

Welsh English: A National Language?

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We have Welsh, of course, in Wales. The most robust of the surviving Celtic languages. Spoken by almost 20% of the population, that is, just over 500,000 people (according to the 1981 Census). The majority language in most of the north and west.

Welsh has suffered adverse discrimination for most of the last 150 years. In fact, the Act(s) of 'Union' of 1536-1543 mark the instigation of an overt crusade by the English state to eradicate the Welsh language. English was made the only official language in Wales, no Welsh speaker was to be allowed any kind of official position, and the English law declared its intention "utterly to extirpate alle and singular the sinister usages and customes" of the Welsh.

Gwyn A. Williams (1985: 121): "a largely monoglot people were made aliens in their own lawcourts and cultivated a corresponding alienation. Welsh ... had to retreat into the kitchen. Since this happened at a critical moment in the inner history of the culture, its long-term effects were to be very serious."

The crusade is punctuated by events which became branded onto the national memory. The Education Report of 1847 made known the findings of a government inquiry into the state of education in Wales. "The report of the Blue Books, as they were called, drew a dark picture of ignorance and, what was much worse, immorality ... The underlying assumption of the report was that 'ignorance' and 'ignorance of the English language' were synonymous" (Humphreys 1983, from an extract reprinted in Ellis 1989: 199). The episode came to be known as the Treason of the Blue Books. An infamous editorial in *The Times* of 8 September 1866 continued the campaign:

The Welsh language is the curse of Wales. Its prevalence and the ignorance of English have excluded and even now exclude the Welsh people from the civilization, the improvement and the material prosperity of their English neighbours. Their antiquated and semi-barbarous language, in short, shrouds them in darkness. If Wales and the Welsh are thoroughly to share the material prosperity and ... we will add, the culture and morality of England, they must forget their isolated language, and learn to speak English and nothing else. For all purposes, Welsh is a dead language. (Extract reprinted in Ellis 1989: 12-13)