

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

11



PART ONE:

THE CELTS AND THE ROMANS (40 BC TO AD 450)	15
Continental Celtic versus Insular Celtic	16
The Ogham Alphabet	19
The Roman Invasion	21



PART TWO:

THE RISE OF OLD ENGLISH (AD 450 TO 1066)	25
Angles, Saxons and Jutes	26
Anglo-Saxons	27
The Runic Alphabet	28
Old English and Christianity	28
The Old English Alphabet	31
The Lindisfarne Gospels	32
Bede's <i>Ecclesiastical History of the English People</i>	35
Viking Marauders: The Influence of Old Norse	35
Alfred the Great	39
The <i>Anglo-Saxon Chronicle</i>	42
The Riddles of the Exeter Book	43
<i>Beowulf</i>	48

PART THREE:	
MIDDLE ENGLISH: GEOFFREY CHAUCER AND ALL	
THAT (1066 TO 1475)	53
A Language United?	54
The Domesday Book	56
Norman French: The Language of Class and Culture	59
The Middle-English Creole Hypothesis	61
The <i>Ormulum</i>	63
Wycliffe's Bible	65
Chaucer and <i>The Canterbury Tales</i>	68
The Decline of French	74
Chancery Standard	76
The Great Vowel Shift	78



PART FOUR:	
EARLY MODERN ENGLISH: A LEVIATHAN OF	
LANGUAGE (1475 TO 1670)	81
William Caxton and the Printing Press	83
<i>Le Morte d'Arthur</i>	87
William Tyndale's Bible Translations	91
Punctuation, Pronouns and Standardized Spelling	97
<i>Tottel's Miscellany</i>	100
The Inkhorn Debate	103
The Campaign for Plain English?	106
The Bard and the Renaissance Theatre	107
'False Friends' and Faux Pas	114
Sir Francis Bacon	117
The King James Bible	120

Thomas Hobbes's <i>Leviathan</i>	127
John Milton and <i>Paradise Lost</i>	131



PART FIVE:

LATE MODERN ENGLISH: TOWARDS A GLOBAL LANGUAGE (1670 TO 1900)	137
Alexander Pope	140
Samuel Johnson's <i>Dictionary of the English Language</i>	144
The Hammer Blows of Grammar	149
The Language of Industry	154
American English and Webster's <i>Dictionary</i>	156
The Ultimate Worde Horde: The Story of <i>The Oxford English Dictionary</i>	160
The Language of Empire	164



PART SIX:

POST-MODERN ENGLISH	167
Slang and Euphemisms	169
BBC English versus Estuary English	173
Singlish and Spanglish	176
Digital English	181
Select Bibliography	185
Index	187

PART ONE



THE CELTS
AND THE
ROMANS



(40 BC – AD 450)

Although the English language does not begin with the Celts, it is important to set the stage for its arrival. The Celts were Iron Age settlers in the British Isles, who migrated from central Europe from about 500 BC. By the time the Romans arrived in Britain the Celts were living as regional, warlike tribes. They were skilled farmers, potters and metal workers and were already known to be trading with the Roman colonies. Their craftsmen have left us evidence of intricately carved designs, but what of their language?

There is general agreement that a distinct Celtic language, separate from that of the Celtic tribes living in other parts of Europe, was spoken in Britain from around the middle of the first millennium BC up until the arrival of the Romans in the first century AD. The Celts left no written record of their history, however, so we must depend on their contemporaries for enlightenment.



Continental Celtic versus Insular Celtic

Early Greek and Roman scribes such as Herodotus (450 BC) and Polybius (200 BC) make reference to a loose ethnic grouping as the Keltoi or Galli in their written histories: a largely tribal society of warlike, iron-based communities. The similarity in stone inscriptions and artefacts discovered in Europe and Britain dating from

this period points towards a form of shared language. The Keltói described in the ancient Greek histories were the early Celts, dispersed as far south as the Iberian Peninsula, and as far north as the Scottish highlands.

Although there are undoubted similarities between these tribal groups in terms of linguistic unity (e.g. alphabetical symbols and verb, subject, object word order), the chronicles of the ancient historians are contradictory and confusing. The Roman writer Tacitus stated that the language spoken by the Gauls was very similar to the language spoken by the early Britons. Julius Caesar, however, saw little similarity and noted that the three principal tribes of Gaul spoke in noticeably distinct dialects. As a result, to view the Celtic languages as belonging to one unified ethnic grouping is problematic, with modern historians preferring to divide the various dialects and forms into two distinct groups: Continental Celtic and Insular Celtic.

The first of these groupings, Continental Celtic, comprises Lepontic (spoken in the southern Alpine region), Celtiberian (spoken in parts of north-eastern Spain and Portugal), Gallaecian (north-western Spain and northern Portugal) and Gaulish (France and northern Alpine region). The second grouping, Insular Celtic, comprises two distinct linguistic families: Goidelic and Brythonic, which subdivide into other related languages. The former (Goidelic) includes Irish and Scottish Gaelic and Manx and the latter (Brythonic) Pictish and Cumbric (both extinct), British, Welsh, Breton and Cornish. As virtually all Continental Celtic is

now extinct, exact geographical boundaries are a matter of vague approximation. In all probability, certain tribes were nomadic and this added to a crossing and merging of dialects, hence the conflicting views of Julius Caesar and Tacitus.

Linguistic researchers and historians have based the distinction between the two forms of Celtic on the hypothesis that the various forms spoken in the British Isles evolved similar changes and innovations that don't appear prevalent in Continental Celtic. Insular Celtic verbs have different conjugational forms (verb endings) depending on where they appear in a sentence. For example, the Old Irish Celtic verb 'biru' in the first person singular means 'I carry'. The negative form, however, is represented by the conjunct 'ni biur' ('I do not carry' or, strictly speaking, 'not I carry'). This addition of a particle at the beginning of a sentence and the conjugated verb ending, appears to be a trait particular to the Insular Celtic family of languages and is not apparent in Continental Celtic, leading to the hypothesis that the Celtic languages of the British Isles, the earliest recorded tongue of our ancestors, evolved independently from the Celtic languages of Europe.



The Ogham Alphabet

The Celts left no written records to show us what their language looked like, although some coins exist with the names of Celtic leaders on them. Later literature incorporated inherited legends and histories from the time, but these endured due to the tradition of oral storytelling.

The Ogham Alphabet may be the closest we can get to what the writing of this time may have looked like. Traces of Ogham are found on around four hundred stone inscriptions and stone monuments dotted mostly around southern Ireland, Wales and the west of England (Devon and Cornwall).

Ogham is sometimes referred to as the Celtic Tree Alphabet as each of the twenty symbols corresponds to the name of a tree. The symbols themselves consist of a series of lines or slashes stemming out from or crossing a vertical line (like branches). The letters are grouped into four sets of five according to the point at which they cross or stem from the downward stroke or 'druim' (meaning 'spine'). Examples of vowels and consonants are:

Letter	Name	Tree	Letter	Name	Tree		
	B	Beith	birch		M	Muin	vine
	L	Luis	rowan		G	Gort	ivy
	D	Dair	oak		A	Ailm	silver fir
	C	Coll	hazel		I	Iodhadh	yew