

# The inhabitants of wales history essay



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The most populous Celtic community in Great Britain are the inhabitants of Wales in the western part of England. The Welsh who call themselves Cymry and their country Cymru had been Christians long before the Angles and Saxons adopted Christianity and they are proud of their literary tradition the beginnings of which predate English literature. The motif of the red dragon in the Welsh flag is a symbol of the Welsh people's resistance against Anglicization and of the perpetuation of their culture and language.

The number of ethnic Welsh people is not known. As for the speech community of Welsh this accounts for 0.58 million speakers and they make up 21 per cent of the total population of Wales. Some 50,000 Welsh-speakers live outside Wales in other parts of England, most of them in the region of Greater London. The level of language maintenance has remained stable during the past two decades. Assimilation to English, though, has been a trend with continuity. About a hundred years ago there were still some 0.9 million Welsh speakers. Most speakers of Welsh live in the western and northern parts of Wales where the rates for language maintenance are between 40 and 50 per cent. In the South the level has fallen below 20 per cent. The Welsh language does not suffer from a lack of transmission to the younger generation like Scottish-Gaelic (—> Highland Scots). In the youngest age range (i. e. between 3 and 15 years) Welsh is spoken by 32 per cent. Proficiency in Welsh is much lower in all other age groups, even among the older generation (i. e. 24 per cent in the age range, 65 and over). At the beginning of the twentieth century there were still 0.28 million Welsh people who could not speak English but only their native tongue. At the end of the twentieth century their number had been reduced to a minimum of 21,500

which is less than 1 per cent of the Welsh speech community. Those who speak Welsh are bilingual, speaking English as second language.

Together with Breton in Brittany and Cornish, formerly spoken in Cornwall, Welsh forms the Brithonic subgroup of Insular Celtic (see Irish for the Goidelic subgroup). Already in the late sixth century, Welsh had developed local features which set it aside from other varieties of Celtic in Britain. The origins of Welsh literature are shrouded in the mist of medieval history. The works of two poets of the sixth century, Aneirin and Taliesin, mark the beginnings of a literary tradition in Welsh. Their literary works, though, are only preserved in manuscripts of the thirteenth century. It is assumed that the texts in the manuscripts are copies of much older originals. Highlights of medieval literature are the collection of narrative prose, the “ Mabinogion” (eleventh - thirteenth centuries), the codification of Welsh laws compiled by Hywel Dda (tenth century) and bardic lyrics composed by Dafydd ap Gwilym (thirteenth century). The translation of the whole Bible into Welsh was completed in 1588. It appeared in a second edition in 1620, and its language became influential for the elaboration of a modern literary standard. Since the Welsh literary language continues language use of the seventeenth century it holds a bridging function between the modern and the ancient so that the connection with the medieval literature is not lost for the reader of today.

Those Celtic tribes who had settled in Wales some two thousand years ago saw the advent of the Romans and experienced Roman rule over Britain. After the Roman conquest of Britain in 43 c. e. Wales was integrated into the Roman Empire as a region of military interest but Roman settlers did not

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come to live there. The Celts in Wales learned about Latin from the Roman administration but it was only during the time when Christianity spread over Britain that Latin became the vehicle of cultural and social innovation in the Celtic communities. The oldest layer of religious terminology in Welsh dates to the third and fourth century; e. g. eglwys 'church' < Latin ecclesia (borrowed into Latin from Greek), esgob 'bishop' < episcopus, pechod 'sin' < peccatum. After the Romans had left Britain at the beginning of the fifth century the Latin heritage was not forgotten but cultivated and preserved. So was the Christian faith. When the Germanic tribes invaded Britain they were still pagans and fought against the Celtic Christians. When the Angles and Saxons later adopted Christianity this was the second era of Christianization in Britain.

Medieval history is dominated by the struggle of the Celts in Britain against Anglo-Saxon supremacy. The historical king Arthur who has been acknowledged as the founder of the British lineage of kings rose to legendary fame as the protector of the Celtic Christians in their fights against the Germanic heathens in Britain. In the late eighth century, the king of Mercia, Offa, had an earthen wall built to separate the Celtic territory of Wales from the Anglo-Saxon settlements. For centuries, the Celts remained west of Offa's wall and the Anglo-Saxons east of it. Wales was finally conquered in 1282 and annexed to England. The status of Wales as a region under the authority of the British Crown was formalized in 1536, and the monopoly of English as the language of administration was confirmed. The English rulers practised a policy of appeasement – to avoid social unrest – by exchanging privileges for loyalty and to accept the Welsh aristocracy into their service. The Welsh élite

was supposed to adopt the English language and English lifeways as a precondition to keeping their privileges. One of the lineages of the assimilated Welsh élite was very successful. These were the Tudors whose representatives eventually ascended the English throne. The first Tudor to rule over England was Henry VII (reigned 1509 – 1547). Until the eighteenth century, Welsh society was divided into an Anglicized élite of Welsh descent, loyal to the kings of England, and Welsh peasantry whose lifeways remained practically untouched by English culture. The seventeenth century saw the introduction of a Protestant movement which has dominated religious life among the Welsh up to the present, Calvinistic Methodism.

Things changed with industrialization evolving, a process which unfolded in three stages on a prolonged horizon of time, ranging from c. 1780 to c. 1900. The area of southern Wales was of particular interest because of its riches in coal. The opening of coal-mines triggered a migratory movement of greater parts of the rural population to the urban and industrialized centers of the South where assimilation pressure was strong and language shift to English was swift. The British Education Acts of 1870 and 1889 stipulated English as the only medium of instruction at all schools and on all levels of education (i. e. from primary to higher), and these regulations promoted radical Anglicization.

The romantic, all-European interest in the preservation of the local heritage and the movement of national awakening of the nineteenth century found its concrete manifestation in the cultural activities of the Celtic Revival. In Wales, this led to the establishment of a cultural institution, the Eisteddfod (literally ‘session’), which was held for the first time in Aberdare in 1861.

This is a sort of fair which offers a cross-section of all domains of Welsh culture and language, including literature, theater and the visual arts.

The Welsh language has been a crucial issue in the process of social and political reforms since the 1940s. After four hundred years of a monopoly of the English language in administration in Wales Welsh was granted official status – alongside English – in 1942. This regulation first concerned only the use of both languages at court and was extended to the use of Welsh in regional and parliament elections, in 1967. Furthermore, “ a trio of Acts in the decade 1988-1998 provide a new statutory infrastructure and institutional context to enable social reform in education, language rights and governance, ...” (Williams 2008: 124). Constituents of this network of reforms are the Education Act (1988), the Welsh Language Act (1993) and the Government of Wales Act (1998) which are the pillars of Wales as an autonomous region within the United Kingdom and which provide the statutory platform for a National Assembly for Wales, established in 1999.

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## **Further Reading**

Aitchison, John and Harold Carter. A Geography of the Welsh Language 1961-1991. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1994.

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