

3 The Celtic kingdoms

Wales • Ireland • Scotland

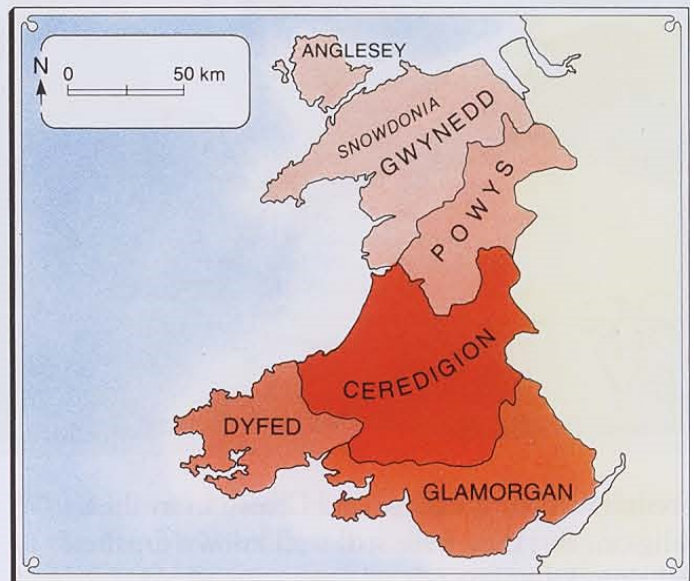
England has always played the most powerful part in the history of the British Isles. However, the other three countries, Wales, Ireland and Scotland, have a different history. Until recently few historians looked at British history except from an English point of view. But the stories of Wales, Ireland and Scotland are also important, because their people still feel different from the Anglo-Saxon English. The experience of the Welsh, Irish and Scots helps to explain the feeling they have today.

Wales

By the eighth century most of the Celts had been driven into the Welsh peninsula. They were kept out of England by Offa's Dyke, the huge earth wall built in AD 779. These Celts, called Welsh by the Anglo-Saxons, called themselves *cymry*, "fellow countrymen".

Because Wales is a mountainous country, the *cymry* could only live in the crowded valleys. The rest of the land was rocky and too poor for anything except keeping animals. For this reason the population remained small. It only grew to over half a million in the eighteenth century. Life was hard and so was the behaviour of the people. Slavery was common, as it had been all through Celtic Britain.

Society was based on family groupings, each of which owned one or more village or farm settlement. One by one in each group a strong leader made himself king. These men must have been tribal chiefs to begin with, who later managed to become overlords over neighbouring family groups. Each of these kings tried to conquer the others, and the idea of a high, or senior, king developed.



Wales and its Celtic kingdoms.

The early kings travelled around their kingdoms to remind the people of their control. They travelled with their hungry followers and soldiers. The ordinary people ran away into the hills and woods when the king's men approached their village.

Life was dangerous, treacherous and bloody. In 1043 the king of Glamorgan died of old age. It was an unusual event, because between 949 and 1066 no less than thirty-five Welsh rulers died violently, usually killed by a *cymry*, a fellow countryman.

In 1039 Gruffydd ap (son of) Llewelyn was the first Welsh high king strong enough to rule over all Wales. He was also the last, and in order to remain in control he spent almost the whole of his reign fighting his enemies. Like many other Welsh rulers, Gruffydd was killed by a *cymry* while defending Wales against the Saxons. Welsh kings after him were able to rule only after they had promised loyalty to Edward the Confessor, king of England. The story of an independent and united Wales was over almost as soon as it had begun.

Ireland

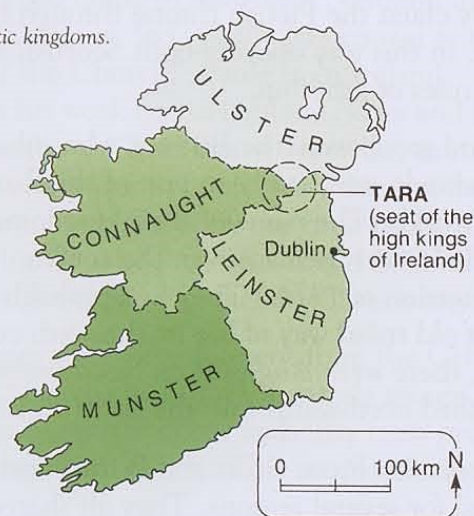
Ireland was never invaded by either the Romans or the Anglo-Saxons. It was a land of monasteries and had a flourishing Celtic culture. As in Wales, people were known by the family grouping they belonged to. Outside their tribe they had no protection and no name of their own. They had only the name of their tribe. The kings in this tribal society were chosen by election. The idea was that the strongest man should lead. In fact the system led to continuous challenges.

