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Nineteenth-Century Literary Languages: Politics, Aesthetics, and Print Culture

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This introduction argues that a focus on the multilingualism of nineteenth-century British and Irish literature can lead to new insights about the literary, cultural, and social histories of the four nations across the long nineteenth century. It offers a historical overview of the changing relations between the languages of nineteenth-century Britain and Ireland (English, Gaelic, Irish, Welsh, and Scots, as well as regional dialects). It discusses the particular difficulties involved in studying multilingualism and linguistic diversity in literature, and highlights the potential of collaborative, interdisciplinary research to address those difficulties. The introduction also considers the specific political and methodological questions which are raised by a multilingual and four-nations approach to the study of nineteenth-century literature, and which the articles in this issue of *19* examine in detail.

For readers and scholars working largely through the medium of English, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that nineteenth-century 'British' writers were producing their work in a multilingual context. The multilingualism of the nineteenth-century four nations — the existence of a range of languages alongside English, spoken by diverse communities across England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland — is acknowledged only infrequently in canonical anglophone literature. In Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth*, for instance, the eponymous protagonist finds herself abandoned by her seducer in a village in Eryri (Snowdonia), where the local population are predominantly Welsh speakers and where Ruth's benefactor, Mr Benson, constantly confronts the communicative limitations of the Welsh he is trying to learn from books. Speaking to a servant, 'he blundered out his directions in very grammatical Welsh; so grammatical, in fact, and so badly pronounced, that the boy, scratching his head, made answer "Dim Saesoneg".'[1] Benson's overly formal and poorly pronounced Welsh bears so little relation to the spoken language of his community that it is mistaken for the 'foreign' *Saesneg* ('English'). Gaskell's novel stands out as an unusual example of a canonical Victorian text, written and published in English, that explicitly addresses the coexistence of multiple indigenous 'British' languages and the complexities that result from living in bi- or multilingual contexts. Periodicals and newspapers, popular verse cultures, non-canonical works of fiction, and publishers' lists (to give just a few examples) provide much fuller evidence of the vital presence in the four nations' literary culture — and social life more generally — of Gaelic, Irish, Scots, Welsh, and a vast array of regional 'Englishes'. But this evidence often hides in plain sight: it remains difficult to see unless one sets out with a particular research agenda or linguistic toolkit.

If Gaskell's literary fiction provides an acknowledgement and, in her representation of Lancashire dialect in the industrial novels *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, an embodiment of linguistic diversity, it also participates in the process of establishing linguistic hierarchies, affirming the ultimate dominance of a particular variety of English that is sometimes referred to as 'standard' and that serves as the medium of Gaskell's own narrative. Welsh-speaking communities are incidental to the plot of *Ruth* and, in line with dominant Victorian language attitudes, they are represented as uneducated, isolated, out of time.[2] In 1853, when Gaskell published *Ruth*, Welsh continued to be spoken by a large — albeit ever more bilingual — number of

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[1] Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth*, ed. by Tim Dolin (Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 94.

[2] See Jo Pryke, 'Wales and the Welsh in Gaskell's Fiction: Sex, Sorrow and Sense', *Gaskell Society Journal*, 13 (1999), pp. 69–84 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45186103> [accessed 25 February 2025].

people in Wales and its bordering English counties.[3] Numbers of Gaelic, Irish, and Manx speakers had seen a more dramatic contraction since the second half of the eighteenth century, though these languages did and do, of course, continue to form part of their nations' linguistic fabric.[4] But these 'minoritized languages', together with Scots and various regional dialects of English, were widely seen in the nineteenth century as being under threat of decline or even extinction, the fate with which the Cornish language had met by the end of the eighteenth century.[5] This threat was the result, it was frequently argued, of an inexorable process of linguistic standardization, driven by changes in education, new communication technologies, and the migration of people to cities across Britain and Ireland. The main aim of this issue of *19* is to ask how literature across the long nineteenth century presented the relations between the languages of Britain and Ireland, and how literary writing questioned, reflected, and contributed to the sociolinguistic developments that marginalized (and continue to marginalize) languages other than English.

