In 1996 I visited Neah Bay on the Olympic peninsula for the Makah Tribal Days, a festival which in some ways strongly resembled a Welsh eisteddfod. In a conversation about language, I drew attention to my own status as a speaker of a European minority language. “How many people speak your language?” I was asked. “About 500,000,” I replied. A wry smile. “D’you know how many speak Makah?”

Obviously Welsh is not in the same condition as the vast majority of Native North American tongues. With half a million speakers, it is in the top 15% of world languages. Nevertheless, Welsh is in a much less healthy state than, say, Icelandic or Faroese. There may be fewer speakers of Icelandic, but it is that nation’s first and virtually universal language: all Icelanders speak Icelandic and are likely to continue to do so. Press, television and radio, education, book publishing—all function overwhelmingly in Icelandic.

Half a million Welsh speakers sounds impressive, but examination shows the number to be less secure than it might seem. In 1911 there were a million, a quarter of whom were monoglot Welsh; today all Welsh speakers are virtually bilingual in English from the age of seven, though fluency varies. The arrival of radio and television ran a language boundary through every Welsh home. Outflow of Welsh-speakers from their heartland areas to the English-speaking areas of Wales and to England and beyond is ongoing, while English incomers have settled in large numbers throughout the Welsh heartland, especially since 1960. This has had the effect of increasing the number of marriages between Welsh speakers and non-Welsh speakers, where English usually has the upper hand. Many homes are occupied by just one person, making dialogue confined to the use of the telephone.

The age weighting of the Welsh-speaking population has for generations been ominous. The percentage of 60-year-olds speaking Welsh has for some generations been larger than the percentage of 10-year-olds. That figure of 500,000 speakers (the standard of whose language skills obviously varies widely) represents about 18% of the total population, but in the censuses of 1961 and 1971 the percentage of young people speaking Welsh was in most areas significantly lower than among the older generations. However, as will be seen below, this situation is changing.

Even when Welsh was the only language of the majority of the population (say, prior to 1840), its domains were restricted. Government, law, and industry—the realm of administration—functioned largely in English. Education, other than for religious purposes, was in English. In a world without press, radio, or television, where government rested lightly on the people, this distortion of domains was not too threatening, though it is evident that the great mass of Welsh-language publishing, both books and periodicals, was religious: there was no fiction or drama, and there were very few books on science, technology, travel, or history.

As a language, Welsh has some interesting characteristics, which it has retained in the teeth of English influence. Noun-adjective order and verbal conjugations resemble French in structure; there are many ways of forming plurals; there is no single word for “yes” or “no”; initial consonants change by complex rules (cwch ‘a boat’; ei gwch ‘his boat’; ei chwch ‘her boat’; fy nghwch ‘my boat’); and some prepositions are conjugated. But the pressure of English has forced into Welsh not only a considerable vocabulary of loanwords, but also an ever-growing number of calques for functions and expressions which simply were not relevant in an earlier age.

It is hardly surprising that Welsh is in this difficult position.
Wales is a small country, about 200 miles from north to south, and varying in width between about 140 and 60 miles. It has a long land border with England and therefore with a language which had already achieved considerable world status even before the extraordinary development of American cultural hegemony in the 20th century. Wales was never a unitary state; the 13th-century development of a principality ruling much of the country but owing homage to England was nipped in the bud by the conquest of 1282–83, and from 1543 it had to accept (and did so without protest) the English legal and government system. A conquered country, Wales lacked the institutions which gave Scotland a sense of unitary government even after the 1707 union with England took away that country's parliament: Scotland has always had its own laws and legal officers, its own banks, its own national church, and its own universities and education system. Prior to 1872 Wales had none of these things. All it had was its language.

Diversity of dialects is a characteristic of a number of Europe's stateless languages, such as Breton, Irish, and Rheto-Romansch (in Switzerland). It is a situation where the conservative forces of literacy and the centripetal effect of cultural dynamism are weak. Doubtless Welsh—spread thinly, as was the population, over rugged terrain—might have suffered such dialectal extremes had no common form developed. Welsh, however, was fortunate in two ways. During the medieval period a class of professional poets maintained a common literary language which, though it may have been far from common speech, was uniform across the country, and at its best was rich, vigorous, and varied. This class of poets was in decline by the 16th century; the slow process of anglicisation of their gentry patrons, and their own conservatism, made them less and less popular. Not that poetry disappeared—far from it. Instead, poetry became more popular and less professional, using metrical forms borrowed from common European stock, especially, of course, from England.

It was at this point that history played a rare card in favor of Welsh. Initially it was owing entirely to the failure of Henry VIII and his first wife to produce a male heir, and that at the very time when much of western Europe was being convulsed by the Protestant Reformation. Henry's rejection of papal authority in 1532 inevitably brought him nearer to Protestantism, particularly in allowing the publication of the Bible in English in 1535, only ten years after having forbidden it on pain of death. The Tudor dynasty (with the exception of Mary, who reigned from 1553 to 1558) turned England toward Protestantism. But what of Wales? English Bibles and prayer books were of no use. The familiar (even if not well understood) Latin was to be replaced by Anglo-gibberish! And Wales could be dangerous, not only for its local revolts, but as a stepping-stone for invaders; the French had threatened or actually landed in Wales in 1387, 1405, and 1485. Wales had to be made safe for Protestantism.

Two steps were taken. Wales was placed on a basis of legal and political equality with England by two acts of Parliament in 1536 and 1543. The laws were to be uniform and to be administered in the courts in English. This process was less revolutionary than it may seem; English probably was already the language of process in Crown courts in half of Wales. Wales now had representation in the London Parliament. The acts were generally welcomed in Wales, and Welsh people, undeterred by racist jokes, immigrated to England in increasing numbers, while the Welsh gentry became increasingly anglicised in culture and outlook. The second step to secure Welsh stability was to allow the Welsh bishops in 1563 to secure an act of Parliament for the translation of the Bible into Welsh—the only minority language in western Europe to have its own state-authorized vernacular Bible in the 16th century.

Nor was this all. The chief architect of the translation, which appeared in 1588, was not only a fine Biblical scholar but a master of the best Welsh, the poets' Welsh. William Morgan was able to craft a work which, fundamentally, could be understood all over Wales, especially, of course, as the great majority of the population heard it every week. It set a new standard of richness and dignity for Welsh prose. Welsh books had begun to trickle from London's printing presses from 1546, but it was only when the London-Oxford-Cambridge monopoly of printing was abandoned before the end of the 17th century that the number of Welsh titles began to increase significantly. Presses were set up, first in Shrewsbury on the English side of the border, then, in 1718, in Wales itself. Although the bulk of publications were religious, ballads, almanacs, and volumes of poetry were also popular. Ten thousand—copy editions of the Bible in 1718, 1727, 1746, and 1752 sold well, encouraged by the spread of literacy, especially after the establishment about 1732 of the so-called circulating schools of the evangelical parish priest Griffith Jones of Llanddowror (1683–1761).

Jones, a remarkable educationist, brought together a number of current ideas and, with the help of several wealthy Welsh gentry patrons and the backing of the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, was able to train teachers and support the establishment of local schools wherever the demand arose—and he insisted that in Welsh-speaking areas the teaching of both adults and children should be in Welsh. Although Griffith Jones loved his native language, his movement was entirely devoted to enabling people to read the Bible so that they would be open to salvation. Tens of thousands of ordinary Welsh people learned to read. Not by coincidence, a series of religious revivals began in 1735 which led eventually to the establishment of the breakaway Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Church in 1811, and by the mid-19th century the Welsh people perceived themselves as