
Marcus Tanner. *The Last of the Celts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. 298p.

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First the good news: Tanner's title is misleading in that the book is less about the plight of the Celts than about the plight of their languages. It is at least possible to argue that the disappearance of a language is not necessarily equivalent to the disappearance of the people who speak that language. Tanner himself acknowledges that peoples have distinctive attributes other than, or additional to, language—for instance when he recounts his experience of feeling at home in Wales as he had never felt at home in England:

I had developed a sense of watchfulness about my own personality, aware that it needed keeping in check, and that at any moment I might sound unsuitably loud, excitable and over the top. In Wales that feeling of difference from my surroundings fell away. I found myself among a nation of gesticulating, excitable people and the physical similarity between me and the people I saw around me was striking. (3)

He even refers to an “unconscious Celtic reflex” (245), which protects Cornish voters from supporting the Conservatives, and differentiates “an Irish spirit” (273) from the language. Despite such inconsistencies, Tanner attributes an almost mystical quality to language, with its “phrases and proverbs that provide a direct link to the past, facial gestures and body movements that accompany specific sounds and beliefs and messages that lie encoded in the structure of the words” (347).

Whether or not the reader accepts Tanner's equation of language and culture, the book is a convincing and compelling account of the erosion of both branches of Celtic, the Goidelic languages of Ireland, Scotland, and the Isle of Man and the Brythonic languages of Wales, Cornwall, and Brittany (1), and the reasons for their decline in the varied historical and cultural contexts in which it has taken place. Successive chapters provide chronological treatment of the strength and eventual weakening or, in the cases of Manx and Cornish, disappearance, of the various languages, with chapters about the Goidelic languages grouped in the first section of the book and those about the Brythonic languages in the second. In the final section Tanner traces the fates of Gaelic transplanted in Cape Breton Island and of Welsh transplanted in Patagonia.

For every step forward, two or more steps back are attributable to centralizing forces; the power of the dominant languages; parents' desire that their children acquire the language necessary for economic success; the influence of schools, churches, immigration, emigration, and tourism; and the loss of diversity in a world dominated

by electronic media. The various narratives become repetitious: not only did the Celtic nationalist movements influence one another; not only is the geography of the languages and the book ironically compact, in spite of the national boundaries dividing it; but the sequences of historical events—of the activities of clergy, politicians, and intellectuals—reflect one another from region to region, as does the way in which affluent middle-class professionals have become interested in languages once used and abandoned by impoverished agricultural workers as if the languages were gentrified houses or decorative antiques. Tanner emphasizes the ironic fact that since the Middle Ages a sentimental enthusiasm for various manifestations of Celtic civilization has accompanied indifference or even hostility to the preservation of the Celtic languages.

Once a language disappears, its recuperation is daunting. An interlocutor tells Tanner that if he were to speak Breton his accent would be as bad as that of Tanner's French (278), and Tanner comments about a Cornish film: "I admired the actors' perseverance, though their slow, slightly robotic tone betrayed the difficulty of wrestling with a tongue whose nuances and inflexions are unknowable" (245). Tanner is a cultural ecologist. As the loss of any species of plant or animal diminishes the earth, the loss of any of its languages reduces human variety and the traces of its human past.

This isn't an academic book. It's more a travelogue, based to a large extent on the author's observations, anecdotes, and interviews and on secondary sources. It needs proofreading. Rage and regret permeate the entire series of narratives. His threnody entirely outweighs the perfunctory expression of hope at the end of the book. ✱