The articles in the issue are based on the work of the Victorian Literary Languages research network, which hosted workshops at the University of St Andrews, Trinity College Dublin, and Bangor University in 2022–23. Our intention in establishing the network was to bring together historians, linguists, and literary critics in an interdisciplinary effort to refocus scholarly attention on the multilingualism of the Victorian four nations and of Victorian literature. The network's activities were directed by the underlying question of how an interdisciplinary and multilingual framework might change our understanding of each of the three concepts evoked in the project's title: 'Victorian', 'Literature', and 'Language'. The three workshops demonstrated the vitality of current research on Gaelic, Scots, Irish, and Welsh, as well as on English dialect, other languages (such as Italian), and linguistic exchanges within the four nations and between the United Kingdom and the rest of the world, not

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[3] The introduction and essays in Geraint H. Jenkins's edited collection *Language and Community in the Nineteenth Century* (University of Wales Press, 1998) offer a definitive social history of the Welsh language in the nineteenth century.

[4] See, for instance, Nicholas M. Wolf, *An Irish-Speaking Island: State, Religion, Community, and the Linguistic Landscape in Ireland, 1770–1870* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2014); Aidan Doyle, *A History of the Irish Language: From the Norman Invasion to Independence* (Oxford University Press, 2015); Diarmait Mac Giolla Chríost, *The Irish Language in Ireland: From Goídel to Globalisation* (Routledge, 2005), doi:10.4324/9780203504826; Wilson McLeod, *Gaelic in Scotland: Policies, Movements, Ideologies* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022), doi:10.3366/edinburgh/9781474462396.001.0001; Michelle Macleod, 'Language in Society: 1800 to the Modern Day', in *The Edinburgh Companion to the Gaelic Language*, ed. by Moray Watson and Michelle Macleod (Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 22–45, doi:10.1515/9780748637102; George Broderick, *Language Death in the Isle of Man: An Investigation into the Decline and Extinction of Manx Gaelic as a Community Language in the Isle of Man* (Niemeyer, 1999), doi:10.1515/9783110911411.

[5] See Sarah G. Thomason, *Endangered Languages: An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 48, doi:10.1017/CBO9781139033817.

just in the Victorian period but throughout the long nineteenth century.[6] Nonetheless, from the start, we have been aware of the preponderance of certain subjects (especially regional dialects of English) and particular methodologies (primarily the close reading of specific texts) in the network's research, and this is to some extent reflected in the coverage of this issue. Its focus is primarily on Scotland and England, with one article on Wales; and on English and Scots, with one article on Gaelic. This introduction discusses broader linguistic and literary developments, with an emphasis on Gaelic, Irish, and Welsh that may appear disproportionate in relation to the contents of the following articles. Its purpose is to situate those articles, and their detailed analyses of specific nineteenth-century models of literary language, in the multinational context of nineteenth-century Britain and Ireland, and to raise wider questions about linguistic diversity that are applicable across the four nations.

Much comparative work remains to be done on the cultural and political pressures that shaped nineteenth-century literature in different languages, nations, and regions. But there are barriers to the completion of this kind of work, which we hope can to some extent be overcome through further scholarly collaboration. At the moment there is a relative shortage of research on nineteenth-century literature in Welsh, Irish, and Gaelic (and, to a certain extent, Scots) that is accessible to anglophone readerships in the UK and Ireland, and globally. Few scholars have expertise in more than one of these languages, meaning that (except in the work of the relatively small number of multilingual researchers), collaboration and the pooling of expertise are essential to the comparative study of their literatures. But such collaborative research is often impeded by institutional structures. Scholars of different languages and literatures are separated from each other by the divisions between different university departments, subject areas ('English', 'Irish Studies', 'Welsh Studies'), and funding schemes. Institutions that do facilitate interdisciplinary dialogue — such as the British Association for Victorian Studies, at whose conference the first conversations that led to this project took place — tend to operate exclusively through the medium of English and, therefore, may not appear like hospitable settings for scholars of the four nations' other cultures, histories, literatures, and languages. And the problems are exacerbated by the ongoing erosion of the study of languages other than English in UK higher education, exemplified by the University of Aberdeen's decision in December 2023 to cut single-subject undergraduate degrees in a number of modern languages, including Gaelic, and to put staff at risk of redundancy. As this issue is being published, Cardiff University has similarly threatened its School of Modern Languages with

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[6] The programmes of the three workshops can be viewed at 'Events', Victorian Literary Languages <https://victorianliterarylanguages.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/events/> [accessed 25 February 2025].

closure; other universities seem likely to follow suit in the context of a major funding crisis affecting higher education across the United Kingdom. Despite these obstacles, however, we think that the articles in this issue clearly demonstrate the importance of the collaborative study of the multilingualism of British and Irish literature, both in the specific field of nineteenth-century studies and more generally. They put forward a number of intersecting analyses and arguments which will help to stimulate ongoing and expanding research on nineteenth-century literary languages in the future.

