IV

‘Diversity in tongue, language, order and habit’: Tudor Governments and Minority Languages.

In Chapter three I suggested that members of the intellectual elite who expressed patriotic views did not necessarily equate national consciousness with a common language. In chapter four I demonstrated that language was an aspect of power rather than a badge of nationality. These conclusions have been based on an examination of perception of the English language by members of the classically educated elite. But what of attitudes to linguistic diversity within the state? Language policies were part of the movement to increase the power of the Tudor monarchy by centralisation of government, but were not an attempt to indulge in linguistic imperialism. They and later English governments have been accused of this by a number of writers. For example, Anthony Buckley has pointed out that the English government been popularly blamed for the ‘decline of the Irish culture found in the Irish has language, in ancient texts and in folklore’.¹ It is outside the scope of this study to consider the reasons for the subsequent decline of the Celtic vernaculars. The subject has been covered by a number of writers such as Durkacz and Hechter.² It is, however, possible to defend sixteenth-century monarchs against the accusation of having a conscious policy to eradicate the Welsh, Cornish and Irish languages.

In the twentieth century, minority languages have been seen as dangerous in leading to nationalist demands as in the case of the Welsh, Breton and Basque separatists. This outlook can be traced back to the German Romantics of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. For example Johann Herder in a 1772 essay Ueber den Ursprung der Sprache, saw language as a valuable collective inheritance, the survival of which was essential for the survival of the nation. Johann Fichte went further in his prejudices. He too saw language as a determinant for nationhood, defining a people as ‘men whose organs of speech are influenced by the same external conditions, who live together in continuous communication with each other’. He also argued that, as the German language was superior because of its antiquity and purity, the German nation must be superior.³ Elie Kedourie included a linguistic criterion in his definition of nationalism: ‘A group speaking the same language is known as a nation and a nation ought to constitute a state.’⁴ Kedourie was not condoning this viewpoint: he disapproved of nationalism and believed that it was wrong to claim the right to independence because of a common language. More recently writers have questioned the centrality of language for nationalism. Anthony Smith has pointed out that language is not an

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essential part of national identity in Africa and that in countries such as Greece, Burma and Pakistan religion is more important. John Edwards had argued on a theoretical level that language is not essential for national identity.6

Because of the possible link between linguistic and political separatism, the assumption is often made by social historians of language that the Tudors had a deliberate policy of suppressing minority languages and that, because Henry VIII and Elizabeth wanted to increase the power of the crown throughout their territories, they must also have wished to eradicate Welsh, Cornish and Irish. Dick Leith even accuses them of an “historic blunder” in allowing worship in vernaculars other than English.7 The following generalization from Victor Durkacz is typical of this approach:

Language policies in Ireland, Wales and Gaelic Scotland have tended to vary according to the prevailing political and cultural situations in each nation: only in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries can it be said that they were brutally repressed by central government which in this period followed a rigid policy of linguistic uniformity in the Celtic periphery.8

The perception of ‘brutality’ is echoed by Gwyn Williams in discussing the Welsh language. He made the point that the Welsh language culture which ‘had been buoyant and innovatory in the fifteenth century stammered before the Renaissance’ and this coincided with the period when ‘it (the Welsh language) was brutally expelled from political life on the first attack by the English state on the Welsh Language’.9 However, the evidence outlined below does not support a verdict of ‘brutal repression’.

When analysing Tudor language policy it is essential to be aware of the differences between sixteenth-century and modern attitudes towards the patchwork of administrative and judicial divisions within the jurisdiction of the English crown, as well as towards vernacular languages in general. At first glance it may appear that the administrative systems in Cornwall, Wales and Ireland indicated that they were perceived as in some way alien. But in fact London and the South East dominated government to such an extent than any outlying region could be treated with suspicion and regarded as in need of additional supervision. Hugh Kearney stresses the dominance of London in terms of law courts, the Commons and the Lords, trade and education.10 Norman Davies acknowledges Kearney as ‘one of the very first historians to view the history of the Isles as a whole’ and agrees with him that what was developing as a result of administrative changes in the sixteenth century was an empire based on the wealth, population and resources of southern England over the rest of the British Isles.11

