

# **A Case for Recognition: The Welsh as the Indigenous People of Britain**

## **Executive Summary**

This report presents a formal and comprehensive case for the official recognition of the Welsh people as the indigenous people of the island of Britain. This argument is grounded in the established international framework for defining indigeneity, as developed and understood by the United Nations and its associated bodies. While the international community has deliberately avoided a rigid, universal definition, it has cultivated a "modern understanding" based on a series of identifying factors. These include historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies, a distinct culture and language, self-identification as a distinct people, and an experience of conquest, colonisation, and non-dominance within a wider state structure.

This analysis systematically demonstrates that the Welsh people meet each of these criteria. The report begins by establishing the international legal context, outlining the principles of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and citing the precedent of the Sámi people in Northern Europe, whose recognised indigenous status within developed European states provides a crucial comparative model. It then presents compelling genetic and linguistic evidence affirming that the Welsh are the direct descendants of the original Brythonic inhabitants of Britain, who occupied the entire island before the arrival of Anglo-Saxon and Norman colonisers.

The report proceeds to document a long and continuous history of colonisation, beginning with the Anglo-Saxon migrations that dispossessed the Britons of their ancestral lands, culminating in the military and legal conquest of Wales by the English Crown in the 13th century. It details the subsequent legal and administrative subjugation through instruments such as the Statute of Rhuddlan (1284) and the Laws in Wales Acts (1535–1542), which systematically dismantled Welsh law and proscribed the Welsh language from public life. The analysis continues by examining the mechanisms of cultural suppression in the modern era, including the infamous 1847 "Blue Books" report and the punitive use of the "Welsh Not" in schools, which aimed

to eradicate the language.

Finally, the report connects these historical processes to contemporary issues, arguing that colonial dynamics persist in the form of resource extraction, such as the drowning of Welsh valleys for English reservoirs, and the ongoing housing crisis driven by second homes, which threatens the cultural and linguistic viability of Welsh-speaking communities. The very survival and revival of the Welsh language and identity, coupled with the political movement for self-determination culminating in the establishment of the Senedd (Welsh Parliament), are presented as powerful expressions of the collective will to endure as a distinct people.

By synthesising this extensive body of evidence, the report concludes that the Welsh case for indigenous status is not only historically, culturally, and scientifically robust but also legally and politically tenable under prevailing international norms. Official recognition is therefore not a radical proposition but a necessary acknowledgement of historical truth and a vital step towards a more just and equitable relationship between the nations of Britain, founded on the principles of mutual respect and self-determination.

## **Section 1: The International Framework for Indigenous Peoples' Rights**

The foundation for recognising the Welsh as an indigenous people rests not on a narrow, popular stereotype but on the sophisticated and flexible framework developed within international law. This framework, championed by the United Nations, intentionally avoids a rigid, universal definition of "indigenous peoples," recognising that such an approach would inevitably be over- or under-inclusive and fail to capture the diversity of indigenous experiences worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Instead, the international community has fostered a "modern understanding" based on identifying characteristics, with self-identification as a fundamental criterion.<sup>3</sup> This approach is essential for evaluating the Welsh case, which, like other European indigenous claims, exists outside the common post-Columbian, oceanic-colonial paradigm.

### **1.1. Defining Indigeneity: The United Nations' Modern Understanding**

For decades, the United Nations and its subsidiary bodies, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), have debated the concept of "indigenous peoples" without ever adopting a formal definition.<sup>1</sup> This deliberate ambiguity is a strategic and principled stance. It arose from a consensus among indigenous organisations and supportive states that a formal definition adopted by states could become a tool for exclusion, allowing governments to deny rights to groups that did not fit a narrow set of criteria.<sup>5</sup> Indigenous representatives have consistently rejected the idea of a state-defined identity, asserting their inherent right to self-identification as a core component of self-determination.<sup>4</sup>

In place of a rigid definition, the most widely accepted and cited conceptualisation is the working description provided in the 1986 study by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, José R. Martínez Cobo. This study identifies indigenous communities, peoples, and nations as those which:

- Have a **historical continuity** with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories.<sup>1</sup> This continuity can be demonstrated through factors such as occupation of ancestral lands (or part of them), common ancestry with the original occupants, and a strong link to territories and natural resources.<sup>3</sup>
- Consider themselves **distinct** from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories.<sup>1</sup> This distinction is manifested through unique cultures, languages, beliefs, and social, economic, or political systems.<sup>3</sup>
- Form at present **non-dominant sectors of society** and are determined to preserve, develop, and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories and their ethnic identity as the basis of their continued existence as peoples.<sup>1</sup> This includes the experience of subjugation, marginalisation, discrimination, and the violation of their rights.<sup>1</sup>
- Exercise **self-identification** as indigenous at both the individual and collective level, and are accepted as such by the group.<sup>1</sup>

This framework, which prioritises the lived experience and collective consciousness of a people over a state-imposed checklist, is the primary lens through which the Welsh claim to indigeneity must be assessed. Each subsequent section of this report will systematically link the historical, genetic, cultural, and political evidence of the Welsh experience back to these internationally recognised criteria.

## 1.2. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)

Adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007, the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) stands as the "most comprehensive international instrument on the rights of indigenous peoples".<sup>11</sup> While it is a non-binding resolution and not a treaty, it establishes a universal framework of "minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of the indigenous peoples of the world" and reflects the commitment of UN member states to uphold these rights.<sup>11</sup> UNDRIP codifies the aspirations and addresses the historical grievances of indigenous peoples globally.<sup>11</sup> For the Welsh case, several of its 46 articles are profoundly relevant, providing a benchmark against which historical and contemporary injustices can be measured.