Such research requires more than careful attention to the political significance of linguistic details within our objects of study. It also necessitates nuanced critical attention to the language that we use as scholars of the nineteenth century. As Peter Mackay points out in his article in this issue, when 'the language of academic discourse is, in the main, English', the discussion of texts written in other languages (or in dialects of English) is persistently in danger of becoming 'tokenistic', as these texts are 'translated and made available as a resource, in effect, to be shared and compared for broader discussions in Scottish literature or nineteenth-century literature (or whatever the period may be)'. This danger is heightened by the ubiquity of inherently evaluative terms such as 'standard English' and of political designations such as 'Victorian' or 'United Kingdom', which carry a postcolonial weight that threatens to impede inclusion and collaboration. These and similar phrases are used in this issue but, in our view, they are used throughout with care and critical self-awareness. Just as the issue aims to rethink a monolithic 'literary language' as a variety of 'literary languages', it is our hope that it also highlights, and gives due prominence to, the range of assumptions, tensions, and identities that can too easily be obscured by generalizing terms such as 'Victorian', 'United Kingdom', and 'standard English'.

Future scholarship on the literary languages of the nineteenth century will of necessity operate on a range of different scales. The majority of the articles in this issue trace the representation of different kinds of multilingualism in particular texts or the work of particular writers, from Anna Maria Bennett at the very start of the long nineteenth century to Rudyard Kipling and Màiri Mhòr nan Òran at its end. Others consider the interaction of languages or linguistic registers within specific genres or textual forms. Lynda Mugglestone discusses how elocutionary 'Speakers' throughout the century combined excerpts from writers from each of the four nations in an effort to construct a canon of literary value and eloquent speech that was multinational but at the same time normative and 'unitary'. Sue Edney argues that local dialects and the specialist languages of working communities were vital to the reimagining and ongoing vitality of the classical genre of georgic. And Simon Rennie, focusing specifically on poetry written during the Lancashire Cotton Famine in the 1860s, shows

how the subject of adult education offered a means through which dialect poets might register, and resist, processes of educational and linguistic standardization. These articles demonstrate the new perspectives on nineteenth-century languages that can be opened up by diverse frames of reference. And the coverage can be broadened even further, through the offices of larger-scale and quantitative projects such as Jane Hodson's database on Dialect in British Fiction 1800−1836.[7] Tools such as this, used in conjunction with the analysis of specific texts, promise to shed new light on the relations between particular cases and wider patterns of linguistic diversity in the nineteenth century.

The work of the Victorian Literary Languages project is informed by the ongoing effort to diversify and decolonize nineteenth-century studies, an effort exemplified in Sarah Comyn and Porscha Fermanis's edited volume *Worlding the South* (2021); the collaborative *Prismatic Jane Eyre* project; the work of the Society for Global Nineteenth-Century Studies, which launched the journal *Global Nineteenth-Century Studies* in 2022; the 2020 *Undisciplining Victorian Studies* issue of *Victorian Studies*, and the 2021 issue of *Victorian Literature and Culture* on *The Wide Nineteenth Century*.[8] Each of these publications is attentive to the difficulties and importance both of nineteenth-century multilingualism and of the language we use to discuss and label literature. In particular, Jessie Reeder's essay 'Toward a Multilingual Victorian Transatlanticism' in *Victorian Literature and Culture* argues that, in the fields of hemispheric studies and transatlantic studies, 'linguistic pluralism is essential not only to understanding more inclusive geographies but also to more fully accounting for diversity within the narrower geographies we treat as exclusively anglophone.' But, despite Reeder's recognition that 'Britain, of course, was also permeable and multilingual', relatively little of this recent scholarship has examined linguistic diversity within, as well as beyond, Britain and Ireland.[9] As Lars Atkin's article in this issue shows, English's interaction with other

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[7] Dialect in British Fiction 1800–1836, December 2015 <https://www.dhi.ac.uk/dialectfiction/> [accessed 25 February 2025].