Wales was governed by a Council acting as a regional governing board, but so was the North of England. The South West had a similar system only briefly in 1539-1540. The jurisdiction of the Council of the Marches of Wales extended to Shropshire, Worcestershire, Hereford and Gloucester and, until 1569, Cheshire. A second section of Wales, the Principality, was governed
differently from the Marches and England. Hugh Kearney argues that although the use of the terms ‘Wales’ and ‘Welsh’ is unavoidable in the sixteenth century, ‘Wales’ was very much a ‘geographical expression’ lacking cultural and social unity. The Duchy of Cornwall was administered separately, but so was the Duchy of Lancaster; and the palatinates of Durham, Chester and Lancaster retained their special courts. There was a variety of jurisdictions within Ireland: The Pale, a small area around Dublin where the Royal writ ran; Anglo-Irish earldoms; and the Gaelic chieftainships. The attitude of Tudor rulers to all the peripheral areas of their realm was that of feudal overlord seeking to curb the ambitions of the overmighty subject. The policy of increased centralisation begun in the 1530s under the influence of Thomas Cromwell, which is discussed below, should be seen in this light rather than as the beginnings of English Imperialism within the British Isles.

Henry VIII’s reputation as an opponent of minority languages is partly based on his statute designed to bring Welsh justice and administration in line with that of the English – An Act for the Laws and Justice to be administered in Wales in like form as it is in this realm. Clause 17 of the Act specified that:

All Justices, commissioners sheriffs, coroners escheators, stewards and their lieutenants and all other officers and ministers of the law shall proclaim and keep the sessions courts and all other courts in the English tongue, and that all office holders had to speak English. There is no doubt that this provision had a detrimental effect on the Welsh language by confirming that English was to be essential for the advancement of all those who wished to hold office. But it would be a mistake to assume that the Act was designed to ‘deliberately suppress the language and break the spirit of the Welsh people.’

The changes in Wales should be seen as part of a wider reconstruction of local government undertaken by Henry VIII’s Council in the 1530s, under the guidance of Thomas Cromwell. The aim of the policy was to increase the control of the Privy Council in Wales, the North of England and in private Lordships where legal jurisdiction was still under the control of bishops, abbots or territorial magnates rather than the crown. The Council of the North was remodelled in 1537 so that it could oversee northern administration of justice on behalf of the Privy Council and the Act for Recontinuing of Certain Liberties and Franchises of 1536 curtailed local anomalies so that feudal or ecclesiastical officials could no longer prevent the assize judges, sheriffs or J.P.s from carrying out their duties. Before 1536 jurisdiction in Wales was complex. Some lands belonged to the English crown and some to the Duchy of Lancaster. In addition marcher estates were held by feudal lords in chief of the crown. Conflicts of jurisdiction enabled criminals to avoid justice and remedies of common law were not available. The Act of 1536 and further legislation in 1543 ensured that the common law was enforced uniformly throughout Wales.
English speakers but, as most aspirants to official posts were bilingual anyway, there was little difference in practice. Interpreters were allowed for Welsh speaking witnesses and Royal Proclamations and Orders of the Council were to be read out in Welsh.\textsuperscript{18} These were actions of a government intent on enforcing the law not on suppressing minority languages.

