.
3. Many economists note that the Canadian economy is changing from an industrial-based economy to a service-based economy. Brainstorm what the impact may be for Canadian culture and share your ideas with your classmates.
4. What parallels might one draw between the history of Wales and that of Quebec and the rest of French Canada?