

Tradition and Cultural Resistance in Cornwall

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Before the collapse of Roman rule in the fifth century, what is now Cornwall was part of the canton of Dumnonia, an administrative district which had its centre in Exeter.¹ Out of the ruins of Roman Britain Dumnonia, comprising Cornwall, Devon and parts of Somerset, arose as one of several successor states resisting Saxon encroachment, though it was eventually to be absorbed by the kingdom of the West Saxons. Many of the Dumnonian people fled overseas to Brittany where their successors still speak Breton, a Celtic language similar to Cornish.

The West Saxon King Ine completed the conquest of Devon in the eighth century and Exeter was taken from the Celts, though resistance continued and the English were checked at the Battle of Kehil in 721 or 722.² The Cornish King Gereint died in battle and was commemorated by the poet Llywarch Hen.³ Later kings, usually described as “shadowy”, include Huwal, king of the west Welsh, who attended Athelstan’s great court in Exeter in 928 AD, as mentioned in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and “Ricatus”, known only from a single inscription at Penzance, which Philip Payton describes as “a semblance, an echo, an assertion of Cornish kingly independence”.⁴ Though Athelstan fixed the border at the Tamar he was not able finally to incorporate Cornwall into his new English state, and the “echo” continued to sound up to the eve of the Norman conquest in the far west. Although in ancient times Cornwall had trading links with the Mediterranean, it now ceased to exist as an independent political entity, though it did retain a separate cultural identity.

This period of transition from an independent state to a remote colony (though Cornwall’s special status continued to be recognised as a Duchy), took centuries to complete, and initially it coincided with the Cornish age of the saints, whose names still dot the Cornish countryside, though many of them were not themselves Cornish, any more than Saint Patrick was Irish (Petroc came from south Wales and Saint Piran was apparently Irish). Whatever their individual origins these saints were all part of a dynamic world of preaching and prayer which bound the Celtic-speaking countries together.⁵ Many of their cults transgressed national boundaries and at this early stage the dialects which were to develop into distinct Cornish, Welsh, and Breton languages were still mutually intelligible. Hagiographers are notoriously unreliable and they do tend to borrow from one another and from the common stock of medieval narrative, but nonetheless the placename evidence does suggest that Dumnonia, even as its territorial integrity was under attack, did continue for some centuries to play an important part in the religious life of northwest Europe. The English invasion was not a single dramatic event but rather what Payton describes as “a piecemeal process taking centuries of consolidation”.⁶ Within this process certain events do stand out: the Battle of Dearham Down near Bristol drove a final wedge between the Britons of Wales and the southwest, and Arthur’s famous victories, though they held up the Saxon advance, could not ultimately prevent it.

Though the Saxon conquest was irreversible, it was not until the development of the Tudor nation state that Cornwall became a part of England, and even then it retained a degree of constitutional autonomy in the form of its ancient stannary parliaments.⁷ In the meantime its language and culture persisted, though diminished and increasingly isolated from their wider European context: but after a thousand years of persecution and retreat that culture was to flower at the last possible moment. This flowering took the form of a body of drama, written in its own ancient tongue, shaped by its own narrative and history, yet expressing its allegiance to the European heritage from which it had been separated, and from which it was to become yet more radically estranged by the English Reformation. These plays can be divided into two groups: firstly the “Ordinalia” trilogy, the masterpiece of Cornish literature, which was probably written in the latter part of the fourteenth century at Glasney College in Penryn.⁸ This consists of a cycle of plays which took three days to perform in one of the *plen an gwary* or playing places which once were found all over west Cornwall, and of which two examples survive at Perranzabuloe and St Just. These performances “in the round” involved the whole community in a shared experience of faith and culture, and told the story of Christ’s Passion and Resurrection, the “big narrative” which underpinned European civilisation. As Brian Murdoch says:

“The three plays known as the ‘Ordinalia’ are the high point of medieval Cornish literature, the point at which Cornish merges most fully into the literature of Medieval Europe.”⁹

And they achieve this merging in a distinctive Cornish way, in language and setting, topography and symbolism, particularly in the use of “the legend of the Rood”, the Quest of Seth for the “oil of mercy”, not to be found in the English mystery plays and derived ultimately from the apocryphal Gospel of Nichodemus.¹⁰ This may have appealed to the Cornish because of the role played in it by Joseph of Arimathea, who was supposed to have visited Cornwall in the company of his nephew Jesus, and to have been associated with the trade in tin.¹¹ Joseph appears in the other Cornish plays.