Key rights enshrined in UNDRIP include:

- **Article 3: The Right to Self-Determination.** This is the cornerstone of the Declaration. It states, "Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development".<sup>9</sup> This right can be exercised internally through autonomy or self-government in matters relating to internal and local affairs (Article 4).<sup>12</sup>
- **Article 8: The Right to Not Suffer Forced Assimilation.** This article explicitly protects indigenous peoples from the destruction of their culture and obliges states to provide redress for any action aimed at "assimilating them or integrating them by force".<sup>12</sup>
- **Article 11: The Right to Practise and Revitalise Cultural Traditions.** This includes the right to "maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures," such as archaeological and historical sites, ceremonies, and literature.<sup>12</sup>
- **Article 13: The Right to Language.** This article affirms the right to "revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures".<sup>16</sup>
- **Articles 25, 26, & 32: Rights to Lands, Territories, and Resources.** These articles recognise the "distinctive spiritual relationship" indigenous peoples have with their traditional lands and waters.<sup>15</sup> They affirm the right to own, use, develop, and control these territories and resources. Crucially, Article 32 establishes the principle of **Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC)**, obliging states to consult with indigenous peoples to obtain their consent before approving any project affecting

their lands or resources.<sup>15</sup>

These articles provide the normative standards against which the historical events detailed in this report—such as the Laws in Wales Acts, the suppression of the Welsh language, the drowning of valleys, and the contemporary housing crisis—can be assessed as violations of rights now recognised under international law.

### 1.3. Precedent in Europe: The Recognition of the Sámi People

The argument for Welsh indigeneity is significantly strengthened by the precedent of the Sámi people, who are officially recognised as the indigenous people of the northern regions of Norway, Sweden, and Finland.<sup>18</sup> The Sámi case demonstrates conclusively that indigeneity is not confined to non-European peoples or contexts of oceanic colonisation. Like the Welsh, the Sámi are a European people with a distinct language and culture who have experienced colonisation and assimilationist policies within the borders of modern, developed nation-states.<sup>21</sup>

The path to Sámi recognition involved a combination of political activism and the leveraging of international legal frameworks. Key developments include:

- **Constitutional Recognition:** The constitutions of Norway, Sweden, and Finland have been amended to acknowledge the Sámi as an indigenous people with the right to maintain and develop their language and culture.<sup>19</sup>
- **International Instruments:** Norway ratified ILO Convention No. 169 in 1990, a legally binding treaty specifically protecting indigenous and tribal peoples' rights.<sup>18</sup> All three Nordic countries voted in favour of UNDRIP.<sup>18</sup>
- **Self-Determination through Self-Government:** The establishment of Sámi Parliaments in Norway (1989), Sweden (1993), and Finland (1973, reorganised 1996) serves as a concrete expression of the right to internal self-determination.<sup>18</sup> These elected bodies represent the Sámi people and act as consultative partners with state governments on matters affecting them.
- **Truth and Reconciliation:** Recognising the profound and lasting trauma of assimilationist policies (known as "Norwegianization"), the Norwegian state established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2018 to investigate historical injustices and propose measures for reparation.<sup>21</sup> This process acknowledges the colonial nature of past state actions.

The struggles of the Sámi resonate powerfully with the Welsh experience. The

"Norwegianization" policy, which suppressed Sámi language in schools and aimed to erase Sámi identity, is a direct parallel to the anglicisation policies enacted in Wales.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, contemporary Sámi conflicts over land and resources provide a striking modern parallel. The Sámi have engaged in major legal and political battles against state-sanctioned development projects, such as the Alta hydroelectric dam in the 1970s and 1980s and, more recently, the Fosen wind farm project, arguing that these projects infringe on their traditional lands and threaten their cultural livelihoods, particularly reindeer herding.<sup>22</sup>

This parallel is not superficial. The underlying dynamic in both the Sámi and Welsh cases is identical: a central state prioritising a national or external economic interest (energy, water) over the rights, cultural integrity, and ancestral lands of a distinct, non-dominant people. The Sámi struggle against "green colonialism" and the Welsh struggle against resource extraction are contemporary manifestations of the same fundamental indigenous-state conflict. The successful recognition of the Sámi, based on this history, provides a clear and compelling legal and political precedent for extending the same recognition to the Welsh.

## **Section 2: Historical Continuity and Ancestral Lands: The Brythonic Heritage**

A foundational criterion for indigeneity, as articulated in the Martinez Cobo study, is "historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies".<sup>1</sup> The Welsh claim to this status is anchored in an overwhelming body of scientific, linguistic, and historical evidence demonstrating that the Welsh people are the direct cultural and genetic descendants of the ancient Britons, the population that inhabited the island of Britain long before the arrival of Roman, Anglo-Saxon, or Norman invaders. This section establishes this unbroken lineage, proving the Welsh connection to their ancestral lands is not a matter of modern sentiment but of deep, verifiable history.

### **2.1. The Original Inhabitants: Genetic and Archaeological Evidence**

Modern genetic science has revolutionised our understanding of British population

history, largely dismantling older narratives of racial replacement and confirming a remarkable continuity between the island's earliest peoples and the modern Welsh. Multiple independent, peer-reviewed studies converge on the same conclusion: the genetic makeup of the Welsh people represents the most ancient layer of the British population, tracing back to the first settlers after the last Ice Age.

