

# On being a Cornish ‘Celt’: changing Celtic heritage and traditions in Cornwall

by Bernard Deacon

*Nang ew nebbaz meeziow Tony Piper screffaz them et a coofen moth era chauns drolgama doaz he rye areth urt an cuntellez Kezcusulianz Celtack’ma. Wortalla nag oma seer. Rag fra? Wel, me vee mouy ha mouy ancertain dro tha category ‘Celtack’; moth ewa an gwella vor tha gunvethaz neb on nye – an Gurnowyion, neb reeg gun gweele ha panna termen igge a toaz veea an gwella ragonye. Metessen therama moaz dreath neb zort a crisis existential. Buz ouga perdery mouy down dro tho tha me a thetermiaz thew hedda an fraga tha weele an areth’ma.* In order to attempt to resolve my existential crisis I could share my thoughts with the conference. Before starting I should state that my method is unlike that of some of the previous speakers. I am not a poet or a novelist or someone consciously on a spiritual quest. Instead I will use another imagination, and the one that I am most familiar with, in order to pursue this issue – the sociological imagination.

One hundred years ago Cornwall’s very future as a Celtic nation lay teetering on a knife edge. In 1901 the meeting of the Pan-Celtic Congress in Dublin had voted 32-22 to postpone a decision on Cornwall’s membership of the Congress. Doubtful about Cornish claims to be ‘Celtic’ because of the ‘death’ of the Cornish language, some of the leading lights of the Celtic Association resisted its admittance. This was despite the claims of Louis Duncombe-Jewell, who had, virtually single-handedly, made the Cornish question a ‘very burning one’ for the Association.<sup>1</sup> In an emotional essay entitled ‘Cornwall: One of the Six Celtic Nations’, he had reeled off a long list of Celtic characteristics, from the literary remains of the language to archaeological remnants to holy wells to the fairy lore of the Duchy and to the characteristics of the inhabitants.<sup>2</sup> Yet it remained an uphill battle to convince those ‘custodians of celticity, guarding their self-appointed right to adjudicate as to who or what might legitimately be termed “Celtic”’.<sup>3</sup> The reason was simple. Like most educated Europeans of the late 19th century the early Celtic Congress equated nationality with language. In the absence of a living Celtic language there could be no living Celtic nation.

In 1904, in more measured terms, Henry Jenner, author of the first major text of the revived Cornish language, published in the same year, succeeded in convincing the Pan-Celtic Congress that Cornwall was Celtic. *Jenner ewziaz tabm Kernewek et an Gezcusulianz. Nag igge oll an tacklow trealia meer dreath an canz blethan ez passiez.* But the scars of this earlier exclusion and the suspicions that produced it lingered for some time. Indeed, it is argued that the result has been a recurring litany of justifications of Cornwall's Celticity, a defensive rejoinder to those real or perceived self-appointed custodians of Celticity who sit on the top branches of the Celtic hierarchy.<sup>4</sup> Jenner's defensiveness was echoed by Charles Thomas as late as 1975 in his address to the 5th International Congress of Celtic Studies.

This paper is not yet another justification of Cornwall's Celtic heritage, not another list, as someone put it, from leprechauns to leeks, or should we say from pastries to pixies. Instead, it starts from the premise that Cornwall is Celtic, or at least a part of the heritage that has made modern Cornwall is Celtic. That Celticity is so far recognised that it now even finds itself being routinely asserted in official Cornwall County Council publications. On the Council's website home page we find a welcome in the Cornish language. *Termen reegave gwellaz an geer 'wiasva' me berderaz dro hedda neppeath dro tha gennez- cramia adro et an cussel. Buz nag ove saw kemiskez dro tha'n screffa composter Kernewek.* And in the 1990s, its submission to the English Local Government Commission stated bluntly that Cornwall's culture and traditions 'stem largely from its isolation [*sic*] and the Celtic influence on language, literature, art and religion'.<sup>5</sup> Even the Cornwall Tourist Board claims on its website that Cornwall's heritage bristles with reminders that 'the Cornish are true Celts', although this message is somewhat compromised by the links on the same page to English Heritage, custodians of Launceston Castle.