[8] *Worlding the South: Nineteenth-Century Literary Culture and the Southern Settler Colonies*, ed. by Sarah Comyn and Porscha Fermanis (Manchester University Press, 2021), doi:10.7765/9781526152893; *Prismatic Jane Eyre: Close-Reading a World Novel across Languages*, ed. by Matthew Reynolds and others (Open Book Publishers, 2023), doi:10.11647/OBP.0319; Society for Global Nineteenth-Century Studies <https://www.global19c.com/> [accessed 25 February 2025]; *Undisciplining Victorian Studies*, ed. by Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong, special issue of *Victorian Studies*, 62.3 (2020), doi:10.2979/victorianstudies.62.3.01; *The Wide Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Sukanya Banerjee, Ryan D. Fong, and Helena Michie, special issue of *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 49.1 (2021), doi:10.1017/S1060150321000012.

[9] Jessie Reeder, 'Toward a Multilingual Victorian Transatlanticism', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 49.1 (2021), pp. 171–95 (p. 178), doi:10.1017/S1060150319000585.

languages globally was to some extent based on practices, ideologies, and hierarchies established through its relations with the languages of Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. In examining these relations, this issue also builds on the recent work of scholars who have set out detailed analyses of nineteenth-century literature in one of the four nations, who have studied literary translations between English and other languages, or who have traced the part played by multilingualism in the history of English at other points, such as the eighteenth century.[10]

The relations between the languages of the four nations were central to definitions of 'Britishness' across the long nineteenth century. In her 2018 essay on the word *Britain*, Kirstie Blair observes that 'in placing British literature within a more "global" concept of Victorian literature and culture, the complexities of national, regional and local identities within "Victorian Britain" have sometimes been subsumed or ignored'.[11] These identities were, at every level, linguistic as well as cultural and political: the effort to construct an Anglocentric 'United Kingdom' that absorbed Wales, Scotland, and (from 1801) Ireland, and that subsumed national and regional distinctions within a supranational union, was reflected in and assisted by the hierarchical separation of different languages, and of different regional variations within those languages. The educational proliferation and cultural promotion of 'pure' or 'standard English', and the relegation of other regional variants of English to firmly circumscribed literary or antiquarian remits, is an important example of this. As the recent work of Ruth Livesey on Victorian provincialism and Matthew Townend on English dialect has shown, nineteenth-century processes of political centralization and linguistic standardization were often closely interlinked, not least in the way in which the implementation of both was often checked and resisted by existing sociolinguistic structures and traditions at regional and national levels.[12] And, as Martin Dubois notes in a recent

[10] Jane Aaron, *Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing in Wales: Nation, Gender and Identity* (University of Wales Press, 2007); Mary-Ann Constantine, *Curious Travellers: Writing the Welsh Tour, 1760–1820* (Oxford University Press, 2024), doi:10.1093/9780191886645.001.0001; Elizabeth Edwards, *English-Language Poetry from Wales 1789–1806* (University of Wales Press, 2013); Kirstie Blair, *Working Verse in Victorian Scotland: Poetry, Press, Community* (Oxford University Press, 2019), doi:10.1093/oso/9780198843795.001.0001; Matthew Campbell, *Irish Poetry under the Union, 1801–1924* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), doi:10.1017/CBO9781107045330; Andrew Murphy, *Ireland, Reading and Cultural Nationalism, 1790–1930: Bringing the Nation to Book* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), doi:10.1017/9781316459898; Annmarie Drury, *Translation as Transformation in Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), doi:10.1017/CBO9781139941495; Daniel DeWispelare, *Multilingual Subjects: On Standard English, Its Speakers, and Others in the Long Eighteenth Century* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

[11] Kirstie Blair, 'Britain', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 46.3–4 (2018), pp. 590–94 (p. 590), doi:10.1017/S1060150318000323.