With the development of Protestantism in the second half of the sixteenth century, the emphasis on vernacular worship gave the government an incentive to encourage the use of the Welsh Language. By a statute of 1563\textsuperscript{19} bishops in Wales were empowered to supervise the translation of the Bible and the Prayer Book into Welsh. The work was to be completed by St David’s day 1566, after which services were to be conducted in Welsh. The government hoped that by making the Bible available in churches in both languages they would encourage people to learn English, but the priority was to encourage a uniform faith, not to insist upon a uniform language. Translation was undertaken by William Salesbury with assistance from Bishop Richard Davies of St David’s. They managed only the New Testament and the Prayer Book, but their work was completed by Bishop William Morgan, who published his Welsh Bible in 1588. All three translators were appreciative of Welsh language and culture. For example Davies, in his epistle attached to the Prayer Book, wrote of his pride in the ancient origins of the true church in Wales before the corrupting influence of Rome had been felt. He appealed to his fellow-countrymen – ‘do not de-nationalize yourself, do not be indifferent, do not look down but gaze upwards to the place where you belong.’ Their enthusiasm for Welsh culture was not incompatible with their dedication to the Anglican church and their admiration for the Tudors, whom they praised for returning the ancient unity of Britain.\textsuperscript{20} The Welsh Bible produced a text which ensured the survival of the Welsh language.

Leith has suggested that the decline of the Cornish language in the sixteenth century was due to a conscious policy decision by the government.\textsuperscript{21} The issue arose early in the reign of Edward VI when the government of Protector Somerset introduced an \textit{Act of Uniformity} to make the new Protestant Prayer Book compulsory. In line with reformed doctrine, services were to be in the vernacular which of course meant English. The legislation provoked The Western Rebellion of 1549. The participants’ objection to the use of English in the Prayer Book, was discussed in chapter four, where it was suggested that the rebels wanted to retain a familiar form of service which they associated with the Catholic doctrine. There was no suggestion of linguistic separatism. After all the rebels wanted the services to be conducted in Latin, not in Cornish.\textsuperscript{22}

Hostility to Irish Gaelic was stronger than towards Welsh or Cornish. An \textit{Act for th’Englishe Order} was passed in the Dublin Parliament in 1537 which included the following:

\begin{quote}
there is nothing which does more contain and keep many of (the King’s) subjects of this saide lande in a certaine savage and wilde kind and manner of living, than the diversity between them in tongue,
\end{quote}
language, order and habit, which by the eye deceiveth the multitude and persuadeth unto them that they should be as it were of sundry sorts, or rather of sundry countries, where indeede they bee wholly together one body whereof his highness is th’only head under God.23 In this statement the assumption is made that loyalty to a country and hence obedience to the state would be in doubt if people did not speak the same language. To explain this it is necessary to look at the circumstances behind the legislation and especially the nature of the Kildare rebellion of 1534. Before the 1530s the Fitzgeralds, Earls of Kildare, had acted as Lord Deputy in Ireland. The system worked in the interest of both sides on the whole but there had been some conflict as when Lambert Simnel had been crowned in Dublin in opposition to Henry VII in 1487 and when Wolsey had attempted to build up an alternative power base to the Kildares in the 1520s, an attempt which was only abandoned because of the expense. The rebellion came about because of developing mistrust on both sides.24 Kildare was summoned to England in 1533. He expected support from the Duke of Norfolk but his rivals looked to Cromwell who was now at the height of his influence. In May 1534 Kildare was accused of ‘manifold enormities’ and his son, ‘Silken Thomas’ was summoned to court. The rebellion, led by Thomas, was sparked off when the Earl was put in the Tower, where he died. Thomas’s attempts to gain wider support for opposition to Henry provide the key to the nature of the 1537 legislation. He had some clerical support which gave the impression that the protest was directed against the break with Rome but, more importantly, he turned to the Gaelic chiefs and transformed the revolt into a Gaelic war of independence. It would appear, then, that the cultural imperialism implicit in the English government’s response to the rebellion was triggered off by fear of separatist agitation, rather than being an example of an aggressive desire to ensure linguistic unity.

