Cornwall, Kenneth Grahame, and the Victorian Mind, Part 1

BRENDAN McMAHON

The early years

Kenneth Grahame (1859-1932) is widely known as one of the greatest children's writers of all time. Though born in Edinburgh he grew up in Oxford and went to school there, though he never attended the university. He went to work as a clerk in the Bank of England and reached the high rank of Secretary in 1898.[1] He began to write essays under the tutelage of W. E. Henley and contributed to the notorious *Yellow Book*. *The Golden Age* (1895) and *Dream Days* (1898) concerned the adventures of five orphans and were widely popular, winning praise from Swinburne amongst others. These books, though they still possess a period charm of their own, have worn less well than *The Wind in the Willows*, which is still in print, and was based on bedtime stories composed for his troubled son "Mouse", whose real name was Alistair. Later dramatised by A. A. Milne , to popular acclaim, the story as Grahame wrote it has an elegiac quality, a profound love for the English countryside, a countryside from which Grahame himself was alienated for much of his adult life.

Grahame's father was an alcoholic, and alienated from his family for most of his life, eventually dying alone in Le Havre. Grahame's mother died in 1864, and his childhood and adolescence were marked by loneliness and ill-health. In particular he seems to have felt that the relatives and other adults who cared for him (the "Olympians") were incapable of entering his imaginative world. In self-defence he constructed a make-believe country based on childhood emotion and the natural world and characterised by authenticity and freedom, the antithesis of Victorian middle-class morality, in the realm of sexual frankness, for instance. His story "Sawdust and Sin" contains an extraordinary sexual encounter between two dolls, an encounter which aroused a strong response in the audience, though Grahame's description is carefully veiled.[2]

Self-control and Social Control

In Victorian England women, children, and foreigners were grouped together and were thought to possess shared characteristics, including irrationality and untrustworthiness, which made them potentially dangerous to the white male who was their master. This hierarchy overlapped the racial pyramid which had white Anglo-Saxon males at the pinnacle. People belonging to the Celtic races shared many of the lower characteristics of women and children, being feckless, superstitious (often a synonym for Roman Catholic), lazy and so on. The working classes generally were also thought to share these characteristics. This psychological construction served a number of purposes in helping to control the subject groups and in defending the ruling group from the anxieties caused by them and by the internal forces of desire and violence to which they corresponded. At the same time this "underworld" embodied positive qualities, the imaginative and spiritual, to individuals such as Kenneth Grahame, who were growing increasingly aware of the dehumanising effect of modern industrial civilisation. In opposition to it he set up an imaginary world which was initially (in

The Golden Age and *Dream Days*) associated with childhood experience, but was later (in *The Wind in the Willows*) populated with figures from folklore, and talking animals.

This fantasy world worked on different levels in his case. Personally it compensated for a miserable childhood and for his alienated life in the city, but it also reflected a more widespread view that for all its commercial and imperial success, Britain had somehow lost its way; this view had been growing since Blake's time, and was expressed powerfully in Dickens's "Condition of England" novels: it finds its successor in the contemporary environmental movement. Though people were proud of Britain's achievements they were also touched by a sense of loss, and Grahame captures this elegiac tone in *The Wind in the Willows*.

At the time Celtic culture was becoming more widely known through the translation of ancient texts and the work of contemporary poets such as Yeats. Kenneth Grahame himself came from an ancient Scottish line, though he was born in Edinburgh to a prosperous middle-class family, had little contact with traditional Gaelic culture and was moved to Berkshire after his mother's death. The part of his childhood spent there at Cookham Dene became for him an idyll, a brief "golden age" which provided a background to his later books. In a sense he carried it with him as a shield against both a personal sense of desolation and the encroachments of a contemporary world with which he was increasingly at odds.

Cornwall as Fantasy

But Cornwall too, or at least some aspects of it, also became identified with Grahame's fantasy world; he seems to have visited the Duchy for the first time in 1884, with his sister Helen, to convalesce after an illness.[3] They stayed on the Lizard, where Helen eventually went to retire. Grahame himself "fell in love with Cornwall and instantly relaxed into a life of fishing and pottering about."

Cornwall brought out "a passion for the sea which never left him" [4] and this is expressed in the "Wayfarers All" chapter in *The Wind in the Willows*, in which Rat, inspired by his encounter with the wayfarer, is possessed by an overwhelming wanderlust, in one of the book's most powerful passages. The traveller tells romantic tales of his journeying, which include "the pleasant harbours of Cornwall and Devon, and so up the channel". Cornwall is the gateway to the imagined otherworld of the south. During his adult life at the Bank of England Grahame was prone to attacks of gastritis, which it is tempting to interpret as weltschmerz, from which he would escape to Cornwall. As a boy and ever after he admired and identified with the local fishermen and from them even acquired a local accent and a taste for starry gazy pie: he returned to south Cornwall several times over the next few years, and throughout his life at times of stress particularly.

