

Small Wars: The Case of Language and Education in Wales

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The inspiration and starting point for this paper is William Urban's (2016) *Small Wars*, with its sharp focus on frontiers and the distribution of power. Drawing on the histories of a wide range of peoples in Europe, Asia and Africa, he sets the scene with a discussion of the "Celtic Fringe" (the Highland Scots, Irish, Welsh, and Cornish) on the periphery of the British Isles. His rationale for their inclusion is their similarity to "the experiences of many peoples elsewhere in the world."¹ He draws attention to the "long and unforgiving sense of history"² of Celtic peoples, a characteristic shared with frontier folk across the world. And within this broader discussion, he touches briefly on the Welsh.

In what follows, I pick up the threads of this discussion, focusing on the role of language and education in the power relations between the English and Welsh and validating the observation that those living on the periphery do indeed have "a long and unforgiving sense of history." By way of context, I provide a brief history of Wales and the Welsh language, tracing its decline from a nation of monoglot Welsh speakers to one where Welsh is very much a minority language. Finally, I consider the lessons learned from this case study which can usefully be shared with other small nations.

Wales and the Welsh language

Wales, a country which is part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, is bordered by England to the east (see Fig. 16.1 at right).

The Welsh language, or *Cymraeg*, is one of the oldest languages in Europe, with a literary tradition dating back to the sixth century CE. The start of its gradual decline can be traced to the 1536 Act of Union, when Henry VIII incorporated Wales into England, proclaiming English as the sole official language. This differential in power relations, then, lies at the heart of all future developments. Nonetheless, Wales remained an overwhelmingly monoglot Welsh-speaking nation until the discovery in the south Wales valleys in the mid-nineteenth century of the large deposits of the high-quality coal that fuelled the industrial revolution. The subsequent demand for labour resulted first in immigration



Figure 16.1: Map of the British Isles with location of Wales indicated in dark shading (reproduced under Creative Commons license).

¹ Urban 2016: 139.

² Urban 2016: 140.

from other areas of Wales and then to the arrival of English speakers from England and beyond.³ The sheer scale of the in-migration of English speakers was such that, by the 1901 census, the proportion of Welsh speakers had declined to a little over half. It also led to a different distribution of Welsh speakers across the nation, with much higher numbers in the north and west of the country, where the population remained more stable than in the industrial south. Even so, the fact that, by the 2001 census, almost a quarter of the population reported speaking the language bears witness to the resilience of a small nation where Welsh has continued to serve as a symbol of both identity and resistance in the face of the overwhelming power of their much larger and dominant English neighbour.

Loss and recovery

Many variables played a part in both the decline from a nation of monoglot Welsh speakers in the sixteenth century to the lowest point in the mid-twentieth century and again from that low point to its ongoing recovery in the twenty-first century. For present purposes, however, I will focus on just one: education.

Language and education in Wales

Historically, educational opportunities in Wales depended on social class. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the gentry tended to send their sons to the English public schools⁴. Parents with a reasonable income were able to enrol their children in schools run by charitable organizations such as the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SPCK) where the language of instruction was English.⁵ Yet, despite its success in creating a network of schools across Wales, the SPCK had minimal impact on the education of the Welsh-speaking masses. Efficacy of the English-only policy in these schools was first questioned in 1734 when Griffith Jones, a cleric and teacher in an SPCK school, proposed a radical alternative: temporary or circulating schools, which stayed in one location for three months in winter when there was less demand for labour and where provision included evening classes for those who had to work in the day.⁶ Schools then moved on to the next location at the end of this three-month period. Griffith Jones trained an army of teachers and located wealthy benefactors to pay their wages. Critically, Welsh was the language of instruction and the Bible, which had been translated into Welsh in 1588, served as the main reading material. Students flocked to the schools and an estimated 200,000 had attended by the second half of the 18th century. These achievements attracted international attention. Catherine the Great, for instance, sent envoys to explore the possibility of setting up similar schools in Russia. The use of Welsh thus challenged assumptions that English was the only acceptable language of instruction; it also created a huge audience for Welsh literature, stimulating the development of Welsh printing presses to produce a wide range

³ Davies 2007.

⁴ Public schools in the UK are elite institutions associated with the upper class.