A landmark 2015 study from the University of Oxford, which created the first fine-scale genetic map of the British Isles, found that the Welsh form a distinct genetic group. Crucially, the research concluded that the Welsh are genetically closer to the earliest inhabitants of Britain who resettled the island after the glaciers retreated more than 10,000 years ago.<sup>27</sup> The study also revealed that subsequent major migrations, including that of the Anglo-Saxons, had significantly less genetic impact in Wales compared to England, preserving this ancient genetic signature.<sup>27</sup>

This finding is strongly supported by the work of leading geneticists. Professor Stephen Oppenheimer, in his comprehensive work *The Origins of the British*, argues that the overwhelming majority of the British and Irish gene pool derives from an Iberian population that migrated up the Atlantic coast following the end of the Ice Age.<sup>28</sup> His analysis indicates that approximately 81% of the Welsh gene pool can be traced to these Mesolithic and Neolithic settlers, establishing a genetic bedrock that predates the arrival of Celtic languages by thousands of years.<sup>30</sup> Oppenheimer is explicit that later invasions by Romans, Vikings, and Anglo-Saxons were primarily elite takeovers that had a minimal impact on the genetic makeup of the broader population, contributing as little as 5% to the English gene pool and even less in Wales.<sup>32</sup>

Professor Bryan Sykes of Oxford University, a pioneer in genetic archaeology, reached similar conclusions in his book *Blood of the Isles*. His extensive DNA survey of over 10,000 volunteers across Britain and Ireland confirmed that the genetic heritage of the Isles is predominantly derived from these ancient Iberian settlers, whom he identifies with the "Celts" in a genetic, if not linguistic, sense.<sup>34</sup> Sykes's research shows that the Y-chromosome (paternal) markers of later invaders like the Saxons and Danes are found in significant proportions only in specific pockets of England (e.g., East Anglia) and that the overall genetic contribution of these groups was small.<sup>34</sup> The Welsh, along with the Irish and Scots, retain the highest proportion of this original genetic signature.<sup>36</sup>

This body of evidence does more than simply establish historical continuity for the Welsh. It fundamentally reframes the entire narrative of British history. The long-held foundational myth of the English people—that they are primarily the descendants of



Anglo-Saxon invaders who drove out or exterminated the native Britons—is shown to be incorrect. The genetic data reveals that the modern English population is also largely descended from the same pre-Roman, Brythonic-era stock. The crucial distinction is that the population of what became England was culturally and linguistically assimilated by a new Germanic-speaking elite, while the Welsh represent the un-assimilated remnant of that original population. This dynamic—where one part of an original population is colonised and assimilated while another part resists and retains its distinct identity—is a classic feature of indigenous history worldwide. It positions the Welsh not as a different "race," but as the indigenous group that successfully maintained its distinct identity in the face of colonisation.

## 2.2. A Brythonic Britain: Linguistic and Territorial Evidence

Before the 5th century, the island of Great Britain was overwhelmingly Brythonic. The indigenous Celtic people, known to Greco-Roman writers as the Britons (*Pritani*), inhabited the entire island from the English Channel to the Firth of Forth in modern Scotland.<sup>38</sup> These diverse tribes and kingdoms were united by a common language, known to linguists as Common Brittonic, the ancestor of modern Welsh.<sup>38</sup> Historical maps based on Roman sources and archaeological evidence show Britain dotted with Brittonic tribes such as the Dumnonii in the southwest, the Ordovices and Deceangli in what is now Wales, and the Brigantes in the north.<sup>41</sup> Maps depicting the political landscape around 500 AD, at the dawn of the Anglo-Saxon migrations, still show the vast majority of the island under the control of various Brittonic kingdoms.<sup>42</sup>

The Welsh language, *Cymraeg*, is the direct descendant of this ancient tongue. It is one of the oldest living languages in Europe, with a continuous literary and spoken history of over 1,400 years.<sup>46</sup> Linguists trace its emergence as a distinct language from Common Brittonic to around the 6th century AD, a process accelerated by the Anglo-Saxon invasions which physically separated the Britons of Wales from their kin in Cornwall (the Cornish) and in the

*Hen Ogledd* or "Old North" (the Cumbrians).<sup>38</sup> The languages of these groups—Welsh, Cornish, and Cumbric—were sister languages, all born from the fragmentation of the original language of Britain.<sup>39</sup>

The former extent of this Brythonic world is preserved like a linguistic fossil record in the place names of modern England and Scotland. The names of rivers, hills, and forts



deep within what is now considered English territory bear witness to the lost ancestral lands of the Britons. This evidence powerfully demonstrates the process of dispossession and the retreat of the Brythonic-speaking population into the western fringes of the island.

Brythonic/Welsh Element	Meaning	Examples of Place Names in England & Scotland	Source(s)
<i>Caer</i>	Fort, Stronghold	Carlisle, Carluke (Scotland), Carfrae (Scotland)	50
<i>Pen</i>	Head, Hill, Top	Penrith, Pendle, Pen-y-Ghent, Penicuik (Scotland)	50
<i>Cwm</i>	Valley	Cumrew, Cumwhitton, Cumdivock (all in Cumbria)	50
<i>Llan</i>	Church, Enclosure	Lanark (Scotland), Lanercost (Cumbria)	50
<i>Coed</i>	Wood, Forest	Culgaith (Cumbria), Pencaitland (Scotland)	50
<i>Aber</i>	River Mouth, Confluence	Aberdeen (Scotland)	53
<i>Drum / Trum</i>	Ridge	Drumlanrig (Scotland), Mindrum (Northumberland)	50

This linguistic footprint provides tangible proof of the first criterion of indigeneity from the Martinez Cobo study: the "occupation of ancestral lands, or at least of part of them".<sup>5</sup> The Welsh were not migrants to the western part of Britain; they are the people who remained in a portion of their original, much larger homeland, retaining the language and identity of that homeland while it was extinguished elsewhere.

### Section 3: A History of Colonisation and Subjugation

The Welsh experience is defined not only by deep historical continuity but also by a long and well-documented history of invasion, conquest, and colonisation by a neighbouring power. This process, spanning over a millennium, saw the violent dispossession of the native Britons from their ancestral lands and the systematic dismantling of their political, legal, and social institutions. This history of subjugation and the resulting status as a "non-dominant sector of society" are core elements of the international understanding of indigeneity.<sup>1</sup> The colonisation of Wales occurred in distinct phases, from the initial Anglo-Saxon incursions to the final legal assimilation into the English state, creating a pattern that would later be replicated in England's overseas colonial ventures.