Cornwall itself at this time (the 1880s) was coming to the end of a remarkable century of industrial expansion: in the sixties and seventies copper and tin fell prey to foreign competition, and Cornishmen emigrated in large numbers to seek work overseas.[5] The human cost of this migration, particularly on the women and children left behind, must have been

immense, though it has been largely forgotten.[6] Alongside this grim social reality a cultural reconstruction of Cornwall on quite different lines was taking place.

> "... in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Cornwall was reconstructed a remote, more primitive yet somehow purer ancestor, an antidote to metropolitan civilisation." [7]

This "cultural reconstruction" was largely the work of outsiders, Victorian gentlemen such as the Newlyn painters, and of the budding tourist industry which made use of its implicit critique of British modernity to promote the Duchy as an antidote.[8] Though Cornish people themselves had lost many of their "Celtic" characteristics (the language had effectively died around the end of the eighteenth century, though efforts were being made to revive it), their contemporary identity "was always liable to suppression by the overwhelming urban need for an uncomplicated distant past".[9] The "otherness" of the Celtic lands could now provide a respite from Anglo-Saxon urban and commercial modernity, precisely because it was associated with the countryside and the past. The new romantic Cornwall was situated in a "remote" region in which the Industrial Revolution was forgotten, (though its monuments were everywhere), and yet the comforts of modern civilisation were readily available.

The romanticisation of Cornwall, though it resonated with wider insular and continental movements, such as the Irish "Celtic Twilight" and the re-invention of the Scottish Highlands, also drew on specifically Cornish traditions, folklore, and Arthurian legend.[10] Most importantly, it served an economic agenda to do with the development of the tourist industry, which had been growing in pace with the railway system since the 1850s. These trends often crystallised in the advertising campaigns of the time, which combined appeals to the local and patriotic with the exotic. (The G.W.R. poster of 1907 urged holidaymakers to "See your own country first", pointing out the "great similarity between Cornwall and Italy, in shape, climate and natural beauties".)[11] This argument of course conveniently blurs the question of whose country Cornwall actually was, at a time when cultural revival was beginning to generate a new sense of national identity.[12]

Architecture and Politics

The Arthurian revival in the service of the British imperial project also played a part, though all reference to the king's role as a Celtic resistance leader was excised, and Tennyson's romantic poetry provided a new language to disguise the radical potential of the stories.[13] When Sylvanus Trevail's monstrous hotel at Tintagel opened in 1899 it was named the "King Arthur's Castle" in a conscious attempt to exploit the "historical" appeal of the site.[14] Trevail claimed that it would stand on the very spot where Tennyson composed his verses while gazing down at the bogus Arthurian palace below.

"Medieval" trappings, including a spurious "Round table", adorned what would turn out to be a curiously lifeless structure built on the cheap. It provoked what we would now call environmentalist protests from the Cornish intelligentsia, led by Arthur Quiller-Couch and the novelist Joseph Hocking, author of *The Birthright*, *Mistress Nancy Molesworth*, and many other popular works. To what extent this protest was a response to the commercial

exploitation of Cornish culture is hard to say, but the hotel was built anyway and, fuelled by commercial rivalry, huge modern hotels began to appear along the Cornish coast. At Newlyn part of the headland around the hotel was walled in, and local people protested that they were deprived of their traditional grazing and fishing rights. The Atlantic Company, which was responsible, was pilloried as "the Cornish land-grabbing company", and the enclosure was eventually stopped. It is not difficult to see the appropriation of Cornish culture and history, even if the history was spurious as at Tintagel, as a metaphor for the grabbing of Cornish land, but Trevail and his friends made a killing.

In England itself architecture had become a battleground between a grim present and an idealised past. For all of us the past, when suitably edited, can be an imagined escape from the exigencies of the present, and the title of Kenneth Grahame's *Golden Days* (1895) captures the tone. The lost world of the past, in which religious faith had been unquestioned, could be recreated in stone. In 1836 the architect A. W. N. Pugin had published his revolutionary *Contrasts*, subtitled *A Parallel Between the Noble Edifices of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries and Similar Buildings of the Present Day, Showing the Present Decay of Taste*, a title which nailed his colours to the mast, and declared his wholehearted contempt for the modern world.[15] Pugin's desire to recreate the medieval or "Gothic" world did not stop at architecture: he and his friends wanted nothing less than to undo the Reformation, to wind back the clock to a time when England was part of a united, Catholic Europe, and to restore, through architecture, what Ruskin had called "our loss of fellowship with Nature".[16] Though the Gothic Revival was past its peak by his time, this feeling was very much shared by Kenneth Grahame.