Five kingdoms grew up in Ireland: Ulster in the north, Munster in the southwest, Leinster in the southeast, Connaught in the west, with Tara as the seat of the high kings of Ireland.

Christianity came to Ireland in about AD 430. The beginning of Ireland's history dates from that time, because for the first time there were people who could write down events. The message of Christianity was spread in Ireland by a British slave, Patrick, who became the "patron saint" of Ireland. Christianity brought writing, which weakened the position of the Druids, who depended on memory and the spoken word. Christian monasteries grew up, frequently along the coast.

This period is often called Ireland's "golden age". Invaders were unknown and culture flowered. But it is also true that the five kingdoms were often at war, each trying to gain advantage over the other, often with great cruelty.

Ireland's Celtic kingdoms.



A page from the Book of Kells, the finest surviving Irish Celtic manuscript.

The round tower of Devenish is one of only two that still stand at Celtic monastic sites in Ulster, Ireland. This one was built in the twelfth century AD. The entrance is about three metres above ground level, and had a ladder that could be pulled in so that enemies could not enter. This design may well have been introduced after the Viking raids began in the ninth century.



This “golden age” suddenly ended with the arrival of Viking raiders, who stole all that the monasteries had. Very little was left except the stone memorials that the Vikings could not carry away.

The Vikings, who traded with Constantinople (now Istanbul), Italy, and with central Russia, brought fresh economic and political action into Irish life. Viking raids forced the Irish to unite. In 859 Ireland chose its first high king, but it was not an effective solution because of the quarrels that took place each time a new high king was chosen. Viking trade led to the first towns and ports. For the Celts, who had always lived in small settlements, these were revolutionary. Dublin, Ireland’s future capital, was founded by the Vikings.

As an effective method of rule the high kingship of Ireland lasted only twelve years, from 1002 to 1014, while Ireland was ruled by Brian Boru. He is still looked back on as Ireland’s greatest ruler. He tried to create one single Ireland, and encouraged the growth of organisation – in the Church, in administration, and in learning.

Brian Boru died in battle against the Vikings. One of the five Irish kings, the king of Leinster, fought on the Vikings’ side. Just over a century later another king of Leinster invited the Normans of England to help him against his high king. This gave the Normans the excuse they wanted to enlarge their kingdom.

Scotland

As a result of its geography, Scotland has two different societies. In the centre of Scotland mountains stretch to the far north and across to the west, beyond which lie many islands. To the east and to the south the lowland hills are gentler, and much of the countryside is like England, rich, welcoming and easy to farm. North of the “Highland Line”, as the division between highland and lowland is called, people stayed tied to their own family groups. South and east of this line society was more easily influenced by the changes taking place in England.



Iona, the western Scottish island on which St Columba established his abbey in AD 563 when he came Ireland. From Iona Columba sent his missionaries to bring Christianity to the Scots. The present cathedral was built in about 1500.

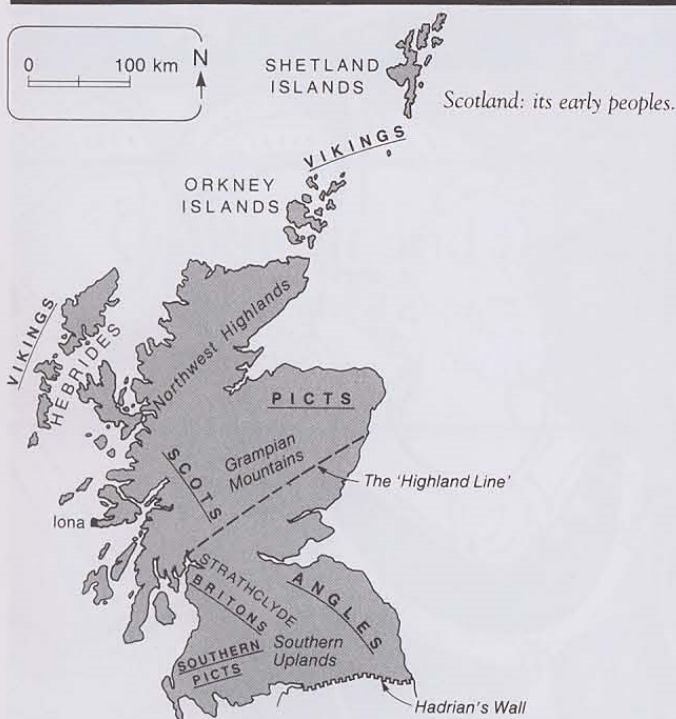
Scotland was populated by four separate groups of people. The main group, the Picts, lived mostly in the north and northeast. They spoke Celtic as well as another, probably older, language completely unconnected with any known language today, and they seem to have been the earliest inhabitants of the land. The Picts were different from the Celts because they inherited their rights, their names and property from their mothers, not from their fathers.