### 3.1. The First Dispossession: Anglo-Saxon Conquest and the Loss of Brythonic Lands

The process of colonisation began in the 5th century AD with the migration of Germanic tribes—the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes—into eastern Britain.<sup>54</sup> The

*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a contemporary record compiled from the perspective of the colonisers, provides a stark account of this invasion. The entry for AD 449 famously recounts how the Briton king, Vortigern, invited the Saxon leaders Hengest and Horsa to Britain as mercenaries to fight the Picts. The *Chronicle* notes that after fulfilling this role, they turned against their hosts, sending word back to the continent that described "the worthlessness of the Britons, and the richness of the land".<sup>56</sup> This framing of the native population as inadequate and the land as ripe for taking is a classic colonial trope used to justify conquest.

The *Chronicle* proceeds to list a series of violent encounters in which the Britons, referred to interchangeably as "Britons" and "Welsh" (*Wealas*, the Anglo-Saxon word for foreigner or slave), were defeated and displaced.<sup>58</sup>

- **AD 457:** "This year Hengest and Esc fought with the Britons on the spot that is called Crayford, and there slew four thousand men. The Britons then forsook the land of Kent, and in great consternation fled to London".<sup>56</sup>
- **AD 473:** "This year Hengest and Esc fought with the Welsh, and took immense Booty. And the Welsh fled from the English like fire".<sup>56</sup>

- **AD 477:** "This year came Ella to Britain, with his three sons... There they slew many of the Welsh; and some in flight they drove into the wood that is called Andred's ley".<sup>56</sup>
- **AD 490:** "This year Ella and Cissa besieged the city of Andred, and slew all that were therein; nor was one Briten left there afterwards".<sup>56</sup>

Over the succeeding centuries, this process of violent expansion continued, pushing the boundaries of Brythonic control ever westward. Historical maps from the 6th to the 10th centuries vividly illustrate this territorial loss, showing the once-dominant Brythonic kingdoms being progressively replaced by the Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy (kingdoms such as Wessex, Mercia, and Northumbria).<sup>59</sup> By AD 800, the independent Brythonic-speaking peoples were largely confined to Wales, Cornwall, and the kingdom of Strathclyde in what is now southern Scotland and northern England.<sup>62</sup>

While modern historians debate the precise nature of the Anglo-Saxon settlement—whether it was a mass migration that replaced the population or an elite takeover that assimilated it—the outcome is undisputed.<sup>55</sup> It resulted in the seizure of the most fertile parts of the island, the destruction of Brythonic political structures, and the imposition of a new, foreign culture and language over the majority of the Britons' ancestral lands. This was the first, and most profound, act of colonisation and dispossession.

### **3.2. The Final Conquest: The Killing of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd and the End of Welsh Sovereignty**

While the Anglo-Saxons had conquered what would become England, Wales remained a patchwork of independent native principalities. The final military conquest was executed by the Norman-English Crown in the late 13th century. This campaign, led by King Edward I, was directed against Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, the Prince of Gwynedd and the only native ruler ever to be officially recognised by the English Crown (in the Treaty of Montgomery, 1267) as Prince of Wales.<sup>66</sup>

After an initial war in 1277 that severely curtailed Llywelyn's territory, a second and final war broke out in 1282. This was not merely a feudal dispute but a national uprising, enjoying broad support among the Welsh who were provoked by Edward's attempts to impose English law and administration in the lands seized in 1277.<sup>68</sup> The

war of 1282 became a struggle for national independence.<sup>66</sup>

The war turned decisively in England's favour on 11 December 1282. Llywelyn, having marched south to rally support in the Welsh Marches, was separated from his main army and killed in a skirmish near Builth, at Cilmeri on the banks of the River Irfon.<sup>66</sup> Accounts suggest he was killed by an English soldier who did not initially recognise his identity.<sup>67</sup> Llywelyn's death was a catastrophic blow to Welsh morale and resistance. His head was cut off, sent to London, and displayed on a pike at the Tower of London, a brutal and symbolic act of colonial subjugation.<sup>67</sup>

The war continued briefly under Llywelyn's brother, Dafydd ap Gruffudd, but organised resistance soon collapsed. Dafydd was captured in June 1283 and taken to Shrewsbury, where he was subjected to the gruesome execution of being hanged, drawn, and quartered—the first prominent person to suffer this fate for the newly defined crime of high treason against the English king.<sup>68</sup> To ensure the permanent extinction of the native royal line of Gwynedd, a classic colonial strategy, Llywelyn's infant daughter and only heir, Gwenllïan, was captured and confined to a remote English nunnery at Sempringham for the rest of her life, while Dafydd's sons were imprisoned until their deaths.<sup>68</sup> The conquest of 1282–83 marked the definitive end of Welsh political independence and the beginning of direct colonial rule.