In a characteristically Cornish image, the dramatist defines the dual nature of Christ as both God and man:

“Hanter den ha hanter deu
den my hanter morvoron
ben en a’n pen the’n colon
yn delola yw an Ihesu

Half man and half God
Human is half the mermaid
Woman from the head to the heart.
So is the Jesus.”¹²

The main concern of the “Ordinalia” of course is to tell the story of “salvation history”, the story of Christ’s sacrifice to atone for human sin; but it is also concerned to express this truth in a way that made sense to the audience in terms of its own culture.

Though Victorian commentators often mocked these plays for their alleged naivety, this artistic strategy in fact involved a sophisticated dramaturgy. Apart from references to Cornish folklore, the “Ordinalia” plays refer to a number of land grants, such as that of King Solomon to his workmen:

“ha rag why thu’ m kerune
my a re thyugh bosuene
lost uthyel ha lanerchy.

And to you, by my crown,
I will give you Bosuene,
Lostwithyel and Lanerchy.”¹³

The effect of this technique is to produce a curious sense of bilocation: the play is enacted both in the “other world” of the scriptural Holy Land, and also “here” in West Cornwall, which then itself becomes a “holy land”, the land where Christ’s feet had indeed trod “in ancient time” according to local legend. (There is a “Jesus well” near Padstow). This effect must have been heightened by the performance of the drama in an open space, with the involvement of local people, and without any of the illusions of modern stagecraft. The otherworldly story of past events is made to illuminate the everyday world of the present, to offer the hope of transformation to a people oppressed by the weight of history: the Jewish people of Jesus’ time were, as the story of his time demonstrates, like the Cornish themselves, a people living under imperial rule, and the debate within the “Ordinalia” must have seemed relevant to a people which had once had kings of its own.

But on the whole the Cornish writers felt more free to deal with specifically Cornish issues in the saints’ plays where they were not constrained by scriptural narratives and were more free to draw upon local tradition. The two surviving plays (and others are known to have existed) are “Bewnans Ke” (the “Life of St. Kea”) and “Beunans Meriasek” (the “Life of St Meriasek”).¹⁴ “Beunans Meriasek” was written in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, “Bewnans Ke” perhaps a little earlier. Saint Meriasek was remembered in both Cornwall and Brittany and his play is set in the Cambourne area. Kea was the patron saint of Kea parish to the south of Truro; in Brittany he was venerated at Cleder and a few other parishes in Wales and the English West Country may also be dedicated to him

Both plays of course are part of a wider European tradition of drama devoted to the activities of saints, the so-called “miracle” plays. The function of saints in a Catholic culture is to help the faithful to access the grace of God provided by Christ’s death and resurrection as described in the “Ordinalia”, by interceding with God on our behalf and by providing examples of how to live; the two sets of plays are thus organically linked. In particular, the saints venerated in Cornwall are usually the founders of the Christian communities which still bear their names; in that sense, they are akin to “myths of origin”. But these plays also have something to tell us about the Cornwall of their own time, the time when they were written and staged. In Philip Payton’s view for instance, “Beunans Meriasek” was written in the aftermath of the Cornish rebellions of 1497, and is

“... at one level a subversive document, perhaps even a political commentary on the position in which Cornwall found itself in the late medieval, early modern period as the Tudor state developed.”¹⁵

The play, like “Bewnans Ke” features a “foreign tyrant called ‘Teudar’”, possibly a reference to Henry VII, who was deeply unpopular in Cornwall; in both plays the “tyrant” is overthrown by the magical power of the saint. The “Life of St. Kea” also contains a long section dealing with King Arthur, the only surviving text of its kind in Cornish. Though most of this material is derived from Geoffrey of Monmouth, there are distinct traces of an older local tradition and themes of direct relevance to contemporary Cornwall. Arthur is driven by the need to preserve British independence by denying the unhistorical Roman emperor Lucius the tribute which he demands:

“Lavar the’th erluth, cosyn:
me re leverys treb flows,
rag an tribute a wovyn
na goyth nahen war nebes oes
then stat a Rome
mars e ben ef dybynnys.
mar goyth pan eur govynnys
me a’n danfen thy yugs,
by the dredful day od dom!
yea, bys ryken
nyn a nahen
rag Bretayn veet
theth Arluth mas

Tell your lord, my friend:
I have said, without trifling,
as for the tribute he demands
there does not fall for some time now
to the state of Rome
anything other than his decapitated head.
Since it is insolently demanded,
I shall send it thither indeed.
By the dreadful day of doom!
Yea, for ever
nothing else will go
from Great Britain
to the goodly lord.”¹⁶

The Cornish rising had been provoked by Henry’s attempt to impose taxes on Cornwall to fund his war against the Scots. Throughout the king is called *Arthut cornow*: Arthur the Cornishman, *flowran an bys/a Gyllywyck*, “the flower of the world/from Kelliwic” (Arthur’s Cornish base). Rather pointedly for a Cornish audience, a stage direction refers to him as *Arthurus Rex Britannie: quis nunc Anglia dicitur*.¹⁷ In a curious image Lucius praises his own ability to inspire fear in his enemies, and claims:

“na vith mab den na’ m dowtya
na whath gravlost yu dan dor.

There will be no man who does not fear me,
not even any goblin under the earth.”¹⁸

While the “Ninth Legate” addresses the emperor thus:

“Eth as floran
drys peh i’n noer.
An wothygan
in dan an doer
a’th worth heb mar

You are the flower
beyond all men in the earth,
the goblins
under the earth
revere you without doubt.”¹⁹

These comments are part of a series of conventionally hyperbolic compliments to Lucius which serve dramatically to emphasise the obsequiousness of the legates and the magnitude of Arthur’s achievement in defeating him, as he eventually does, of course. One of the words used here, *krafllost*, is glossed by Thomas and Williams as “subterranean goblin or demon”, and the other, *bothiak*, seems not to have been known before the discovery of the “Ke” manuscript. Ken George gives *kravlost* literally: “scrape tail” as “knocker, a mine-spirit”. This does imply the longevity of the Cornish belief in such beings, many of whose stories were collected by Robert Hunt in the 1840s.

The Cornish knockers were relatives of the German *kobolds* but much more friendly. They were supposed to be the spirits of Jewish people who were condemned to work in the mines as a punishment for their alleged complicity in the crucifixion of Christ. They and their kindred had many names – *buccas*, *gathorns*, *nickers*, *nuggles* and *spriggans* among them – and the distinctions between them are not always clear.²⁰ Unlike the *kobolds* they were generally friendly to the miners when treated well. Hunt tells the story of Trenwith and his son, two miners who could communicate with the knockers:

“they told the little miners that they would save them all the trouble of breaking down the ore that they would bring ‘to grass’ for them, one tenth of the richest stuff, and leave it properly dressed, if they would quietly give them up this end (of the mine). An agreement of some kind was come to. The old man and his son took the pitch, and in a short time realised much wealth. The old man never failed to keep his bargain, and leave the tenth of the ore for his friends. He died. The son was avaricious and selfish. He sought to cheat the knockers, but he ruined himself by so doing. The lode failed; nothing answered with him: disappointed, he took to drink, squandered all the money his father had made, and died a beggar.”²¹

As often in folktales, generosity and fair dealing are rewarded, while duplicity and greed are punished, and this of course affirms the solidarity which small communities need in order to survive: also, in the dangerous life of the miner it was important to avoid the hostility of the natural and supernatural forces which might either sustain or endanger life. The claim that the Emperor Lucius himself can command such powers is recklessly grandiose and in the event his attempt to subdue the British and “Arthur the Cornishman” proves as vain as would any attempt to subdue the knockers, and the Emperor’s head is sent back to Rome in ironic tribute. The scene in which these metaphors are used follows the one in which Kea confronts the tyrant Teudar, with an intervening scene emphasising Arthur’s greatness; and it picks up the same theme, that of unjust foreign rule, a theme which in the Cornwall of the time could only be tackled in subtly encoded ways. The language of the play did of course offer some protection, since those who spoke Cornish would by definition be sympathetic to the play’s concerns; it is interesting that in the English Civil War the language was used as a royalist “secret code”, since it was unintelligible to the parliamentary forces.