⁵ Jones and Roderick 2003.

⁶ Carradice 2010; Jones 1902.

of reading resources. Yet, despite the evident efficacy of Welsh in education, its use remained limited for the next 200 years, during which time advocacy by the Welsh for their mother tongue was overruled by the more powerful English upper classes. Nowhere did this antagonism play out more clearly than in the 1847 report of the Royal Commission on Education in Wales which was undertaken by three English-speaking Anglican lawyers, spectacularly ill-suited to investigating education in predominantly Welsh-speaking, non-conformist communities.⁷ When the commissioners far outstepped their education brief to comment on the morality of the Welsh nation which, they claimed, was being held back by its language, this triggered a furious backlash. Their three-volume report is known to this day as the *Treachery of the blue books*.⁸

In some respects, the damage had already been done, since many Welsh people had begun to believe that the only route to self-improvement was through speaking English. The extent to which they were colluding with the English oppressors can be seen in the use of the “Welsh not,”⁹ a stick or plaque given to any child heard speaking Welsh during school, to be hung around the neck and handed on to whoever was next heard speaking the language (Fig. 16.2 below). At the end of the day, the last child with the ‘Not’ was punished.

The cruelty associated with the “Welsh not” serves as a present-day rallying cry for those trying to understand a history of oppression. Yet the reality is somewhat more nuanced. The issue here is not physical force but what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has termed “symbolic violence,”¹⁰ whereby ordinary people are persuaded by an official narrative. The use of the “Welsh not” was never government policy. Rather, it was driven by individual teachers who, like the nineteenth-century Church Commissioners, mistakenly believed the surest route to self-advancement was through mastery of English. That said, while the government did not ban Welsh in education, neither did they do anything of note to promote its use.



Figure 16.2: A Welsh not (courtesy of the National Museum of Wales).

Turning of the tide

Complacency about the falling numbers of Welsh speakers reached a tipping point mid-century, by which time the demise of the language seemed inevitable. A growing sense of urgency among grassroots activists and cultural leaders, however, played a key role in changing attitudes. Saunders Lewis, for instance, one of the most important figures in twentieth-century Welsh language literature, is widely acknowledged as having kickstarted the process of bringing Welsh back from the brink of extinction with his 1962 BBC radio address, *Tynged yr Iaith* (“The Fate of the Language”).

⁷ Evans 1997; National Library of Wales, n.d.

⁸ ‘Blue’ comes from the colour of the reports’ covers.

⁹ Davies 1994.

¹⁰ Dowding 2011.

The continued intransigence of the Westminster¹¹ government when faced with Welsh demands also served as a catalyst for change. The flooding of the Trywern Valley in 1965 to provide water for the city of Liverpool in England was a case in point.¹² Very strong Welsh opposition failed to stop approval of the scheme, leading to the loss of several centuries-old communities. Frustration at the failure to be heard over this and other demands, resulted in increasing acts of civil disobedience in the 1970s, including the burning of holiday cottages owned by English incomers and the defacing of English language signage (see Fig. 16.3 at right).¹³

The failure to provide Welsh-language television proved another flashpoint. Although the main political parties had previously pledged a Welsh language channel during election campaigning, Margaret Thatcher's government reneged on its promise, triggering further acts of civil disobedience, including attacks on television transmitters in Welsh-speaking areas. The government finally relented in 1980 following the threat of Gwynfor Evans, politician and author, to fast till ¹⁴death (BBC News, 2010).

Increasing political pressure led to the establishment in 1990 of the Welsh Assembly Government and the transfer of certain limited powers, creating a space where the survival of the language became an important focus. The Welsh Language Act 1993, for instance, introduced equal treatment of Welsh and English in "public business and the administration of justice in Wales." It was not until 2011, however, that the Welsh language was finally recognised as co-official with English within Wales. The appointment of a Welsh Language Commissioner, with strong enforcement powers to protect the rights of Welsh-speaking people to access services through the medium of Welsh, was another significant development.