### 3.3. Subjugation by Law: From the Statute of Rhuddlan to the Laws in Wales Acts

Military conquest is invariably followed by legal subjugation, a process designed to dismantle indigenous institutions and formalise the coloniser's control. This pattern is perfectly illustrated in Wales. The Edwardian conquest was immediately followed by the **Statute of Rhuddlan in 1284**. This was not an act of parliament but a royal ordinance issued by Edward I from his newly built castle at Rhuddlan, a key site in his "iron ring" of fortresses designed to pacify the conquered territory.<sup>71</sup>

The Statute was a colonial charter that fundamentally reshaped the governance of Wales.<sup>72</sup> It abolished the native Welsh legal system,

*Cyfraith Hywel* (the Laws of Hywel Dda), which had governed civil life for centuries, and replaced it with English common law.<sup>71</sup> It imposed English administrative structures, dividing the principality into new shires (Anglesey, Caernarfonshire, Merionethshire, etc.) modelled on the English system and appointing English-style

officials like sheriffs and coroners to administer justice and collect taxes for the English Crown.<sup>71</sup> While some Welsh customs, particularly regarding land inheritance, were permitted to continue in a modified form, the statute's primary purpose was to extinguish Welsh legal autonomy and integrate the territory into the administrative machinery of the English kingdom.<sup>71</sup>

The final legal step in this colonial process came with the **Laws in Wales Acts of 1535 and 1542**. Passed under Henry VIII, these acts formally annexed Wales to the Kingdom of England, creating a single legal jurisdiction.<sup>75</sup> The preamble to the 1535 Act explicitly states the intention to "utterly to extirp all and singular the sinister Usages and Customs differing from" the laws of England, clearly framing Welsh traditions as inferior and in need of eradication.<sup>76</sup>

The most damaging and explicitly colonial provision of this legislation was Section 20 of the 1535 Act. This clause banned the use of the Welsh language in courts of law and stipulated that any person using "the Welsh Speech or Language" was barred from holding any public office in Wales.<sup>75</sup> In a country where the vast majority of the population was monoglot Welsh-speaking, this law institutionalised a system of linguistic and cultural apartheid. It made assimilation a prerequisite for social and political advancement, deliberately creating an Anglicised ruling class of gentry who were detached from the language and culture of the people they governed.<sup>48</sup> This clause remained legally in force for over 400 years, until its effective repeal by the Welsh Language Act 1993.<sup>48</sup>

The sequence from military defeat to the Statute of Rhuddlan and finally to the Laws in Wales Acts represents a textbook case of legal colonialism. It demonstrates a clear and deliberate strategy, pursued over centuries, to first conquer, then administratively control, and finally culturally assimilate a distinct people by dismantling their native institutions and suppressing their language. This is a core experience shared by indigenous peoples across the globe.

## **Section 4: The Erasure of a Culture: Linguistic and Social Oppression**

Following legal and political subjugation, a key phase of colonisation involves the ideological assault on the culture of the colonised people. In Wales, this manifested as

a concerted effort to portray the Welsh language and its associated culture as backwards, immoral, and an obstacle to progress, thereby justifying policies aimed at its erasure. This cultural oppression, which reached its zenith in the 19th century, was not a series of disconnected events but the logical continuation of the legal proscriptions enacted in the 16th century. It represents a clear violation of the rights to culture and language now protected under Articles 8, 11, and 13 of UNDRIP.<sup>12</sup>

#### **4.1. "The Language of Heaven": The Antiquity and Resilience of Welsh**

To understand the significance of the attack on the Welsh language, it is essential to recognise what was being targeted. *Cymraeg* is not a minor dialect but one of Europe's most ancient languages, with a rich and unbroken literary tradition stretching back to the 6th century AD.<sup>47</sup> It is the most direct living descendant of the Common Brittonic language spoken across Britain in pre-Roman times.<sup>49</sup> Its history is marked by extraordinary resilience and creativity. The earliest surviving poetry, attributed to the

*Cynfeirdd* (early poets) like Aneirin and Taliesin, dates to the Primitive Welsh period (c. 550-800) and laments the battles against the invading Angles.<sup>49</sup> The medieval period produced masterpieces of European literature, most notably the prose tales of the

*Mabinogion*, collated from a much older oral tradition.<sup>48</sup> The language was used to codify the native laws of Hywel Dda and was the language of princes and poets alike.<sup>82</sup> The translation of the Bible into Welsh in 1588 by William Morgan was a pivotal moment, standardising the modern literary language and ensuring its survival through the religious life of the nation.<sup>48</sup> It was this vibrant, ancient, and sophisticated culture that became the focus of colonial denigration.

#### **4.2. The "Treachery of the Blue Books" (1847)**

The most infamous document of 19th-century colonial ideology in Wales is the 1847 *Reports of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales*, known universally in Wales as *Brad y Llyfrau Gleision*—the "Treachery of the Blue Books".<sup>85</sup> Commissioned by the British government in response to social unrest such as the Chartist Uprising and the Rebecca Riots, the inquiry's official purpose was to

investigate the state of education.<sup>86</sup> However, its remit was expanded to include the "morals and behaviour" of the Welsh people, and its conclusions had been largely predetermined.<sup>87</sup>

The inquiry was conducted by three monoglot English Anglican barristers who had no knowledge of the Welsh language or the Nonconformist culture that dominated Welsh life.<sup>87</sup> Their report was a scathing and vicious attack on every aspect of Welsh identity. It castigated the Welsh working class as "ignorant, lazy, and immoral" and alleged that Welsh women were particularly prone to sexual promiscuity, citing the practice of "bundling" (courting in bed) and late-night chapel meetings as evidence of their lax morals.<sup>87</sup>

Crucially, the report identified the Welsh language and the nation's overwhelming adherence to Nonconformist Christianity as the root causes of this alleged degradation. The language was deemed a "barbaric" and "vast drawback to Wales," an obstacle to moral progress and commercial success, and a vehicle for "backwardness, and obscurantism".<sup>89</sup> The report recommended, as its primary solution, the imposition of an English-language education system to act as a "civilising mission".<sup>89</sup>

The "Blue Books" are a textbook example of a colonial document. They pathologised the native culture to justify external intervention, framing the Welsh in terms used for other colonised populations around the empire, effectively exoticising them as a "primitive" society in need of British salvation.<sup>89</sup> The report caused a furore in Wales, but its long-term legacy was insidious. It instilled a deep-seated sense of cultural inferiority and a "complex about their image in the face of the world," convincing generations of Welsh people that social and economic advancement was possible only through the abandonment of their language and the adoption of English norms.<sup>86</sup>