Cornwall's Celtic heritage is now something to be envied, a point illustrated by the recent curious efforts of a few people in English Devon to reject hundreds of years of Englishness and claim a Celtic inheritance based on some very dodgy historical grounds. But, before dismissing the claims of our English neighbours - and I suppose imitation is the best form of flattery - perhaps I need to turn to the issue of how one might define 'Celtic'. That makes up the first part of this lecture. After setting out the problems posed by the term 'Celt', I intend rapidly detouring back in time to

overview historical perceptions of the ‘Celt’ in Cornwall before returning to the performances of contemporary Cornish ‘Celts’. I shall then argue that we ignore the politics of the Cornish Celt at our peril. This too is part of our ‘Celtic’ heritage, for better or for worse. Finally, I reflect briefly how, in the interests of both comprehensiveness and realism, the contemporary Celt in Cornwall cannot ignore the fact that they are also a product of other heritages and other traditions. Too often Cornwall has merely been seen as some sort of terrible apocalyptic warning to the other Celtic countries. Eat your Celtic greens, boys and girls, or you too will be like us. Nevertheless, picking up on the theme of ‘in-betweenness’ that was introduced earlier in this conference, Cornwall’s situation might give us a special insight into the Celtic condition, a privileged view from the margins.

### *Problems*

For most people and for much of its life the qualifier ‘Celtic’ has signified the past. In that sense the word itself is deeply traditional, looking back into the mists of time for the authentic heritage of the Celts, delivered more or less intact to succeeding generations. The very title we have been asked to speak to at this Congress, ‘Celtic heritage and traditions in a changing world’, harks back to former times. It’s the ‘heritage and traditions’ that are Celtic, implicitly surviving in or threatened by a ‘changing world’ that is not. Such a deeply traditional reading of the title might, however, be challenged. For ‘traditions and heritage’ do not come to us intact and are not, despite what we might believe, unchanging. On the contrary, all traditions have a history and an origin.<sup>6</sup> And traditions may change the world as well as be changed by it. Instead of seeking to enumerate those ‘Celtic traditions’ of Cornwall that survive in a changing world I intend here to focus on how traditional meanings of the Celtic in Cornwall have themselves changed, before assessing a few ways in which being ‘Celtic’ can be performed in contemporary Cornwall.

But, if the Celt is consigned to the past, then only some aspects of that past are privileged as ‘Celtic’. We thus have three definitions of ‘Celtic’, two of which are themselves traditional, the third less so. First, there is the tight definition of Celtic as pertaining to a Celtic language. This, with its origins in the romantic nationalism of the 19th century, has been deeply influential in the academic pursuit of Celtic Studies. It was also the problem that Louis Duncombe-Jewell and Henry Jenner faced back in

1901-04. If, to be Celtic, one had to belong to a Celtic language community, then the Cornish had a major problem as the last native abilities in the vernacular tongue had faded during the first half of the 1800s. But if this definition is rigidly adhered to then all the Celtic countries now have problems. Less than 20% of the people in Wales speak Welsh; maybe somewhere between 5 and 10% of the population of lower Brittany have a working knowledge of Breton; the proportion of Scots Gaelic speakers in Scotland is now lower than 2%, and in Cornwall (and Mann?) around 0.1% of the population are able to hold a (limited) conversation in Cornish (and Manx). Even in Ireland three quarters of the population have little or no competence in Irish.

Clearly, if we were to confine Celtic traditions to those communities which actually make use of a Celtic language in their day-to-day lives then this would lead to a very restricted view of the Celtic heritage. This was exactly the line resisted by Jenner, who argued that those peoples who inhabited a territory where a Celtic language was or had been spoken should be deemed 'Celtic'. At a stroke this included the Cornish. As Oliver Padel has shown, placenames indicate the existence of a marked linguistic boundary between Cornish and English for 300 years from the eighth to eleventh centuries and one that virtually paralleled the eastern political boundary of Cornwall.<sup>7</sup> But Jenner was equally adamant that not all the culture of that Celtic people could be 'Celtic'. Here we meet a loose definition of 'Celtic' - one that includes a selection of the cultural attributes of a Celtic people as Celtic. It could be material artefacts, such as stone crosses and holy wells or more abstract emotions, such as *hireth* or a taste for peculiar types of poetry. This looser definition introduces a certain flexibility but also opens up vast areas of dispute as to what should be included and what excluded.