The lost world of wholeness and harmony could be recreated in literary terms, and the Victorians were particularly good at this.[17] Grahame became a late contributor to this literature, and he shaped it using elements which he valued in his experience of Cornwall, which continued to develop over the years. He became particularly attached to Fowey, where he befriended two men who became increasingly important to him. One was Arthur Quiller-Couch, who wrote as "Q", famous novelist and editor of *The First Oxford Book of English Verse*, who was knighted in 1910 and awarded the Chair of English at Cambridge in 1912,[18] and the other was Edward Atkinson, the commodore of the Fowey Yacht Club.[19] The rather boyish boating adventures he shared with these men over many years lay behind the adventures of his heroes, in *The Golden Age* and *The Wind in the Willows*, in which Ruskin's "fellowship with Nature" was also restored.

Revivals

Some of the early Cornish Revivalists, such as Louis C. Duncombe-Jewell and Henry Jenner, held similar views to the "Goths",[20] and this is perhaps not surprising: most existing literature in the Cornish language is late medieval, and expresses the profoundly Catholic worldview of a community which felt itself to be an integral part of European Christendom. The Reformation was not greeted enthusiastically in Cornwall, which was to lose its traditional faith and language, and faced incorporation into the Tudor nation state.

Pugin's Gothic revival though, like the Oxford Movement, failed to restore England's ancient faith. Still, resentment of an oppressive present was expressed as a desire to restore an imagined past, a "merrie England" in which industrialism and class conflict did not exist. And Arthur the Cornishman was to play his part in that process, hence the name of Trevail's hotel, since by then Arthur had been transformed into an English king. On some level though the Gothic revival did remind England that there might be alternatives to the glum realities of industrial civilisation, and that a different world had once existed and might exist again.

Kenneth Grahame did something similar in his books. In *The Golden Age* and *Dream Days* he used actual childhood experience to create an idealised domain in which childhood imagination could successfully resist the oppressive rule of what he called "the Olympians", the adults who control the lives of children. The relationship between children and adults is of course ambivalent. When, in *The Golden Age*, the governess Miss Smedley leaves to take up another post (in the "Exit Tyrannus" chapter) the children look forward to freedom from "the grim oppressor" and plan to fly the flag and "proclaim our deathless sentiments in the ears of the retreating foe". In fact, they are overwhelmed by sadness and a sense of loss, a mood which pervades all Grahame's books. Cornwall for him was likewise an escape from the "Olympian" world and corresponded to the magical world of the Riverbank in *The Wind in the Willows*:

"'What lives over there?' asked the Mole, waving a paw towards a background of woodland that darkly framed the water meadows on one side of the river.

'That? Oh that's just the wild wood', said the Rat shortly. 'We don't go there much, we riverbankers.'

'Aren't they – aren't they very nice people in there?' said the Mole a trifle nervously.

'W-e-ll,' replied the Rat, 'let me see. The squirrels are all right. And the rabbits – some of them, but rabbits are a mixed lot. And then there's Badger, of course. He lives right in the heart of it, wouldn't live anywhere else either, if you paid him to do it. Dear old Badger! Nobody interferes with him. They'd better not,' he added significantly.

'Why, who should interfere with him?' asked the Mole.

'Well, of course – there – are others,' explained the Rat, in a hesitating sort of way. 'Weasels and stoats – and foxes, and so on. They're all right in a way – I'm very good friends with them – pass the time of day when we meet and all that – but they break out sometimes, there's no denying it, and then – well you can't really trust them, and that's the fact.'

'And beyond the wild wood again?' he asked: 'where it's all blue and dim, and one sees what may be hills, or perhaps they mayn't, and something like the smoke of towns, or is it only cloud-drift?'

'Beyond the wild wood comes the Wide World', said the Rat. 'And that's something that doesn't matter to you or me. I've never been there, and I'm never going, nor you either if you've got any sense at all.' " [21]

Like Cornwall the Riverbank is on the periphery, as far as possible from "something like the smoke of towns", the centres of power where the "Olympians" rule. Of course this was a fantasy, since Cornwall had been heavily industrialised early on, though it was now entering a post-industrial phase. Its identity had already changed many times in response to historical circumstances. Once a tribal homeland, it became a Roman administrative district, and then an independent kingdom when Roman Britain disintegrated. Though the Cornish were defeated by Athelstan their territories retained a degree of autonomy, and Cornwall continued to play its part in western European Catholic culture until the late Middle Ages, though it dwindled to a remote colonised province after the Reformation, but nevertheless it subsequently became an important industrial region. In Kenneth Grahame's time it was beginning to acquire a new identity as a holiday destination, re-enchanting a tired and anxious England, much as Kenneth Grahame's books did.