While political pressure produced the legislative framework for the revitalisation of Welsh, the main tool for its enactment has been Welsh-medium education. The nineteenth-century Church commissioners could scarcely have imagined twentieth-century ambitions for children to achieve fluency in both English *and* Welsh. The first Welsh-medium school was established independently of the state in 1939; this provision gained momentum in subsequent decades to the point where a significant minority of children in state funded schools in Wales now deliver some form of Welsh-medium education.¹⁵



Figure 16.3: English place name sprayed over a road sign leaving only the original Welsh name (Cr.edit: Yr Eryr Wen)

¹¹ I distinguish here between the Westminster government with jurisdiction in certain areas over the whole of the United Kingdom and the devolved governments with varying powers in the constituent nations based in Cardiff (Wales), Edinburgh (Scotland) and Belfast (Northern Ireland).

¹² Cunningham 2007.

¹³ Owen, & Lewis 2023.

¹⁴ Carradice 2012.

¹⁵ Welsh Government 2017.

The Welsh Government target is currently for 30 per cent of pupils to have varying degrees of their education through Welsh by 2031 and 40 per cent by 2050; and for all children ages five to sixteen to at least learn Welsh as a second language. Parental choice, of course, is the determining factor in whether children attend Welsh-medium schools. Those who opt for this form of delivery do so both as an expression of cultural identity and because it offers children an economic advantage, given the many employment opportunities in the public sector and the creative industries which have flowed from the improved status of the language.¹⁶

The evidence shows clearly that this educational intervention has stemmed the decline in numbers of Welsh speakers (see Fig. 16.4 below). According to the *Annual Population Survey*,¹⁷ children and young people aged three to fifteen years of age were more likely to report that they could speak Welsh than any other age group, underlining the importance of Welsh-medium education in language maintenance. However, this observation comes with certain caveats.¹⁸

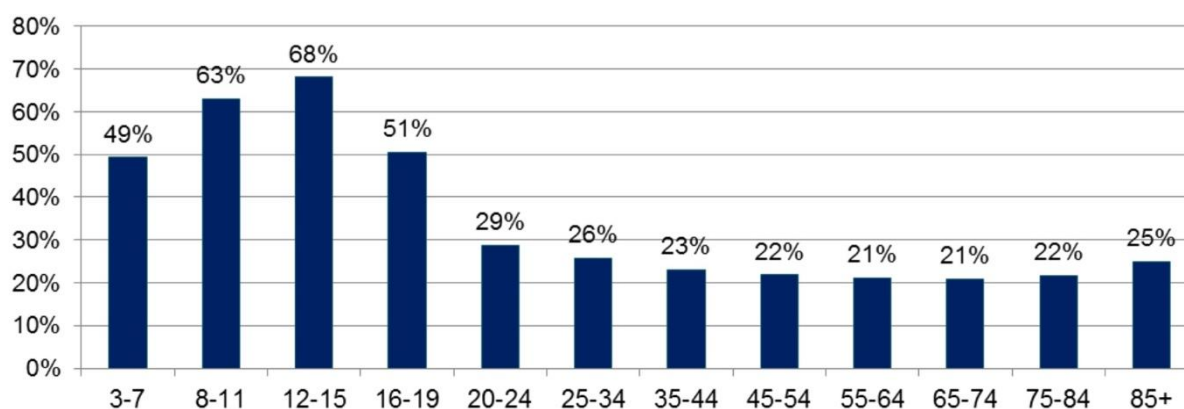


Figure 16.4: Chart Indicating percentage reporting speaking Welsh, by age group (Welsh Government, 2019)

When school is not enough

It is ironic that, while schools in the nineteenth century were an important engine of language loss, their great-great-grandchildren, educated through the medium of Welsh, choose in the main to speak not Welsh but English outside class. While a supportive education system is a prerequisite for language maintenance, it is not enough. Most children in Welsh-medium education today come from English-speaking homes and live in English-speaking communities where there are few opportunities for using the language outside school. While the realisation that a more comprehensive approach is required has been relatively slow, it is now firmly embedded in the Welsh Government's (2017) goal of producing a million Welsh speakers by 2050, as illustrated in the foreword by Carwyn Jones, First Minister, and Alun Davies, Minister for Lifelong Learning and Welsh Language:

¹⁶ Edwards and Pritchard 2006.

¹⁷ Welsh Government 2019. See also Chart 1 below.