#### **4.3. The Welsh Not: A Symbol of Cultural Violence**

If the "Blue Books" provided the ideological justification for linguistic suppression, the "Welsh Not" was its brutal, practical application in the classroom. The Welsh Not (or Welsh Note, Welsh Stick) was a token, typically a piece of wood often inscribed with the letters "WN," used in some Welsh schools during the 19th and early 20th centuries to punish children for speaking their mother tongue.<sup>91</sup>



The method was simple and cruel. The token would be hung around the neck of the first child heard speaking Welsh. That child was then expected to pass it on to the next classmate they heard speaking the language. At the end of the day or week, the child left holding the Welsh Not would be subjected to punishment, which often included caning or flogging.<sup>93</sup> This system not only punished the use of Welsh but also turned children into informants against one another, breeding fear and shame around their own language.

Personal testimonies reveal the profound psychological trauma the practice inflicted. The writer and educator Owen M. Edwards recalled his first day at school, where he was given the Welsh Not for shouting in his native tongue. He wrote that he subsequently hated school, was unable to sleep, and came to see English speakers as "a natural enemy".<sup>96</sup> Another testimony recounts the experience of a Mrs. Hughes from Newport, Pembrokeshire, who was frequently beaten for speaking Welsh. Being shy, she was reluctant to pass the token on to others and so often ended the day with it, leading to regular punishment. She eventually decided to never pass it on as a matter of principle, turning it into a "battle of wills" with the teachers.<sup>95</sup> These accounts highlight the humiliation, fear, and alienation caused by this policy.

While historical debate continues over how widespread the practice was, its symbolic power is immense.<sup>93</sup> It was never official government policy but was implemented by schoolmasters and organisations with the tacit approval of parents who had internalised the message of the Blue Books: that English was the language of progress and Welsh was a handicap.<sup>93</sup> The Welsh Not stands as a stark symbol of the physical and psychological violence used to enforce the colonial project of linguistic erasure. It represents the endpoint of a direct causal chain that began with the legal proscription of Welsh in the 16th century and was reinforced by the ideological condemnation of the 19th century. This long-term, systematic effort to destroy a core element of a people's identity is a hallmark of cultural oppression experienced by indigenous peoples globally.

## **Section 5: Contemporary Manifestations of Colonial Dynamics**

The colonial relationship between Wales and the English state is not confined to history. Its dynamics continue to manifest in contemporary issues, particularly in disputes over land and resources. These modern-day conflicts demonstrate the

ongoing status of the Welsh as a "non-dominant" group whose rights and cultural viability are often subordinated to external economic and political interests. Events such as the drowning of Welsh valleys and the current housing crisis are not isolated problems; they are the 21st-century echoes of a centuries-old pattern of dispossession, directly contravening the principles of land rights and Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) enshrined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>15</sup>

### **5.1. The Drowning of Valleys: Resource Extraction and Community Displacement**

One of the most potent and traumatic events in modern Welsh history was the flooding of the Tryweryn valley in 1965 to create the Llyn Celyn reservoir.<sup>98</sup> The purpose of the reservoir was to supply water not for Wales, but for the English city of Liverpool and the Wirral peninsula.<sup>100</sup> The project resulted in the complete destruction of the village of Capel Celyn, a community of 67 people, including a school, a post office, a chapel, and a cemetery.<sup>99</sup> Twelve farms and 800 acres of land were submerged.<sup>99</sup>

The destruction of Capel Celyn was particularly egregious because it was one of the last exclusively Welsh-speaking communities in the region, a heartland of Welsh culture.<sup>99</sup> The decision to flood the valley was made not by local Welsh authorities but by Liverpool City Council, which sponsored a private bill in the UK Parliament. This legislative manoeuvre bypassed any need for planning consent from Welsh local government and ensured the project's approval despite the unanimous opposition of every Welsh Member of Parliament (35 out of 36 voted against it; one abstained) and 125 Welsh local authorities.<sup>99</sup> The villagers marched on Liverpool to protest, but their objections were dismissed.<sup>100</sup>

The opening ceremony in October 1965 was met with mass protests, where the roar of the newly released water was used to drown out demonstrators singing the Welsh national anthem, *Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau*.<sup>101</sup> The event was seen by the Welsh people as a profound act of colonial arrogance—an external power extracting a vital resource (water) from Welsh land for its own benefit, while callously destroying a Welsh community in the process.<sup>101</sup> It was a clear and flagrant violation of the principle of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent.

The Tryweryn flooding had a seismic impact on the Welsh national consciousness. It

became a powerful symbol of Wales's political impotence within the UK and a catalyst for the growth of modern Welsh nationalism.<sup>99</sup> The graffiti slogan

*Cofiwch Dryweryn* (Remember Tryweryn), first painted in the 1960s, remains an iconic symbol of Welsh defiance and a constant reminder of this historical wound.<sup>102</sup> The case of Capel Celyn is not unique; other valleys, such as the Elan Valley in the 1890s for Birmingham's water supply and the village of Llanwddyn for Lake Vyrnwy to supply Liverpool in the 1880s, followed a similar pattern of resource extraction for English cities.<sup>102</sup>

## 5.2. The Modern Enclosures: The Second Homes Crisis and Cultural Viability

The dynamic of dispossession continues today, albeit through economic rather than legislative force. The contemporary "second homes crisis" in Wales represents a modern form of land alienation that poses an existential threat to the viability of Welsh-speaking communities. In many of Wales's most scenic coastal and rural areas—which are often the historic heartlands of the Welsh language—a high concentration of properties are purchased as second homes or short-term holiday lets, overwhelmingly by buyers from outside Wales, primarily from England.<sup>106</sup>