Henry was crowned King of Ireland in 1541, and this has been interpreted as part of a policy of aggressive imperialism.25 His motivation was, however, more limited and practical. Henry’s headship of the church in Ireland, which the Irish Parliament had established in 1536, could not be enforced as long as he remained ‘Lord’ – a title which implied he was viceroy to the Pope.26 Under the new arrangements a Kingdom of Ireland was to embrace the whole of the island and its people would speak English and be governed by English law.27 John Guy has suggested that the legislation:

Even militated against the idea of a unitary state, for a subordinate superstructure had been created for Ireland: the later Tudors ruled technically two separate kingdoms, each with its own bureaucracy. In future ideological terms, it became possible to conceive of Anglo-Irish nationalism, as opposed to English or Gaelic civilization.28

The Lord Deputy, Sir Anthony Leger, who devised the regnal policy, actually hoped to reconcile English, Anglo-Irish and Gaelic interests; but after Henry’s death any hope of peaceful co-existence was ruined. In 1557 the Lord Deputy, the earl of Sussex confiscated Leix and Offaly, to the west
of the Pale and ‘planted’ them with English settlers. Ireland was influenced by the Counter Reformation so increasingly resented the English as Protestants as well as conquerors. During Elizabeth’s reign, relations between England and Ireland became increasingly hostile. Sir Henry Sidney, Lord Deputy 1565-1578, attacked the power of the Gaelic Lordships and tried to increase the authority of the Crown by establishing presidencies in Munster and Connaught. Ireland became a magnet for soldiers and adventurers, wishing to enhance their personal influence and fortune. A serious rebellion in 1579-83 involved Papal and Spanish help for the rebels. Rebellion also broke out in Ulster in 1593 and became more dangerous in 1595 when Hugh o’Neil, Earl of Tyrone, assumed leadership. Order was eventually restored between 1600 and 1603 by Lord Mountjoy, but it had been at the cost of growing religious and cultural alienation of the Gaelic Irish and the Anglo-Irish population.

Despite growing hostility towards the Irish peoples, there was no discernible attempt to limit the Irish language in the second half of the sixteenth century. As in Wales and Cornwall, language policy was influenced by the need to enforce the Protestant Reformation which involved encouragement of the vernaculars. As early as Henry VIII’s reign the Government’s religious policy came up against the stumbling block of language differences. George Browne was appointed Bishop of Dublin in 1536 and had instructions to carry out the same reforms as had been introduced in England, including an English version of the common prayers. In 1538, however, the requirement to provide an English Bible translation for every parish had to be waived because of the prevalence of Gaelic. The more extreme Protestant measures of Edward VI’s reign also hit snags. The first printing press in Ireland was set up in 1551 to provide religious texts for the English-speaking areas of Galway and Limerick but the Gaelic-speaking areas remained problematic. The English Council authorized Gaelic services where a “convenient number” did not speak English and a Latin version of the Prayer Book was allowed. When Elizabeth I’s Uniformity legislation was introduced into Ireland a special clause allowed ministers who could not speak English to continue using the Latin version of the Prayer Book. Given the strong views of the Protestants on the use of the vernacular, such measures could only be temporary expedients, however, and a campaign was undertaken to increase the use of Gaelic for religious purposes. Some appointments were made of conscientious Bishops who were able to preach in both English and Gaelic such as Hugh Brady, Bishop of Meath from 1563 to 1584 and Robert Daly, Bishop of Kildare from 1564 to 1583. The campaign for the use of Gaelic for sermons, prayers and religious texts was backed by English councillors Thomas Lancaster, Bishop of Armagh from 1568 to 1583 and by John Lang, who took over in the same diocese from 1583 to 1589.

Brendan Bradshaw has drawn attention to a conflict of strategy between these reformers who thought that the Irish people could be converted to Protestantism by education and persuasion and those who advocated force.
The reformers faced a slow struggle in the face of intransigence from the more repressive elements and indifference from the complacent, but gradual expansion of the use of Gaelic resulted from their endeavours. The first book to be printed in Gaelic originated in Scotland. In 1567 Bishop John Carswell’s translation of John Knox’s *Book of Common Order* was published in Edinburgh. Carswell specified in the introduction that his translation was ‘especially for the men of Scotland and Ireland’. He also regretted that ‘we suffer greater want than any other, that we have no the Holy Bible printed in Gaelic, as it has been printed in Latin and English…and likewise that the history of our ancestors has never been printed, although a certain amount of the history of the Gaedhil of Scotland and Ireland has been written in manuscripts’.34 Because of its intended audience, the translation was made into classical common Gaelic, not the Scottish and Irish dialects that became predominant.