There is a solution; an even looser definition of Celtic traditions might define them as all those aspects of culture that are defined as Celtic by the people who perform them. This is what the Scottish historian Edward J. Cowan has called that 'clamjamfry of nonsense that is popularly deemed to constitute part of Celtic heritage'.<sup>8</sup> In Cornwall, where both the linguistic basis of Celticity is less secure and where other aspects of heritage, notably its history of industrialisation, have served to complicate simplistic notions of the 'Celtic', there has been a tendency since at least the 1920s, if not earlier, to embrace a wider definition of Celtic tradition. My argument here is that, in

contemporary conditions, adopting such a definition is both more realistic and more illuminating. In Cornwall at least, the Celtic has not just been changed by a 'changing world'. That is just too passive a way to look at things. Instead, the 'Celtic' is playing its part in changing that world and has the potential to change it even further. And perhaps this is made more possible in Cornwall precisely because of our slightly 'semi-detached' status in the Celtic world.

### *Perceptions*

Instead of seeking to identify the Celtic heritage we can view the idea of a Celtic heritage as itself a cultural tradition. How was this tradition of being Celtic read in Cornwall and how has it changed over the years? The English perception of the Celt as a temporally and spatially remote 'other', one 'vague in chronology, its characteristics both veiled in and formed by a particularly romantic reaction to a dominant industrial and post-industrial materialism'<sup>9</sup> has, not surprisingly, been particularly powerful in Cornwall, England's first and last colony. In the 19th century, while the English saw the Irish Celt as a 'dangerous savage', and the Welsh Celt as a 'noble savage', the Cornish were merely 'pleasantly primitive', no threat to the status quo and safely domesticated. *Me wait en deethiow'ma dron nye mouy perillez ha ther a nye rye tabm own, po tha'n lacka, ancombrenses, urt an Governanz en Loundrez*. This imagery was fuelled by the Newlyn school of artists, who incidentally did not describe the Cornish as Celts, and the coming of mass tourism. The latter, feeding its voracious middle class market in the south east of England, produced an outpouring of romantic and whimsical caricatures of Celtic Cornwall, reaching a height of stereotypical banality in the 1920s and 1930s. Jon Betjeman assured his readers in 1934 that 'the mystery popularly known as "Celtic twilight", which hangs over the Highlands of Scotland and over Wales and Ireland, also hangs over Cornwall. This mystery is undoubtedly something to do with the Druid worship, which was particularly strong in Cornwall'.<sup>10</sup> This view of Celtic Cornwall was reflected back at the visitor by E.M.Trembath, Newquay's Publicity Officer, in 1952; 'out of England and into Cornwall ... the slightly foreign atmosphere, the Celtic air of remoteness are irresistible to the prosaic city-dweller'.<sup>11</sup>

How had the Cornish stumbled out of the Celtic twilight as Celts? The idea of Celtic Cornwall was itself, by the 1930s, part of a long tradition, and one that, *pace* the post-

Celtic revisionists, had been reproduced as much by insiders as by romantics in the imperial centre. At the beginning of the 18th century Edward Lhuyd's comparative research into the Celtic languages and his field-work in Cornwall had firmly established the Cornish language as part of that linguistic family. The description of Cornish as Celtic was picked up by the Cornish antiquarian William Borlase in his *Antiquities and Monuments of the County of Cornwall* of 1754 and 1769. Borlase linked the stone monuments of Cornwall, many of which, it eventually turned out, had nothing at all to do with the Celts, to the religion of the ancient Celts. It was the activities of the Druids plus the fact of the Cornish language that made the Cornish Celts. But Borlase also drew his Celtic net very widely indeed, including in his definition of Celt Scythians, Iberians and even Germans. In popular Cornish culture of the later 18th century therefore, Celtic was not a commonly understood description. More usual was the notion of the Cornish as 'ancient Britons', one of the original inhabitants of these islands.