Psyche and Society

Cornwall was remote yet accessible, and for Grahame it overlapped with his own escapist fantasies. Many other artists and writers seem to have found Cornwall liberating in a similar way, and Gluck and the Newlyn school helped to create the new post-industrial Cornwall: several commentators have noted how the romantic reconstruction of Cornwall established "an effectively imperial relationship between centre and periphery as well as reinforcing Cornish difference".[22] It also allowed individuals such as Grahame an opportunity to re-enchant their own personal worlds, helping them to cope with unpleasant realities in the present. But the political and economic forces which shaped the new Cornwall came from outside the Duchy itself. In terms of the innerworld, Cornwall's new mood relaxed the sometimes oppressive power of Victorian morality, encouraging holidaymakers to enjoy themselves, and the artistic colonies tolerated a certain amount of harmless hedonism, though much of this no doubt was imaginary. But the later bizarre happenings surrounding Aleister Crowley and the "Tregerthen Horror" were much more extreme.[23]

Kenneth Grahame used Cornwall not only as an internal resource but as an actual escape from situations which he found emotionally difficult, as we shall see in the second part of this article.

Notes

1. For this and what follows see A. Prince, *Kenneth Grahame: An Innocent in the Wild Wood*, London, Allison and Busby, 1994.
2. Prince, pp. 125-126.
3. Prince, pp. 73-74.
4. Prince, p. 74.

5. See P. Payton, *Cornwall: A History*, Fowey, Cornwall Editions, 2004, Chapter 10, pp. 207-237.

6. See L. Trotter, "Husband Abroad: Quantifying spousal separation associated with emigration in nineteenth century Cornwall", in P. Payton, ed., *Cornish Studies*, Vol. 20, Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 2012.

7. B. Deacon, *Cornwall: A Concise History*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2007, p. 18.

8. E. Westland, *Cornwall: The Cultural Construction of Place*, Penzance, Patten Press/ Exeter, Institute of Cornish Studies, University of Exeter, 1997.

9. E. Westland, "D. H. Lawrence's Cornwall: Dwelling in a precarious age", *Cultural Geographies*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (2002), 266-285.

10. See, for instance, S. Deane, *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature 1880-1980*, London, Faber and Faber, 1985; B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London, Verso, 1983.

11. C. Thomas, "See your own country first: The geography of a railway landscape", in Westland, 1997, pp. 107-128.

12. See B. Deacon, D. Cole, and G. Tregidga, *Mebyon Kernow and Cornish Nationalism*, Cardiff, Welsh Academic Press, 2003, pp. 14-25.

13. See, for instance, S. Barczewski, *Myth and National Identity in Britain*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000.

14. R. Perry, and K. Harradance, *Silvanus Trevail: Cornish Architect and Entrepreneur*, London, Francis Boutle, 2008, pp. 138-140.

15. See R. Hill, *God's Architect: Pugin and the Building of Romantic Britain*, London, Allen Lane, 2007.

16. W. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870*. New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Press, for Wellesley College, 1957, p. 80.

17. See, for instance, N. Streatfeild, *To the Land of Fair Delight: Three Victorian Tales of the Imagination*, London, Victor Gollancz, 1960.

18. M. Drabble, *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 6th edn, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 832.

19. Prince, p. 163.

20. See Deacon, Cole, and Tregidga, 2003.

21. *The Wind in the Willows*, Chapter 1.

22. See A. Kent, *The Literature of Cornwall 1000-2000*, Bristol, Redclyffe Press, 2000, and P. Payton, and P. Thornton, "The Great Western Railway and the Cornish-Celtic revival", in Payton, P., ed., *Cornish Studies*, Vol. 3, Exeter, Institute of Cornish Studies, University of Exeter Press, 1995, pp. 83-103.

23. P. Newman, *The Tregerthen Horror: Aleister Crowley, D. H. Lawrence and Peter Warlock in Cornwall*, Totnes, Abraxas Editions and D.G.R. Books, 2007.

Brendan McMahon is the author of a trilogy of books about Cornish folklore: A *Wreck upon the Ocean*, *Gathering the Fragments*, and *Otherworlds*.