Despite the influence of medieval Arthurian romance on this aspect of the play there is evidently a surviving tradition of a Cornish Arthur fighting for Celtic independence against foreign encroachment, and the debate on political legitimacy in the play recalls the similar debate in the “Ordinalia”. The play also records Cornish disaffection with foreign rule in the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, for which there were many reasons, culminating in the 1497 rising led by Michael Joseph An Gof and Thomas Flamank.²² At the time tin yields were in decline and living standards falling, new regulations governing the industry were resented and Henry responded by suspending stannary government in Cornwall. On top of this, heavy new taxes were imposed to finance a war against Scotland. The Cornish rose in rebellion and crossed the Tamar in force, marching across southern England before the government could respond. Eventually though the king raised an army and the Cornish were overwhelmed at Deptford. An Gof and Flamank were hanged, drawn, and quartered at Tyburn though the remaining Cornish were treated leniently. Cornwall though remained uncowed, and supported Perkin Warbeck’s attempt to seize the throne later that same year.

But this did not mark the end of Cornish resistance, or Tudor persecution. Glasney College, a focus for Cornish culture and language, was suppressed in the 1540s, images were destroyed in the churches, and the use of the English Book of Common Prayer was enforced. The Cornish drew up a petition declaring that the new Anglican service was

“like a Christmas game: ... we will have our old Service of Matins, Mass, Evensong and Procession in Latin, as it was before. And so we the Cornish men (whereof certain of us understand no English) utterly refuse this new English.”²³

This is a powerful statement of Cornwall’s attachment to its faith and traditions, a statement which went unheard, with tragic consequences. Disturbances at Marazion and Penryn rapidly spread to Bodmin, and under the leadership of local gentry and priests the rebels marched into Devon and besieged Exeter. They were driven back into Cornwall by the royal army commanded by Lord Russell, and the rebel leaders were captured and executed at Tyburn. The invading army enacted a terrible vengeance. Cornwall was “pacified” by Sir Anthony

Kingston: the Tudor state was stronger now than it had been in 1497 and determined to crush all resistance from the “Celtic fringe”. Kingston carried out his task with relish and sadistic humour, killing four thousand rebels, about ten percent of the Cornish population. Jesuits were imprisoned and tortured, parish priests hanged from their own bell towers. The Cornish language was strongly associated with Catholicism and there is some evidence that Cornish-speaking communities were singled out for particularly vicious treatment, to help unify the new Tudor nation-state by eradicating alternative cultures and imposing homogeneity. Some have gone so far as to label these events “a holocaust”.²⁴

Apart from the cost in human life, this repression was also a disaster for Cornish culture. The Cornish language drama was suppressed, and the closure of Glasney, where that drama was written, effectively put an end to the Cornish literary tradition. The compulsory imposition of English as the language of worship was a major attack on both Cornish Catholicism and the Cornish language. In fact a Cornish language prayer-book would have been feasible, because a bible in the Cornish language is now known to have existed in the sixteenth century. It has since been lost, but may yet turn up.²⁵ The language was now driven from the public space and consigned to domestic use for its few remaining years, though it did linger on in the far west until the eve of industrialisation in the eighteenth century.

But Cornish resistance had not even yet ended. In the Civil War the Cornish army functioned separately from the rest of the royalist forces, and enabled Sir Richard Grenville to propose setting up an independent state in Cornwall, under the crown. At one point Grenville sealed the Duchy off from England by seizing the bridges over the Tamar. In Mark Stoye’s words: “clearly, Grenville was now preparing to defend Cornwall against the world”.²⁶

Sadly, Grenville’s proposal came to nothing, and Cornwall’s destiny as a southwestern English county seemed assured. After the Civil War, it became increasingly integrated into the British nation-state and cut off from its Celtic and European Catholic neighbours, relationships which had been an important part of its historic identity.

The consolidation of the British nation-state created the conditions required to make Britain the world’s first industrial economy, and Cornwall was one of the earliest and most important parts of that emerging economy, with her tin mines, her brief dominance of the world copper market and her extraordinary talent for engineering, through the work of Richard Trevithick, Humphrey Davy, and the thousands of miners and engineers who made the wheels turn all around the world.²⁷ But the collapse of copper brought recession and hunger, followed by large-scale unemployment and emigration. Despite this, industrialism combined with Methodism, which gave Cornwall a new form of expression for its deep-seated spirituality, did produce what Alan Kent describes as “increased confidence in Cornish identity”, though at a considerable cost in suffering and dislocation.²⁸ One consequence was a new interest in the folklore of Cornwall.