[12] See Ruth Livesey, 'Middleness: Provincial Fiction and the Aesthetics of Dull Life', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 29.1 (2024), pp. 25–36, doi:10.1093/jvcult/vcad029; Matthew Townend, *The Victorians and English Dialect: Philology, Fiction, and Folklore* (Oxford University Press, 2024), doi:10.1093/oso/9780198888123.001.0001.

article on Victorian poetry, 'dialect poetry's success ran counter to these trends [of standardization], but the ideology of the standard was also what made its celebration of linguistic difference possible.'[13]

A comparable dynamic also unfolded, on a wider scale and to a greater extent, in the relation between English and the languages of Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. As part of her warning that 'writers who identified as Scottish and Welsh, especially if they lived in Scotland or Wales and lacked access to London's resources, are often rendered invisible in scholarship by a "British" framework', Blair poses a question that is particularly relevant to Peter Mackay's article on Màiri Mhòr nan Òran: is 'British' 'the right term for Highland poets writing radical political protest verse in Gaelic?'.[14] One way of answering this question is to note that languages other than English retained a place in the imperial ideology of the 'British' United Kingdom, but it was a marginal and subordinate place.[15] Some Welsh writers and commentators sought to identify Welsh as the original British language, representing an ancient and 'purer' version of Britishness than the dominant English, yet the Welsh language was, more frequently, depicted as a romantic relic of a pre-union past, at best, or even an obstacle to British progress.[16] Gaelic was often categorized specifically as a language of protest, while also being appropriated, as part of the broader Highlandist commodification of Scottish identity in the nineteenth century, as a signifier of the traditional orality of Highland culture. And in another example that is discussed by Paolo D'Indinosante and Katerina García-Walsh in this issue, Scots was consistently presented as the language of poetic sentiment, underpinned by the example of Robert Burns, and of the uncanny.

Although our research network was conceived as a project on Victorian Literary Languages, the contributions to its workshops soon demonstrated that literary multilingualism was a significant and under-researched question across the whole of the long nineteenth century, and this is reflected in the broad chronological scope of this issue. The interrelations between the languages of Britain and Ireland demonstrate the complexities of periodization in the nineteenth century: there are as many continuities as there are changes on either side of the Victorian threshold. Throughout the long nineteenth century, anglophone writers consistently expressed admiration for other languages as expressions of authentic national cultures, even as those languages

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[13] Martin Dubois, 'Dialect, Victorian Poetry, and the Voices of Print', *English Literary History*, 90.4 (2023), pp. 1069–98 (p. 1070), doi:10.1353/elh.2023.a914016.

[14] Blair, 'Britain', p. 592.

[15] Linda Colley notes that 'minoritized languages' like Welsh and Gaelic could serve as the medium for shaping a united British identity, specifically grounded in Protestantism. See Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (Yale University Press, 2005), p. 22.

[16] See Geraint H. Jenkins, *A Concise History of Wales* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 27, 172, doi:10.1017/CBO9780511990090.

were marginalized and minoritized by a range of intersecting social, economic, and cultural developments. The story of linguistic diversity in the nineteenth-century four nations is in part the story of how English was consistently understood and framed as the language of 'civilization' and 'progress', while the 'Celtic' languages of the other nations were classified as objects of romanticization, nostalgia, and fetishization. Nonetheless, there are important distinctions between the early, mid, and late nineteenth century, determined by demographic and political changes, and recorded and enacted in literary languages.

In the early decades of the century, attention to the languages of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales was closely linked to new ideas about the nation state, constructions of the 'folk' as an authentic embodiment of national identity, and antiquarian attempts to preserve oral cultures. This interest is exemplified by the pan-European fascination with James Macpherson's Ossian, by Romantic writers' engagement with the Mabinogi, by the popularity of Burns's poetry and his collections of Scots songs, by the ballad revival more broadly, and by Walter Scott's marketing of Scottish and particularly Highland culture (with its simultaneous occlusion and fetishization of Gaelic).[17] Late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century writers' romanticization of the linguistic and cultural heritage of the 'Celtic Fringe' set in motion a process of rendering languages like Gaelic, Irish, and Welsh other and remote, geographically and temporally, even as they celebrated them. Already, these living languages and cultures were coming to be curated, like museum artefacts, for a predominantly anglophone readership. As Starlina Rose's article in this issue shows, there was more than one way to other the languages of these nations: Anna Maria Bennett's *Ellen, Countess of Castle Howel* (1794) uses the developing tools of the realist novel — specifically, free indirect discourse — both to demarcate and belittle the speech of Welsh characters, and to incorporate it within the anglophone register of the text as a whole. However, at the turn of the century, there was relatively little evidence of targeted endeavours to suppress linguistic diversity. Attempts to spread knowledge of English in the remoter parts of Scotland and Ireland were guided by the assumption that 'progress' would run its course and lead inexorably to homogenization. Road building and other infrastructural developments were part of the same process and, if extension of English proficiency was seen as an inevitable consequence of such developments, there was relatively little active hostility to the other languages.[18] By the 1830s and 1840s, however, linguistic diversity was beginning to be perceived as a problem.