The non-Pictish inhabitants were mainly Scots. The Scots were Celtic settlers who had started to move into the western Highlands from Ireland in the fourth century.

In 843 the Pictish and Scottish kingdoms were united under a Scottish king, who could also probably claim the Pictish throne through his mother, in this way obeying both Scottish and Pictish rules of kingship.

The third group were the Britons, who inhabited the Lowlands, and had been part of the Romano-British world. (The name of their kingdom, Strathclyde, was used again in the county reorganisation of 1974.) They had probably given up their old tribal way of life by the sixth century. Finally, there were Angles from Northumbria who had pushed northwards into the Scottish Lowlands.

Unity between Picts, Scots and Britons was achieved for several reasons. They all shared a



common Celtic culture, language and background. Their economy mainly depended on keeping animals. These animals were owned by the tribe as a whole, and for this reason land was also held by tribes, not by individual people. The common economic system increased their feeling of belonging to the same kind of society and the feeling of difference from the agricultural Lowlands. The sense of common culture may have been increased by marriage alliances between tribes. This idea of common landholding remained strong until the tribes of Scotland, called “clans”, collapsed in the eighteenth century.

The spread of Celtic Christianity also helped to unite the people. The first Christian mission to Scotland had come to southwest Scotland in about AD 400. Later, in 563, Columba, known as the “Dove of the Church”, came from Ireland. Through his work both Highland Scots and Picts were brought to Christianity. He even, so it is said, defeated a monster in Loch Ness, the first mention of this famous creature. By the time of the Synod of Whitby in 663, the Picts, Scots and Britons had all been brought closer together by Christianity.

The Angles were very different from the Celts. They had arrived in Britain in family groups, but they soon began to accept authority from people outside their own family. This was partly due to

their way of life. Although they kept some animals, they spent more time growing crops. This meant that land was held by individual people, each man working in his own field. Land was distributed for farming by the local lord. This system encouraged the Angles of Scotland to develop a non-tribal system of control, as the people of England further south were doing. This increased their feeling of difference from the Celtic tribal Highlanders further north.

Finally, as in Ireland and in Wales, foreign invaders increased the speed of political change. Vikings attacked the coastal areas of Scotland, and they settled on many of the islands, Shetland, the Orkneys, the Hebrides, and the Isle of Man southwest of Scotland. In order to resist them, Picts and Scots fought together against the enemy raiders and settlers. When they could not push them out of the islands and coastal areas, they had to deal with them politically. At first the Vikings, or “Norsemen”, still served the king of Norway. But communications with Norway were difficult. Slowly the earls of Orkney and other areas found it easier to accept the king of Scots as their overlord, rather than the more distant king of Norway.

However, as the Welsh had also discovered, the English were a greater danger than the Vikings. In 934 the Scots were seriously defeated by a Wessex army pushing northwards. The Scots decided to seek the friendship of the English, because of the likely losses from war. England was obviously stronger than Scotland but, luckily for the Scots, both the north of England and Scotland were difficult to control from London. The Scots hoped that if they were reasonably peaceful the Sassenachs, as they called the Saxons (and still call the English), would leave them alone.

Scotland remained a difficult country to rule even from its capital, Edinburgh. Anyone looking at a map of Scotland can immediately see that control of the Highlands and islands was a great problem. Travel was often impossible in winter, and slow and difficult in summer. It was easy for a clan chief or noble to throw off the rule of the king.