This was itself part of a wider European development. The Grimm brothers began publishing their innovative collections in 1812, and Crofton Croker’s Irish tales first appeared in 1825.²⁹ Howells’ *Cambrian Superstitions* came out in 1831, and Campbell of Islay began

his great Highland collection in 1839.³⁰ Everywhere the collection of folktales was spurred by a growing sense that traditions were dissolving under the pressure of industrialisation and the cultural homogeneity of the powerful nation-state, and that they needed to be preserved while there was still time; this perception led to the formation of the Folklore Society in 1878. In England though the first of the county fieldworkers was Robert Hunt in Cornwall, who started collecting stories in the 1930s, though they were not published for another thirty years.³¹ In 1829 Hunt embarked on a ten month walking tour of Cornwall to collect “every existing tale of the ancient people”, though he later added material collected by others to complete his *Popular Romances*. On his journey he met “droll tellers”, who were itinerant storytellers apparently specialising in long, episodic stories interspersed with songs, which were specifically designed to reflect local circumstances. One would like to know more about the techniques used by these men, but it is clear that their audience consisted mostly of simple country people. Both Hunt and Bottrell collected stories from ordinary working men and women, but also from “gentlemen” and educated correspondents.

This process was of course ambivalent. It represented a desire to preserve and assert the value of those minority traditions which were felt to be passing, though the collectors themselves were educated people, trained in the dominant culture, who felt a need to distance themselves from the “superstitious” beliefs of the subject races to which they themselves usually belonged, even as they recorded them. Some were frankly contemptuous, like Howells in his *Cambrian Superstitions*:

“We rejoice that the beatific rays of wisdom have gleamed through the dark clouds of ignorance and superstition, and the march of intellect has made its appearance even amongst the mountains and valleys of Wales. Almost every peasant can now read, and no longer dreads passing over his threshold in the dark for fear of coming into contact with ‘the shadowy shapes of the unknown’.”³²

This unpleasant combination of smugness and self-hatred was characteristic of the age. Collectors who identified with their material would sometimes adopt a less judgemental, more apologetic tone. Patrick Kennedy for instance apologised for his “legendary fictions” which were “artless in structure, improbable in circumstance and apparently devoid of purpose”.³³ His collection was inspired by “the horrid thought” that the memory of the tales heard in boyhood would be irrecoverably lost, though if they were as puerile as he makes them out to be it would not seem to be much of a loss. The folklore writers were torn between their love of their own culture and their need to gain a readership in the dominant culture. The Cornish collectors, who had perhaps less internalised self-hatred to manage, were less apologetic but driven by similar motives:

“In a very few years these interesting traditions would have been lost, unless they had been preserved in some such form as the present volume is intended to supply; since modern customs, and the diffusion of the local news of the day, are superseding, in even the most remote districts, the semi-professional droll-tellers.”³⁴

In a paradox that often characterised responses to the Victorian transformation, the modern science of folklore collection was used to preserve the fragments of the old world, much as Stanhope Forbes at Newlyn used the new “plein-air” technique to record the passing lifestyles of the Cornish fishing communities.³⁵

Both Hunt and Bottrell make the important point that Cornwall and particularly west Penrith had until recently been protected from change by its geographical isolation, but that improved transport and communications now made it vulnerable to outside influences. Both authors too emphasise the distinctively Cornish qualities of their collections.

It has of course become a fixed convention that folk beliefs are always on the point of extinction: in their book of 2003, a hundred and forty years after Hunt, Tony Deane and Tony Shaw also emphasise Cornwall’s “otherness” and the fragility of its culture:

“This same introverted character provides a natural catalyst for the wealth of superstition and lore that exists in the area and a real concern is that this character may be gradually diminishing.”³⁶

