The Stories of English

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scribe or the location where he was working. The written language immediately added a new dimension to the language, a fresh set of opportunities for expression, and a millennium later it would provide the data and motivation for a whole new field of study, Old English dialectology.[5]

Interlude 1
The Celtic language puzzle

In fact there are two puzzles. First, why did the Anglo-Saxons not end up speaking the Celtic languages of Britain? Arriving in such small numbers, we might have expected them to adopt the language of the country, as can easily happen after a period of settlement and intermarriage. This is what took place at the time in Normandy, for example, where the Scandinavian invaders ended up speaking French. It is also what took place in England after 1066, with the Norman invaders eventually speaking English. But the Germanic invaders of Britain retained their original language.

The second puzzle. When invaders arrive in a country and impose their own language, they take in words from the indigenous language, often in large numbers. To take a relatively recent example, there are thousands of words in the *Dictionary of South African English* which have come from Afrikaans, Xhosa, Zulu, and other African languages.[6] Although English arrived in South Africa as a language of power, it quickly began to reflect local concerns by assimilating new vocabulary. And we may generalize: even if an invading group ends up adopting the conquered people's language, that language leaves a sign of its presence. When the Vikings arrived in England in the late eighth century, they introduced many Scandinavian loanwords and even managed to exercise an influence on English grammar (p. 76). When the Normans took over England, they introduced thousands of French loanwords into the English they eventually adopted, as well as French conventions of spelling (p. 210). Why, then, are there so few Celtic loanwords in Old English? How can the Anglo-Saxons have failed to be influenced by the majority Celtic language around them?

Apart from the place-names referred to on p. 25, the influence is indeed small, and many of the words which are cited as of Celtic origin are of doubtful etymology. It is sometimes difficult to tell whether a word entered Old English from Welsh, after the Anglo-Saxons arrived, or whether it had been acquired on the Continent from Latin, and was thus already in their language. For example, *bin* 'receptacle' might have derived from an early British word *benna* (compare Welsh *ben* 'wagon') or from an even earlier Latin *benna*; *assen* 'ass' probably came from an Old British word *assen*, but it might have been earlier,

from Latin *asinus*. There are also cases of words which probably came from Celtic, but because there are equivalent forms in some Germanic languages, the point is not certain. These include *puck* 'malicious spirit' (Welsh *pwca*), which had a similar form in Old Norse (*puki*), and *crock* 'pot' (Welsh *crochan*), also found in several Scandinavian languages (such as Icelandic *krukka*).

Old English words which do seem to have a clear Celtic connection include *bannoc* 'piece of a loaf or cake', *broc* 'badger', *cammoc* 'cammock, a type of plant', *crag* (compare Welsh *craig* or *carreg*), *dunn* 'grey-brown' (compare Welsh *dwn*), and *wan* 'dark' (compare Welsh *gwan*). *Wan*, for instance, a word not otherwise known in Germanic, turns up in *Beowulf* (l. 702): *Com on wanre niht scriðan sceadugenga* 'The creature of the shadows came stalking in the dusky night' (John Clark Hall's translation). Three other Celtic words turn up in Northumbrian texts, suggesting an ongoing British presence in the far north: *bratt* 'cloak', *carr* 'rock', and *luh* 'lake' (cf. modern *loch*). We must also add to the list a few words introduced by Irish missionaries, such as *ancor* 'anchorite', *clucge* 'bell', and *dry* 'sorcerer' (compare *druid*). There are several words of uncertain etymology with possible Celtic connections cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but even if we included them all, we would only be talking of another twenty or so candidates. A number of other Celtic borrowings (such as *brogue*, *coracle*, and *plaid*) did come into English, but not until well after the Old English period.

There are various explanations, but all are speculation. Perhaps there was so little in common between the Celtic way of life as it had developed in Roman Britain, and the Anglo-Saxon way of life as it had developed on the Continent, that there was no motivation to borrow Celtic words. There might even have been a conscious avoidance of them. This could have happened if the Anglo-Saxons perceived themselves to be so socially superior to the 'barbarians' that Celtic words would have been seen as 'gutter-speak'. Or there could have been avoidance for the opposite reason: because many Celts would have become highly Romanized (for the Romans were in the country for the best part of 400 years), perhaps the Anglo-Saxons perceived them as 'nouveau riche' and wished to distance themselves from such 'posh' speech. Either factor could have been relevant, in different times and places.

Then again, a completely different line of reasoning might have been involved. Perhaps the two ways of life were so similar that the Anglo-Saxons already had all the words they needed. Celtic words which the Anglo-Saxons might most usefully have adopted might already have come into their language from Latin because of the Roman presence in Europe. At the very least they would have been familiar with many Latin words, from encounters with Romans on the Continent. From this point of view, Latin – as the language of political power – would have been a more attractive source of words than

Welsh; and this would have been consolidated when the Irish missionaries arrived in Britain, bringing Latin as the language of a different kind of power. The Celts, too, would have been familiar with Latin: there must have been many Latin-speaking Celts during the Romano-Celtic years. Latin certainly had an influence on early Celtic, as can be seen from such forms as Welsh *eglwys* 'church' from *ecclesia*, or *ysgol* 'school' from *schola*. Several early place-names show this influence, such as the many places whose names have a British form of *ecclesia* as their source: *Eccles*, *Eccleshall*, *Exhall*, *Eccleston* (see also panel 1.6).