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[17] Important case studies are given in Gerard Carruthers and Alan Rawes's edited collection *English Romanticism and the Celtic World* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), doi:10.1017/CBO9780511484131.

[18] On the relationship between infrastructural developments and efforts to establish a unified British culture, see Jo Guldi, *Roads to Power: Britain Invents the Infrastructure State* (Harvard University Press, 2013).

One of the most striking articulations of the significance of the English language for political union and colonial activity comes not from a four-nations context but from India, suggesting the importance of understanding the literary languages of the nineteenth-century four nations in their global contexts. In his now infamous 'Minute on Indian Education' (1835), Thomas Macaulay, who was not fluent in any of the indigenous languages of India, directly tied his arguments about the supposed superiority of English to the quality of anglophone literature.[19] Similar assumptions also came to bear within the four nations. Though other languages were never officially banned in schools in Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, the increasing nationalization of the school system, alongside greater oversight of educational processes, effectively amounted to linguistic intervention, with long-term impacts on literary production and consumption. The 1847 *Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales* strikingly exemplifies the increasing governmental hostility towards the languages spoken alongside or, sometimes, instead of English in the four nations. The inquiry, proposed by the radical MP for Coventry William Williams, was partly motivated by ongoing popular unrest in the south of Wales, including the Rebecca Riots, the Merthyr Rising, and the Chartist march on Newport. Official responses to these events habitually established direct connections between the uprisings and the Welsh language, suggesting that lack of fluency in English was a major obstacle to social and national cohesion. The 1847 inquiry consolidated this narrative and, in so doing, sparked an immediate and ferocious backlash from the communities whose linguistic and Nonconformist religious practices were presented as barriers to civilization and, more generally, associated with a lack of moral probity.[20] The report was controversial, in part, due to the methods of inquiry, including the predominance of monoglot English investigators and the practice of interviewing in English pupils whose education was undertaken through the medium of Welsh, leading to a distorted view of their knowledge and achievement. Nevertheless, it had a powerful impact on the way in which Welsh and English, and the cultural output in the two languages, came to be perceived throughout and beyond the nineteenth century.[21]

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[19] Macaulay's minute, and its impact on the teaching and reading of literature, has been discussed extensively by post-colonial scholars. See, for instance, Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, 25th anniversary edn (Columbia University Press, 2015), pp. 23–45, doi:10.7312/columbia/9780231171694.001.0001; and Katie Halsey, '"Macaulay's Children": Thomas Babington Macaulay and the Imperialism of Reading in India', in *Postcolonial Audiences: Readers, Viewers and Reception*, ed. by Bethan Benwell, James Procter and Gemma Robinson (Routledge, 2012), pp. 184–95.

[20] For a detailed overview on the inquiry, with a particular emphasis on language, see Gwyneth Tyson Roberts, *The Language of the Blue Books: The Perfect Instrument of Empire* (University of Wales Press, 1998).

[21] See, for instance, Gwyn A. Williams, *When Was Wales?: A History of the Welsh* (Penguin, 1985), especially pp. 209–10. An overview of the cultural response in Wales can be found in Roberts, pp. 209–22.

While the repercussions of the report were far-reaching, long-lasting, and complex, they did not lead to formal repression of the Welsh language as a medium of education. As Martin Johnes documents in *Welsh Not*, Welsh continued to hold a place in education throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, despite a broader context of language change and decline.[22] Nevertheless, such legislative measures as the 1870 Education Act, which effectively mandated and made provision for the primary education of all children aged 5 to 12 in England and Wales, weakened the presence of Welsh as a language of instruction.[23] In England the Act reinforced educational trends that had started to marginalize regional dialects in favour of the 'Queen's English', or at least to restrict the use of dialect to domestic and private settings. Similar shifts resulted from the extension of the Act to Scotland in 1872 and, several decades earlier, from the establishment of the National Education Board in Ireland in 1831. In Scotland, too, the ongoing eviction of crofters and depopulation of the Highlands constituted, in linguistic terms, a sustained attack on Gaelic, a process exacerbated (as it was in Ireland as well) by emigration. The middle decades of the century, then, witnessed a persistent reduction in numbers of monolingual speakers of languages other than English, driven in part (although not exclusively) by active political choices and educational policy.