This trope works on different levels. In the most literal sense it is clearly true. Little of the material collected by Hunt could be found today in west Cornwall, nor are the processes of oral transmission as robust now as they were then. And of course what Hunt collected can only have been a fragment of what must once have existed in the Cornish language. But it also expresses deep anxieties about change, perhaps fundamentally a fear of death but also associated with capitalism, a system which is based on permanent change, as distinct from traditional societies which emphasise continuity, even as it emphasises the superiority of modernity and the inferiority of the past. Hunt’s stories were an expression of Cornish identity at a point when it was changing beyond all recognition. They also served the needs of the emerging tourist trade by providing a body of material which was distinctly Cornish. Both Hunt and Bottrell focus on giants, piskies, mermaids, stories associated with features in the landscape and with the demon Tregeagle etc., that is, on stories which are distinctively, if not exclusively Cornish, and to that extent their work expresses a traditional sense of identity, albeit an identity which was currently being replaced by a new industrial one. In a commercial context, Cornwall’s folklore has contributed to its marketable identity as a romanticised periphery, and the titles of the folklore collections (*Popular Romances of the West of England*, *Traditions and Hearthsides Stories of West Cornwall*) both suggest a non-threatening combination of liminality and cosiness which is sufficiently different to be interesting yet somehow familiar. Though altered in some respects, this perception of Cornwall still persists.

Stories concerning the saints had survived into the nineteenth century and still evidently continue to provide a focus for the communities to which they had given their names. In 1886 Margaret Courtney wrote that Cornish people have

“from time immemorial made it a practice to meet at each other’s houses to celebrate their feasts and saints’ days. Since ‘there are more saints in Cornwall than there are in heaven’ these friendly gatherings must necessarily be numerous.

Each parish has its own particular saint to which its church is dedicated. The feasts held in their honour, probably dating from the foundation of the churches, are kept on the nearest Sunday and Monday to dedication day ...³⁷

Perhaps they also preserved a faint memory that Cornwall had once been part of a wider Celtic and European world. Another Cornish tradition, the legend of King Arthur, had clearly fared less well over the centuries. That it had survived into the late Middle Ages as an embodiment of Cornish aspiration is demonstrated by the Arthurian sections of “Bewnans Ke”, even though the traditional material had been contaminated by Geoffrey of Monmouth’s immensely popular literary fantasies, but by the 1840s Hunt could find little of Arthurian interest. As he says himself:

“The scarcity of traditions connected with King Arthur is not a little remarkable in Cornwall, where he is said to have been born, and where we believe him to have been killed.”³⁸

He did give legendary accounts of Arthur’s battles with the Danes and of the slaughter of Vellan-Druchar, which may be a distorted memory of one of his twelve battles against the Saxon invaders.³⁹ Hunt links the slaughter of these “Danes” to the tradition that Arthur did not die but was transformed into a chough, the national bird of Cornwall. He illustrates this tradition by quoting a letter from one Edgar MacCulloch:

“My father, who died almost two years since, at the age of eighty, spent a few years of his youth in the neighbourhood of Penzance. One day he was walking along Marazion Green with his fowling piece on his shoulder, he saw a raven at a distance and fired at it. An old man who was near immediately rebuked him that he ought on no account to have shot at a raven, for that King Arthur was still alive in the form of that bird.”⁴⁰

Hunt places this anecdote in the context of an ancient tradition that Arthur never died and would return at the time of his people’s greatest need: because of this the chough has become a symbol of resurgent Cornish cultural identity!⁴¹ This belief was current in Bodmin in the twelfth century, when an old man was involved in a violent argument with foreign visitors who had denied Arthur’s immortality,⁴² and according to Hunt it evidently survived into the nineteenth century and perhaps beyond. Though contrary to popular belief and the tourist industry, Tintagel has no real Arthurian connections.⁴³ Arthurian symbolism was later incorporated into the renaissance of Cornish culture which began around the end of the nineteenth century.

In the dramatic ritual of the Cornish Gorredd ceremony, which was probably written by Robert Morton Nance, the Deputy Grand Bard declares:

“An als whath Arthur a with,
yn corf Palares yn few
y whas whath Arthur a bew
myghtern a ve hag a vyth.

An vyrth oll: Nyns yu marrow myghtern Arthur.