1.6 The *cross* question

Was *cross* a Celtic loanword? It was not the normal word for 'cross' in Old English: that was a word with Germanic origins, *rod* 'rood', as in the triumphant line 56 of the Old English poem *The Dream of the Rood*: *Crist wæs on rode* 'Christ was on the cross' (p. 40). So how did *cross* arrive in English?

The word is known in Germanic, deriving from Latin *crux*: Old Norse has *kross*. And as it does not appear in Old English until the tenth century, it is very possible that the Vikings brought the word with them. The earliest usage is in the place-name *Normannes cros* (modern Norman Cross, near Peterborough, Cambridgeshire), which has a Scandinavian ring to it because of the way the specific term precedes the general one (contrast the opposite pattern in Celtic, as in Welsh *Llanfair* 'Church [of] Mary'). Then from the eleventh century it appears in other names, all in the north, such as *Crosby* and *Crosthwaite*.

But some have argued that a word with such Christian significance would be unlikely to have come from a Scandinavian source. Religious words did not on the whole enter English from Germanic, whereas the Irish missionaries brought many religious terms with them. The Latin word had entered Old Irish as *cros*; Welsh has it as *croes*. Certainly stone crosses were common in Ireland, and Irish art influenced the stone crosses of England; so perhaps there was linguistic influence there, too. The matter is unresolved, and probably unresolvable.

Genetic evidence is helping to throw some light on the situation. A study reported in 2002[7] showed a major difference in Y-chromosome markers between men from a selection of seven towns along an east–west transect from East Anglia to north Wales, suggesting a mass migration of Celts from England, with at least half the male indigenous Celtic population of England being displaced. The researchers, having also identified striking genetic similarities between English and Frisian men, concluded that the Welsh border was more of a genetic barrier than the North Sea. Such a significant population movement is suggestive of what we would today call 'ethnic cleansing' – and if this were

so, one of the consequences would be a distaste for all things Celtic, especially the language. You do not borrow words from people you have just evicted.

But the linguistic evidence from personal names does not entirely support this scenario. There are not many Celtic names used by Anglo-Saxon personalities, but when they do occur they are of special interest. *Cædwalla*, *Ceadda*, *Cedd*, *Ceawlin*, *Cerdic*, and *Cumbra* are all Welsh names. *Cumbra*, for example, is very close to the Welsh word for 'Welshman', *Cymro*. But what is interesting is that these are all names of members of the Anglo-Saxon nobility. *Cædwalla*, for instance, was king of Wessex in 685, according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and his conversion to Christianity is described by Bede (Book V, Chapter 7). But *Cædwalla* is a distinctly Welsh name. Indeed, he has a namesake in the Welsh prince *Cadwallon* of Gwynedd – referred to as 'king of the Britons' by Bede (Book II, Chapter 20) – who killed the Northumbrian King Edwin in 633. What sort of society must it have been for Anglo-Saxon royalty to adopt Welsh names?

People are remarkably sensitive about choosing first names, as every parent knows. Great thought is devoted to the matter. No one would give their child the name of an enemy or of a person felt to be disreputable. When people are at war, they may even change their name to avoid being wrongly identified – as famously happened with the British royal family in 1917, when George V replaced Saxe-Coburg-Gotha by Windsor. On the other hand, choosing the name of a person whom one respects, or whom one wants to impress or thank, is a common practice – whether this be an older relative, a family friend, a business contact, or a political ally. People are also much influenced by social trends: some names become highly popular, and in modern times newspapers publish annual lists of the most fashionable choices. Religion exercises a strong influence, too, as with names of saints or biblical personalities. In older times – as still in many societies today – even greater significance was attached to the meanings of names, with children being deliberately called names which mean 'blessed', 'Christ-like', and so on.

So, if some Anglo-Saxon noblemen were giving their children British names, it must mean that, at the very least, there was respect for some members of Celtic society in some parts of the country. A likely scenario is that Anglo-Saxon chieftains would be living in accord with members of the Romano-Celtic nobility, and intermarrying with them. A child would be named for a senior member of one or other family, and this would just as easily be Celtic as Germanic. Some of these children would one day become nobility themselves, and use of the name would spread. And if senior members of the household did such things, then junior members would also find it a fashionable thing to do. We do not know who were the parents of Cædmon – the seventh-century monastery stable-lad who, according to Bede (Book IV, Chapter 24), became

England's first Christian poet – but they gave him a Welsh name. Why such intimate contact with Celtic tradition did not result in a greater influx of Celtic loanwords into Old English remains one of the great puzzles in the history of the language.