This influx of external capital drives up property prices to levels far beyond the reach of local people, particularly the young, who are forced to move away to find affordable housing.<sup>106</sup> This is not merely an economic issue; it is a cultural one. As Welsh-speaking communities are hollowed out and their demographic balance is altered, the language ceases to be the natural medium of daily life. The result is a steady erosion of Welsh as a community language, threatening its survival in the very areas where it has historically been strongest.<sup>106</sup> The closure of local schools in villages with high rates of second home ownership, such as Aberdyfi (43% second homes) and Abersoch (46% second homes), provides concrete evidence of this community decline.<sup>109</sup> Campaigners argue that this process directly undermines the Welsh Government's own goal of achieving a million Welsh speakers by 2050.<sup>106</sup>

The Welsh Government has acknowledged the severity of the crisis and has taken steps to mitigate it. In a significant policy shift, it has granted local authorities the power to levy a council tax premium of up to 300% on second homes and long-term empty properties, a measure that came into effect from April 2023.<sup>110</sup> This policy is a direct attempt to disincentivise second-home ownership and increase the housing

stock available to permanent residents.

Welsh Local Authority	Second Home Council Tax Premium (2024-25)	Source(s)
Gwynedd	150%	112
Pembrokeshire	150% (reduced from 200%)	113
Ynys Môn (Anglesey)	100%	109
Conwy	100%	112
Ceredigion	100%	109
Sir Gaerfyrddin (Carmarthenshire)	100%	109

The implementation of these premiums demonstrates that the Welsh authorities recognise the housing crisis as a direct threat to the sustainability of local communities and the Welsh language.

The parallel between the Tryweryn flooding and the second homes crisis is stark. They represent two sides of the same colonial coin: the commodification of Welsh land for external benefit. In the 20th century, the land's value was its physical resource (water), extracted via compulsory state power. In the 21st century, the land's value is its amenity and beauty, extracted via the overwhelming force of the market. The mechanism has shifted from state coercion to economic pressure, but the outcome remains the same: the displacement of Welsh-speaking communities, the transfer of control over Welsh land to non-resident interests, and the erosion of the nation's indigenous culture. This continuity reveals a persistent structural inequality, proving that the colonial relationship is not just a historical memory but an active, ongoing process that continues to dispossess the Welsh people of their ancestral territory.

## Section 6: Self-Identification, Determination, and the Path to Recognition

The final pillars of the indigenous case rest on the subjective criteria identified by the

international community: a people's own self-identification as distinct and their collective determination to preserve their identity and control their own destiny.<sup>1</sup> In Wales, these criteria are met through the remarkable survival and modern revival of Welsh culture and language, and through the clear political aspiration for self-government. These are not abstract sentiments but are embodied in tangible institutions, social movements, and political structures that demonstrate the collective will of the Welsh people to endure and flourish as a distinct nation.

### **6.1. The Resolve to Remain Distinct: The Survival and Revival of Welsh Identity**

The very existence of the Welsh language and a vibrant Welsh identity in the 21st century is perhaps the most powerful evidence of the nation's "resolve to maintain and reproduce their ancestral environments and systems as distinctive peoples".<sup>3</sup> Despite centuries of legal proscription, ideological attack, and social pressure aimed at its eradication, the Welsh language has survived. More than just surviving, it is experiencing a significant revival, a testament to the collective will of its speakers.

This revival is not accidental but the result of concerted community and political effort. The establishment of Welsh-medium schools (*Ysgolion Cymraeg*), beginning with a private school in Aberystwyth in 1939, has been central to this success.<sup>46</sup> Today, Welsh is a compulsory subject for all pupils up to the age of 16, and Welsh-medium education is a growing and popular choice for parents, leading to an increase in the number of young Welsh speakers.<sup>46</sup> This educational movement has been complemented by the creation of vital cultural institutions. The launch of Radio Cymru in 1977 and the Welsh-language television channel S4C in 1982, following widespread public campaigns, ensured that Welsh has a strong presence in the modern media landscape, nurturing a thriving contemporary culture of music, drama, and journalism.<sup>46</sup>

The formal political expression of this resolve to remain distinct is Plaid Cymru, The Party of Wales. Founded in 1925 as *Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru*, its principal aims from the outset were the promotion and safeguarding of the Welsh language and culture, and the achievement of political independence.<sup>115</sup> The party's early president, Saunders Lewis, articulated its mission as taking away the Welsh people's "sense of inferiority" and removing the "mark and shame of conquest".<sup>115</sup> From protesting the lack of Welsh broadcasting in the 1930s to its current platform, the party has consistently acted as the political vehicle for Welsh cultural and national aspirations.<sup>115</sup>

The existence and persistence of such a party is a clear manifestation of a collective political consciousness rooted in a distinct identity.

## **6.2. The Right to Self-Determination: Political Aspiration and Devolution**

The right to self-determination is the pre-eminent right of peoples in international law, and the cornerstone of UNDRIP.<sup>9</sup> For indigenous peoples, this right is often expressed through the pursuit of autonomy or self-government over their internal and local affairs.<sup>13</sup> The modern political history of Wales, culminating in the establishment and empowerment of the Senedd (Welsh Parliament), can be understood as a clear and ongoing expression of this right.

The demand for self-government is a direct response to historical and ongoing colonial pressures. The legacy of the Laws in Wales Acts, which stripped Wales of its own legal system, and the powerlessness demonstrated by events like the Tryweryn flooding, created a powerful argument that only through self-government could Welsh interests be protected.<sup>105</sup> The movement for "home rule" that began in the 19th century evolved into the campaigns for devolution in the 20th.<sup>105</sup>

The 1997 referendum that established the National Assembly for Wales revealed a telling geographical split. The predominantly Welsh-speaking areas of the west and north—the language's heartlands—voted decisively in favour of devolution, while more Anglicised areas in the east were opposed.<sup>116</sup> This result demonstrates the inextricable link between the desire to preserve the indigenous culture and the demand for political autonomy.