Still Arthur watches our shore
in guise of a chough there flown,
His kingdom he keeps his own
Once king, to be king once more,
All the bards: King Arthur is not dead.”⁴⁴

The collection and popularising of Cornish folklore was paralleled by the editing and publication of what remained of medieval Cornish literature, and though Cornish was to be little more than a footnote to the wider discipline of Celtic studies, which became established in the later nineteenth century and which concentrated on philology and on the larger literatures of Wales and Ireland, the Cornish texts did make possible the language revival initiated by Henry Jenner with his 1904 *Handbook of the Cornish Language*.⁴⁵ The materials Jenner and his colleagues had to work with were very limited: it was as if the English language had died out in the eighteenth century, and had to be reconstructed in the twentieth century from a few fragments of one of the *Canterbury Tales*. Though a few more Cornish texts have turned up since then, and others undoubtedly remain to be found, the situation has not improved much. Some of the Revivalists, notably Morton Nance in his construction of Unified Cornish, filled the undoubted gaps with borrowings from other Celtic languages, but the phonetics of Cornish were particularly difficult to reconstruct. These issues generated much conflict in later years, conflict which eventually produced three rival forms of revived Cornish.⁴⁶ This has made it more difficult to establish the spoken language and has created confusion, as well as wasting scarce resources.

But although the number of people who can write or converse fluently in one or other variety of Cornish is quite small, the language has found a place in Cornish life, through language classes, folk music and Cornish language weekends, campaigns for Cornish road signs, the naming of children and houses and the like, despite continual problems with recognition and resourcing from central government. The language is now firmly identified with Cornish identity, which has also been affirmed politically in support for Mebyon Kernow – the Party for Cornwall, and the campaign for a Cornish Senate. As with all small countries appropriated by larger nation-states, identity in Cornwall is problematic. Many people are not well-informed about their traditional culture, which is outgunned by Anglocentric mass media, and many people identify with the dominant culture for economic reasons or because of a sense of inferiority (some of the early Celtic folklorists shared this dilemma). In April 2014 the British Government was compelled to recognise the existence of the Cornish through the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, but by 2016 it was already being criticised for failing to meet its obligations.⁴⁷

It has not been possible to do justice to such a huge topic in the space available, but I hope that enough has been said to provide at least an outline of the ways in which Cornish tradition has helped to sustain identity across centuries of persecution and marginalisation.

Notes

1. P. Payton, *Cornwall: A History*, Fowey, Cornwall Editions, 2004, p. 50.
2. See Della Kooke, "Saxon Conquest and Settlement", in R. Kain, and W. Ravenhill, eds, *Historical Atlas of South West England*, Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 1999.
3. Payton, 2004, p. 50.
4. Payton, 2004, p. 57.
5. See Donald Attwater, *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1965.
6. Payton, 2004, p. 67.
7. See G. R. Lewis, *The Stannaries*, Truro, D. Bradford Barton, 1908.
8. See Jane A. Bakere, *The Cornish Ordinalia: A Critical Study*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1980.
9. B. Murdoch, *Cornish Literature*, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 1993, p. 41.
10. See F. E. Halliday, *The Legend of the Rood*, London, Duckworth, 1955, and Esther Caster Quinn, *The Quest of Seth for the Oil of Life*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1962.
11. See Lionel Smithett Lewis, *St. Joseph of Arimathea at Glastonbury or The Apostolic Church of Britain*, London, A. R. Mowbray, 1937, and C. C. Dobson, *Did Our Lord Visit Britain as they say in Cornwall and Somerset?*, Glastonbury, Avalon Press, 1936.
12. E. Norris, *The Ancient Cornish Drama*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1859, pp. 360-361.
13. Norris, pp. 182-183, and see Alan Kent, *The Literature of Cornwall*, Bristol, Redcliffe Press, 2000, pp. 36-37.
14. See Whitley Stokes, *The Life of St. Meriasek, Bishop and Confessor*, London, Trübner, 1872, and Graham Thomas, and Nicholas Williams, eds, *Bewnans Ke, The Life of St. Kea*, Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 2007.
15. Payton, 2004, p. 97.
16. Thomas and Williams, 2007, pp. 212-214.
17. Thomas and Williams, 2007, p. 136.
18. Thomas and Williams, 2007, p. 169.
19. Thomas and Williams, 2007, p. 181.
20. See Katharine Briggs, *A Dictionary of Fairies*, London, Penguin, 1976, p. 255.
21. Robert Hunt, *Popular Romances of the West of England*, 3rd edn, London, Chatto and Windus, 1881, pp. 308-309.
22. Payton, 2004, pp. 107-110.
23. Payton, 2004, p. 123.
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