In 1571 a catechism, compiled by John Kearney, Treasurer of St Patrick’s, became the first Gaelic book to be printed in Ireland and this had been made possible by a gift of Irish types from Elizabeth. A Gaelic New Testament was completed in 1587 and printed in 1603. Brady, Lancaster and Lang fought for a University to be established in Dublin to help with the development of a vernacular ministry. They campaigned for thirty years until Trinity College was finally established in 1595. The delay was not caused by critics of the motives of the reformers, but by a succession of Archbishops of Dublin who were determined to prevent the use of St Patrick’s, one of Dublin’s cathedrals, to finance the project.

As well as differing views among the reformers there was also a variety of approaches from the would-be colonists during the period of the plantation of Munster. Declan Kiberd quotes hostile references to the Irish language from Edmund Spenser and Sir John Davies as examples of the politicisation of language. He refers to the way that Sir George Carew, President of Munster, had Gaelic manuscripts of the province cut up to make covers for English language primers being put into circulation for school children.35 However, Kiberd makes no attempt at contextualization. An explanation for the hostility to the Irish language lies not in inherent racism or nationalism but in a policy split between the Old English whose interests lay in avoiding confrontation, and the New Irish planters such as Spenser whose interests lay in military conquest and colonisation. Spenser first went to Ireland in 1580 as secretary to the Deputy, Lord Grey. Because of his status as England’s foremost Renaissance poet, Spenser’s *View of the Present State of Ireland*, has, perhaps, received more attention than it deserves in the light of its contemporary reception. *The View* was written in the early 1590s. When it was submitted to the Munster Stationer in 1598 it was refused registration and proscribed by the Government. According to Ciaran Brady the influence of the manuscript version was limited.36 When it was eventually published in 1633 the editor, Ware, expressed his regret at Spenser’s extremism, cut out words such as ‘savage’ and ‘barbarous’ and omitted many attacks on the Anglo-Irish.37 Spenser advocated starving the population of Ireland, transporting any
survivors, confiscating lands and a general policy of repression as a forerunner to conversion to Protestantism. He did not associate language and nationality, in that his hostility applies equally to the ‘Old English’, the term he uses for the descendants of the Anglo-Norman settlers of the twelfth century, as well as to the Gaelic speakers. In 1581 Sir Nicholas White, the ‘Old English’ councillor, had warned Elizabeth’s minister, Lord Burghley, that: ‘innovation hath in all ages been accounted dangerous, and the busiest men that way be not the profitablist ministers...’; he urged the merits of ‘temperate and peaceable government’ against ‘the rooting out of ancient nobility by violent and warlike government’. It was to counter this approach, which was after all in line with the English government’s instinctive conservatism, that Spenser and his allies developed their arguments that the Irish people were savages who had to be rescued from their barbarity.

The hostility to the Irish language shown by some of the planters was rhetoric designed to further their interests at court. The activities of Sir William Herbert, who was involved with Spenser in the plantation of Munster, indicate that the hostility was not necessarily typical. Herbert’s theories on how the Irish could be subdued were explained in his political treatise, Croftus, sive De Hibernis. He shared some of Spenser’s views, advocating colonisation, the transporting of the native population and the use of force. He was more moderate, however, in not recommending a scorched earth policy. He compared Ireland with his native Wales and believed that it was in the interests of both regions to have native laws and culture superseded by English. He was, however, sympathetic to the use of Gaelic for religious purposes. In The Croftus he argued that the Bible and the Common prayers should be read to the Irish in their own language, with the singing of Gaelic hymns and psalms to be accompanied by the harp. His activities in Ireland mirrored these suggestions. In his work in North Kerry, Herbert made the promotion of religious reform his priority. He arranged to have popular prayers translated into Irish and distributed among the native population. He appointed Irish speakers as curates in his estates and secured the appointment of an Irish-speaking bishop to the local diocese of Ardfert.