It is difficult to date precisely when the Cornish began to apply the description 'Celtic' more regularly to themselves. In 1826, in his introduction to an edition of the mystery play *Passyon gon arleth*, Davies Gilbert described Cornish as 'a dialect of the Celtic language', although one that, he rejoiced, had 'ceased altogether from being used'. *Ha ma hedda daskwethaz na goth tha whye cregy urt kennifer tra leverrez gen nebonen lettrez. Lebben, termen thew gun tavaz clappiez arta kennifer journa nye ell gwellaz dro Gilbert cabm. Ha me venga suggestia thera mouy a Gernewek whathe clappiez et e theethiow e hunnen del reegava guffaz.* This unfortunate fact did not, however, prevent people describing themselves as Celtic. By the later 1850s we can find many examples of this. In 1859 the Reverend Charles Colwell told his Wesleyan Methodist hearers that they were 'the real descendants of the Cornish Celts'. What makes this all the more interesting is that it occurred at the Burra Burra mine in South Australia.<sup>12</sup> But a sense of being Celtic was not restricted to emigrants on the mining frontiers of the New World.

In 1860 the Royal Institution of Cornwall (RIC) published a paper by Sir Gardner Wilkinson on Carn Brea. In this, he linked the archaeology of Carn Brea with other areas, including Wales. This stimulated a communication from the Cambrian Society to the RIC that in turn triggered a veritable outburst of pan-Celtic enthusiasm amongst

the Cornish antiquarians. In 1861 the President of the RIC, Dr Charles Barham, stated that 'we are here at the utmost verge of the Celtic system, we want to connect our local antiquities with the antiquities of other Celtic tribes ... particularly those settled in Brittany'. Other letters spoke of 'Celtic brethren' and 'Celtic origins', although the differences between the Cornish and their Celtic cousins were also remarked upon. 'The Cornish Celt is migratory, seafaring, commercial, self-reliant ... in fact, everything the Welshman and Breton are not'.<sup>13</sup> And, in 1863, the President, a Mr E. Smirke, pointed out that 'it was from contact and communication with Phoenician civilisation, then the most advanced in the world, that the ancient inhabitants of Cornwall were raised above the level of other Celtic tribes, and that the psychological condition of Cornishmen was influenced for good'.<sup>14</sup>

This interest in Cornwall's Celtic origins on the part of the gentleman-antiquarians of the Royal Institution of Cornwall paralleled the production of editions of Cornish miracle plays in 1859 and 1862 and the publication of the Reverend Robert Williams' Dictionary of Cornish in 1865. In that same year Robert Hunt published his *Drolls, Traditions and Superstitions of Old Cornwall*, where he took it for granted that the Cornish were Celts, 'who, like all the Celts, cling with sincere affection to the memories of their past'.<sup>15</sup> These various events also reflected a deeper, more popular interest in Cornwall's Celtic past among the urban middle classes. For example, in 1854 the first edition of *Netherton's Cornish Almanack* carried several pages of content in and about the Cornish language as well as more mundane information about fairs, markets, copper ticketings and banking facilities. The intense and precocious regional patriotism fostered by Cornwall's early industrialisation clearly did not preclude an interest in its Celtic connections.

But the equally early de-industrialisation of Cornwall after the 1860s seemed to curtail this popular interest in Cornwall's Celtic traditions. By the 1890s and 1900s a re-Celticised elite had commandeered Celticity in Cornwall. This group, to a man socially conservative and almost invariably Unionist in politics, dominated the shift in the 1900s from antiquarian study to active Celtic revival. But it was a revival that was seriously circumscribed. Over-influenced by the Celtic gurus of the pan-Celtic revival, these men uncritically adopted what has been termed a 'grab-bag' of Celtic traditions, including those aspects of music, costume and sport deemed by the Celtic

gatekeepers to be authentically ‘Celtic’.<sup>16</sup> As a result much effort went into such things as inventing a Cornish kilt, re-designating Cornish wrestling as a ‘Celtic’ sport and hunting for Cornish pipes. Amongst all this frenetic re-inventing the Celt was located firmly in the past, deepening the divide between Cornwall’s Celtic past and its industrial and post-industrial present. For example, Henry Jenner, in a pamphlet written in the 1920s, placed his authentic Cornish Celticity squarely back in the very remote past.<sup>17</sup> Since that time it had been something ‘diminishing’, ‘receding’ and ‘clinging on’; Cornwall’s Celtic heritage was to be studied but it hardly provided an agenda for action or, it should be added, had much to do with a ‘changing world’.