And yet, the nineteenth century also boasts an extraordinarily rich archive of literary texts, across a wide variety of genres, in Gaelic, Scots, Irish, and Welsh.[24] When the Home Rule movements and National Revivals of the late nineteenth century began to campaign for language rights — for instance, by lobbying for the right to

[22] Martin Johnes, *Welsh Not: Elementary Education and the Anglicisation of Nineteenth-Century Wales* (University of Wales Press, 2024), doi:10.16922/welshnot.

[23] Russell Davies argues that 'the real damage [...] was done at primary school level. Forster's Education Act of 1870 represented the most far-reaching and potent challenge to the future well-being of the Welsh language.' See Russell Davies, 'Language and Community in South-West Wales, *c.* 1800–1914', in *Language and Community in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Jenkins, pp. 101–23 (p. 116).

[24] Hywel Teifi Edwards notes the tension between the extraordinary volume of nineteenth-century Welsh literature and the prevalent 'critical disregard for a significant body of literature written in the teeth of demoralising circumstances as Wales was transfigured by social, economic and cultural changes of seismic proportion'. See Hywel Teifi Edwards, 'Preface', in *A Guide to Welsh Literature*, ed. by A. O. H. Jarman and others, 7 vols (University of Wales Press, 1976–2003), V: *c. 1800–1900*, ed. by Hywel Teifi Edwards (2000), p. vii. At the St Andrews workshop of our network, as well as in a subsequent blog post, lexicographer Olga Szczesnowicz noted that the bulk of the corpus for *Faclair na Gàidhlig* (a project that aims to produce a historical dictionary of Scottish Gaelic) stems from nineteenth-century sources, since 'compared to the previous two hundred years, the nineteenth century saw an enormous growth in the number of Gaelic publications'. See Olga Szczesnowicz, 'Nineteenth-Century Sources in Faclair na Gàidhlig', Victorian Literary Languages, 27 July 2022 <https://victorianliterarylanguages.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2022/07/27/nineteenth-century-sources-in-faclair-na-gaidhlig/> [accessed 26 February 2025]. For an overview, see Niall Ó Ciosáin, 'The Print Cultures of the Celtic Languages, 1700–1900', *Cultural and Social History*, 10.3 (2013), pp. 347–67, doi:10.2752/147800413X13661166397184.

address correspondence in Welsh and Irish or by demanding access to public services in their nations' languages — literary culture also demonstrated a renewed interest in multilingualism. But even before these political movements took shape and gained prominence, the increasing efficiency and productivity of the publishing industry, the affordability and popularity of periodicals, and rising rates of literacy across languages (of which educational reform was a significant cause) ensured that, as the century progressed, more writing than ever before was published in languages other than English.

To some extent, the dissemination of a multilingual print culture extended and enhanced the nostalgic, romanticized understanding of these languages that had been established at the start of the century. They could now be studied, as objects of antiquarian interest, in a wider range of textual forms: grammars, dictionaries, philological studies, anthologies of folk literature. Paradoxically, these texts often had the effect, too, of reiterating the widespread view of these languages as traditional, oral idioms, abstracted from their organic contexts and preserved in the alien medium of print.[25] Yet literature could also issue insistent reminders of the living presence of other languages, reminders which emerged precisely through the tensions that arose when print sought to impose homogeneity on inherently plural and constantly evolving patterns of speech, song, and writing. Victorian print culture contributed to a comparable interest in regional varieties of English, as evidenced by the formation of the English Dialect Society in 1873 and the publication of the *English Dialect Dictionary* between 1898 and 1905. As the contemporaneous publication of the *Oxford English Dictionary* demonstrates, the codification of language also acted in the late nineteenth century as a means of celebrating and reinforcing particular versions of communal identity, and what was true of English was also true of regional dialects and other languages. As Veronica Alfano shows in her article on William Barnes, the language of dialect literature, poised between tradition and innovation, could be a means of expressing both the nostalgia that permeated Victorian understandings of regional linguistic communities — also examined in the richly illuminating close reading of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* in Ruth Livesey's Afterword to this issue — and the ongoing vitality of those communities themselves.