¹⁸ See, for instance, Edwards and Newcombe Pritchard 2005.

Government cannot insist that parents and carers use the Welsh language with their children, that children play together in Welsh or that someone uses Welsh socially. We can, however, work to provide the conditions to facilitate an increase in the number of Welsh speakers and an increase in the use of Welsh. . . . The overarching message in this document is that we need to reach a position where the Welsh language is an integral element of all aspects of everyday life. . . . By raising our expectations and adopting an ambitious vision we have the potential to change the future outlook for the language. Together, we can enable the Welsh language to grow, and create a truly bilingual Wales with a living language for all.¹⁹

Arguably, the same desire for economic advancement, which persuaded many Welsh people to abandon their mother tongue for English in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries will determine outcomes in the twenty-first century, where the ability to speak Welsh gives a competitive edge in many areas of employment.

Discussion

While this paper focuses on one nation (Wales), two languages (Welsh and English) and just one aspect of social organisation (education), the findings have wide currency for nations discussed in Dr. Urban's *Small Wars*. In particular, the historical scope of the present case study – from the sixteenth to the twenty-first centuries – raises issues around language maintenance and loss for other borderlands. For instance, why are efforts to maintain the minority languages of Scotland or France less successful than in Wales or Catalunya?

In the mid-19th century, the vast majority of the population spoke Welsh. But just fifty years later, the proportion had fallen to around half. Alarm bells were ringing about the imminent demise of the language from the 1950s but, like earlier reports of the death of Mark Twain, such reports have proved unfounded. In spite of the far greater power of their English neighbour, the role of Welsh in individual and collective identity and resistance was such that almost a quarter of the population reported speaking the language into the new millennium, thus demonstrating the resilience against all the odds of this small nation.

Apart from a brief interlude in the seventeenth century, Welsh was completely excluded from education so that, by the late 1800s, negative attitudes towards the language on the part of the English elite had persuaded many that their children's future success depended on fluency in English rather than continued use of Welsh. The growing resistance of a small group of activists and cultural leaders, however, met with indifference from Westminster politicians which, in turn, led with increasing frequency to acts of civil disobedience. Small government concessions led incrementally to the devolution of certain powers to the Welsh Assembly Government in 1990, though it was not until the twenty-first century that an understanding emerged that the survival of the language depended on the use of both bottom-up and top-down approaches. The Welsh

¹⁹ Welsh Government 2017: 2–3.

experience thus poses questions for other borderlands: at which stage, for instance, does intransigence in the face of demands from less powerful neighbours become counterproductive? And what lessons can be learned from history? One such lesson which immediately springs to mind is that the same economic argument that drove the shift from English to Welsh in the nineteenth century is, in part at least, leading English-speaking parents to embrace Welsh-medium education for their children a hundred years later. The huge expansion of job opportunities, which has resulted from the equal status now accorded to Welsh and English, means that Welsh speakers have a competitive edge. And, in a similar vein, which mechanisms can usefully be harnessed for sharing both the successes and failures of initiatives in areas such as education?

Conclusion

In spite of the encouraging progress to date, it remains to be seen whether the extremely ambitious target of one million Welsh speakers by 2050²⁰ will be achieved. Nor is it the case that the population of Wales is unanimous in its support for the language: incomers from England taking advantage of lower house prices often have no interest either in Welsh-medium education for their children or in the widely available language classes for adults; many long-term Welsh residents are similarly resistant.

It would also seem that it is a case of *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. It is a matter of concern that assertions of Welsh identity provoke hostile responses from some outside Wales that are barely distinguishable in tone from the views expressed in the *Treason of the Blue Books*. Journalist A.A. Gill describes the Welsh in the *Sunday Times* as “loquacious, dissemblers, immoral liars, stunted, bigoted, dark, ugly, pugnacious little trolls.”²¹ In a similar vein, another journalist, Rod Liddle (2010), describes the Welsh as “miserable, seaweed munching, sheep-bothering pinch-faced hill-tribes.”

While it is difficult to disagree with Dr. Urban’s observation in *Small Wars* concerning the “long and unforgiving sense of history” of Celtic peoples, this is, arguably, a two-sided affair where it is important to consider the provocation!

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²¹ BBC News 1998.

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