Since 1999, the powers of the Senedd have been incrementally expanded, moving from a body with only secondary legislative powers to a parliament with primary law-making authority across a wide range of policy areas.<sup>81</sup> This journey represents a gradual process of decolonisation and the reclaiming of indigenous sovereignty, albeit within the framework of the United Kingdom. The ongoing political debate in Wales is now focused on expanding these powers further. Plaid Cymru's current platform includes calls for the devolution of justice and policing, the establishment of a distinct Welsh legal jurisdiction to finally undo the legacy of the 1535 Act, and an independence referendum to be held within the next parliamentary term.<sup>105</sup> These aspirations are the contemporary political manifestation of the fundamental indigenous right to freely determine one's own political status and pursue one's own

economic, social, and cultural development.<sup>12</sup>

## Section 7: Conclusion and Recommendations

The body of evidence presented in this report, drawn from international law, genetics, linguistics, history, and contemporary social and political analysis, constructs an undeniable case for the recognition of the Welsh as an indigenous people of Britain. The Welsh experience aligns precisely with the nuanced, non-prescriptive framework for identifying indigenous peoples developed by the United Nations. This is not a claim based on romanticism or grievance, but on a rigorous application of internationally accepted criteria to a well-documented historical reality.

### 7.1. Synthesising the Case: Wales and the Criteria for Indigeneity

The modern understanding of indigeneity, as articulated in the foundational Martinez Cobo study, is based on a series of identifying factors rather than a rigid definition. The Welsh people unequivocally meet each of these key criteria:

- **Historical Continuity:** As demonstrated in Section 2, genetic science confirms that the Welsh are the most direct descendants of Britain's original post-Ice Age inhabitants.<sup>27</sup> Linguistically, the Welsh language (*Cymraeg*) is the direct, unbroken continuation of the Common Brittonic tongue spoken across the island before the arrival of any colonising powers.<sup>48</sup> The Welsh today occupy a part of their much larger ancestral homeland, the rest of which was lost to colonisation.
- **Distinct Culture and Language:** Despite centuries of sustained pressure, the Welsh have maintained a distinct culture and one of Europe's oldest living languages.<sup>47</sup> The suppression of this language and culture through legal instruments like the Laws in Wales Acts and ideological attacks like the 1847 "Blue Books" (Section 3 and 4) only serves to highlight its distinctiveness from the dominant English culture.<sup>76</sup>
- **Experience of Conquest and Non-Dominant Status:** The history of Wales is a history of colonisation. From the initial dispossession of land by the Anglo-Saxons to the final military conquest by Edward I in 1282-83 and the subsequent legal



subjugation, the Welsh were reduced from a self-governing people to a non-dominant nation within a larger state.<sup>69</sup> This non-dominant status continues to manifest in contemporary issues, where Welsh land and resources are exploited for external benefit and the viability of Welsh-speaking communities is threatened by external economic forces (Section 5).<sup>99</sup>

- **Determination to Preserve Identity:** The survival of the Welsh language against all odds, its modern revival through education and media, the persistence of a distinct national identity, and the political movement for self-government are powerful testaments to the collective determination of the Welsh people to preserve and develop their identity as a distinct people, in accordance with their own cultural patterns (Section 6).<sup>105</sup>
- **Self-Identification:** The Welsh have always identified themselves as a distinct people, from the use of the term *Cymry* ('fellow countrymen') in the 7th century to the modern political movement for independence.<sup>46</sup> The very commissioning of this report is an act of collective self-identification as the indigenous people of Britain.

## 7.2. Recommendations for Recognition

In light of the comprehensive evidence presented, this report concludes with the following formal recommendations:

1. **Official Recognition by the UK Government:** It is recommended that His Majesty's Government formally recognise the Welsh as an indigenous people of the United Kingdom. Such recognition would align the UK with its international human rights commitments and with the precedent set by other European states, such as Norway, Sweden, and Finland in relation to the Sámi people.<sup>19</sup> This would be a momentous step towards acknowledging the historical injustices of colonisation and establishing a new partnership based on the principles of mutual respect and equality.<sup>1</sup>
2. **Official Recognition by the United Nations:** It is recommended that the Welsh Government, in conjunction with Welsh civil society organisations, formally petition the relevant United Nations bodies, such as the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, for recognition of the Welsh as an indigenous people. This would place the Welsh case on the international stage and allow Wales to engage with the global community of indigenous peoples.
3. **Strengthening Rights under the Indigenous Framework:** Official recognition is

not merely symbolic. It provides a stronger foundation for the protection of Welsh rights under the framework of UNDRIP and other international instruments. This includes, but is not limited to:

- The right to the revitalisation and protection of the Welsh language (Article 13).
- The right to self-determination, providing further impetus for the expansion of devolved powers to the Senedd (Article 3).
- The right to maintain a distinctive spiritual and cultural relationship with traditional lands, and the right to Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) regarding any future development or resource extraction projects that may affect Welsh communities (Articles 25, 26, 32). This is particularly pertinent given the history of events like the Tryweryn flooding and the ongoing pressures from projects that do not primarily benefit Wales.

Acknowledging the Welsh as the indigenous people of Britain is not an act of division. It is an act of historical truth and restorative justice. It corrects a long-standing colonial narrative that has obscured the true history of the peoples of this island. It provides a framework for addressing contemporary inequalities and ensures that the future of Wales—its land, its culture, and its language—is determined by the Welsh people themselves. It is the necessary and logical next step in Wales's long journey of decolonisation and self-realisation.

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