The contradictions inherent within language ideology throughout the long nineteenth century were often recognized by anglophone commentators, but it is surprising, still, how unconcerned they typically were about those contradictions. To give just one example, the University of Edinburgh professor and scholar of Gaelic, John Stuart Blackie, writes in his 1876 *Language and Literature of the Scottish Highlands* that

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[25] See, for perhaps the most famous example, Matthew Arnold, *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (Smith, Elder, 1867).

supposing the language dead, like other departed things will it not acquire a peculiar new interest by this very fact that it is no more? And shall we not then begin to blame ourselves, as foolish mortals so often must, that we made so little use of it when alive? Our wisdom certainly here, as in all other matters, is to avoid extremes. While we do not put into operation any artificial machinery for exciting a galvanic life in a language that is flickering to its natural close, we abstain, on the other hand, from refusing to nourish the mountain child with his natural food, and to check the spontaneous outflow of Celtic sentiment and Celtic song by an artificial cram of Saxon grammars and dictionaries. To teach English to all children of the British empire is an imperial duty; to smother Gaelic where it naturally exists is a local tyranny.[26]

Echoing Matthew Arnold's position in his lectures *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, Blackie here voices opinions that might have been expressed at any point in the century, but they are framed specifically in the terms of the Victorian evolutionary philology that borrowed its assumptions and metaphors from the mid-century writings of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer. Despite his intellectual enthusiasm and political support for Highland culture — he campaigned throughout the 1870s for the establishment of a chair in Celtic at Edinburgh — Blackie is happy to endorse the organic, evolutionary, and degenerative argument that languages can die, and the claim that Gaelic specifically is dead or close to death. His stance depends on a series of unresolved tensions, between 'Celtic' and 'Saxon'; imperial and regional identities; and centralized educational intervention and 'natural' tradition. These tensions go unremarked here, as they do in much nineteenth-century writing, but they are among the issues that this project, and this issue of *19*, in particular, hope to bring to light and to examine.

One of the major aims of the project is to demonstrate the importance of literature as a site for representing and reflecting on language change as well as for affirming and assessing the respective value of different languages and linguistic varieties. It also seeks to shed light on the ways in which nineteenth-century literary criticism and theory contributed to the formation and consolidation of language ideology, sometimes in direct polemics about multilingualism, but often in subtler ways. Will Abberley's article demonstrates that Robert Louis Stevenson's theory of literary composition was shaped in part by the evolutionary model of language which, in the hands of Blackie and numerous other writers, validated the notion that, if some languages grow and thrive, others will die and become extinct. Blackie's reference to 'Celtic sentiment and Celtic song' is also relevant to the concerns of this issue, both because it reflects the

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[26] John Stuart Blackie, *The Language and Literature of the Scottish Highlands* (Edmonston and Douglas, 1876), p. 20.

widespread restriction of languages other than English to the sentimental (in contrast to the progressive rationalism of English), and because it highlights the related association of these languages and dialects with poetry. Six of this issue's eleven articles focus on poetry, and they reveal how — both in Britain and globally — the presence of linguistic variety in poems often voices and endorses established distinctions between sentiment and progress, tradition and modernity, and orality and literacy. But the articles also show how poets frequently used the resources of poetic form and linguistic experimentation to undermine and rewrite these distinctions, to question narratives of progress and standardization, and to present their writing as an embodiment of the value, prestige, and social and cultural relevance of their languages and dialects.

This twofold argument — that literature in a range of languages both reflects and endorses language ideologies and sociolinguistic developments, and resists and reimagines them — is present, with differing emphases, across the contents of this issue. The articles each argue that literary form (including but not limited to poetic form) has the capacity to reshape aspects of linguistic structures, whether national languages, regional dialects, or 'literary language' itself. Carolyn Oulton, for example, considers how an especially small language community (a group of London legal clerks and Dickens fans) used a particular textual form (the minute book of the meetings of their 'Pickwick Club') to develop a mode of writing that was simultaneously social and literary, informed equally by the idioms of their own conversations and by the language of *The Pickwick Papers.* The minute book arguably enacts in microcosm a process that was unfolding across nineteenth-century literature, in which different voices, registers, and languages interacted with, and to some extent redefined, what was understood as 'literary language'. This issue is founded on the premise that close attention to this process in specific texts, and to the parts played in it by multilingualism and linguistic diversity, can suggest new ways of understanding and interpreting the distinct but connected histories of literature and of languages in the nineteenth-century four nations.