The failures of those who wished to bring the Protestant faith to the Irish people should not lead one to overlook the fact that their approach involved an encouragement rather than repression of the Irish language. It is also misleading to assume, as some modern historians are prone to do, that Spenser’s hostility to the Irish people and their culture was more in line with official government policy than that of the reformers who believed that it was crucial to encourage education in the vernacular.

In this survey of Tudor language policies, I have suggested that government attitudes towards Celtic languages were bound up with the consolidation of power. In the 1530s this led to restrictions on the use of Welsh and Irish. In the second half of the sixteenth century, however, religious change meant that considerations of power provided motivation for the encouragement of
In the 1530s the consolidation of Tudor power involved the extension of the use of the English language in Wales for judicial purposes. However the provision of interpreters for court proceedings and the instructions that the Proclamations and Orders of the Council were to be read out in Welsh suggests that there was no attempt to suppress the vernacular. The Protestant Reformation ensured the survival of the Welsh language as the Bible and Prayer Book were translated into Welsh.

There was no need for the Tudors to be hostile to Welsh culture and language. After all Henry VII spent his first 14 years in Wales and himself spoke Welsh. Their propaganda, based on the myth of British Imperial identity, used the narratives of Brutus as the Trojan progenitor of Britain and of Arthurian legend as popularised through Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*. The connections between these narratives and Wales gave respectability to its culture. Gwyn Williams has emphasised the role played by Welsh humanists at the Tudor court, describing them as follows:

They were deeply Welsh, Welsh patriots who knew no conflict of languages. They used English as centrally as Latin. They were particularly European in formation.

Paradoxically, the greater the success of Welsh cultural influences on a wider stage, the less likely writers were to use their own vernacular, preferring Latin when writing for the scholarly elite or English for a wider audience.

Protestant changes in the reign of Edward VI brought language issues to the forefront in Cornwall, when the Western Rebels objected to the use of English instead of Latin for church services. The boundaries of Cornish speaking areas were receding in the sixteenth century, not because of any hostility from England, but because of economic factors such as increased commercial links and the increased importance of ports consequent upon naval developments and the war with Spain. Wakelin also emphasises the importance of the Protestant Reformation in influencing the language decline. This was not only as a result of the failure to translate the Bible into Cornish, but also an effect of the eventual ending of the mystery plays and the severing of links between Cornwall and Brittany.

Throughout the sixteenth century, hostility towards Ireland grew and some English administrators and settlers were disdainful of the Irish language and culture. However, as in Wales, government policy in the second half of the sixteenth century was determined by the hope of spreading the Protestant faith, and this involved encouraging, not suppressing, vernacular languages.

Tudor rulers were concerned to consolidate their power in the Celtic peripheries by working with local landed, bureaucratic and clerical elites and it was these groups who were encouraged to use English. In the second half of the century, language policy was dominated by religious factors and in this sphere the language of the masses became a consideration. The audience for printed religious texts was not limited to the literate as there was wide oral dissemination through preaching, domestic and official Bible reading and attendance at services where the Prayer Books were used. In the
reigns of Edward VI and Elizabeth government power was inextricably linked to the success of the Protestant faith, which was disseminated through the vernacular languages. It is important to remember that this applied to English as well as to the Celtic languages. Policies such as Bible and Prayer book translations, the provision of Irish type and the appointment of Gaelic speaking Bishops by Elizabeth helped to ensure the survival of the Celtic languages in Wales and Ireland.

Notes

5. ibid p.68
14. 27 Henry VIII, c.63, 1936.
15. Durkacz, op cit p.3.
16. 27 Henry VIII, c.24.
19. 5 Elizabeth, c.28, 1963.
38. ibid. ix, lines 3319-3350.
42. Bradshaw, op cit, p.487.
45. Williams, op cit, p.27.