At about the same time, however, Robert Morton Nance had started the Old Cornwall movement. In the first editorial of the movement’s journal *Old Cornwall*, published in 1925, Nance listed the ‘ancient things’ that made up the spirit of Cornwall, ‘its traditions, its old words and ways, what remains to it of its Celtic language and nationality’. So far so traditional. However, in the absence of a spoken Celtic language, Nance widened his definition of ‘Celtic’ to include the Anglo-Cornish dialect and those who spoke it as Celtic.<sup>18</sup> While still looking to traditional knowledge - the ‘very savour and Cornishness of Cornwall’ - this was also strikingly innovative in re-defining what Cornwall’s Celticity actually was and including at least a part of everyday lived experience within that definition. Incidentally, credit should perhaps be given not to Nance but to an under-rated earlier Cornish revivalist, Fred Jago. Jago, a doctor in Plymouth who hailed originally from St Austell, had published a book *The Ancient Language and the Dialect of Cornwall* in 1882. In this, he prefigured the Old Cornwall movement by arguing that the Cornish dialect was the ‘link between the old and new tongue, between Celtic and English’.

What Jago had begun in the 1880s and Nance taken up in the 1920s led to an early example of Edward Cowan’s ‘clamjamfry’ as the Old Cornwall societies set about re-defining almost any ‘tradition’ as ‘Celtic’. For some, this was going too far. Arthur Quiller-Couch was, by the 1930s, dismissing the craze for making Celtic connections as ‘speculative fervour outrunning evidence’ and pointing out that plans to perform a Cornish miracle play in Cornish would require a greater degree of play-acting on the part of the audience than the players.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, the creative re-definition of the

Celtic in inter-war Cornwall was only the early intimation of a process that has since gone much, much further.

### *Performance*

In contemporary Cornwall a wide variety of things can be and are defined as Celtic. Let's just take aspects of five of these – legends, ley lines, landscape, leisure and language - and ask what they might tell us about current uses of the qualifier 'Celtic'.

Ever since Hunt's *Drolls and Superstitions of Old Cornwall* and perhaps since Borlase imagined those Druids on their wind-swept hill-tops, legend and folklore in Cornwall has been designated as 'Celtic'. Much of this is only vaguely connected with Cornwall's Celtic period or with a culture based on its Celtic language. These days traditions such as the special and mysterious significance of the number nine in the folklore of the Celtic countries are not exactly an obvious part of everyday life.<sup>20</sup> Although perhaps one might still catch glimpses of the mysterious role of this number. For example, in Cornwall there were *nine* ancient hundreds. Unfortunately, however, there were originally six, but the two eastern ones were tampered with by the Saxons, who divided them into five new hundreds. But, that aside, nine divides by three and it has been argued that units of three Cornish acres, or multipliers thereof, had a special significance in early medieval Cornish governance.<sup>21</sup> In this respect, can it be mere coincidence that there are *three* salaried core academic staff employed at the Institute of Cornish Studies and that one of them, the author of this paper, lives at Number 54 (six times nine) and previously lived at Number 45 (five times nine), both of which contain two numbers that add up to nine? There may be more to the mystical Celtic significance of the number nine, or is it three, than first meets the eye.

More rationally 'Celtic' is the Arthurian legend. An interest in Arthuriana is something that is shared by a new kind of 'Celt', the spiritual Celt in Cornwall. As Amy Hale points out, Cornwall has proved attractive to this new type, one with neither ancestral nor residential links with Cornwall, but who identifies with Celtic spirituality.<sup>22</sup> She proceeds to argue that the differences between the ethnic Cornish Celt and the spiritual non-Cornish Celt are being narrowed as Celtic spirituality becomes a resource for the re-assertion of Cornish difference and the spiritual Celt becomes more alert to native perceptions. This claim perhaps requires more evidence

to be substantiated but it does introduce another dimension to the Celtic in Cornwall, both loosening the definition of Celtic tradition even further, to include people and places with no link to Cornwall, and in suggesting how new Celtic traditions are being forged, ones that have potential effects on older Celtic traditions.

For the spiritual Celt Cornwall possesses a sacred landscape. This has a more precise geography than that 'diffused sense of holiness' that Cornwall's Celtic crosses and Celtic holy wells are supposed to give to the Cornish landscape,<sup>23</sup> a tradition that can be traced back to Borlase. For the spiritual Celt, Tintagel may be part of it, but the really sacred landscape is to be found in West Penwith, where the distilled Celticity of an elemental landscape dominated by small fields, massive granite hedges, stone circles, standing stones and Cornish place names is at its most intense. The role of West Penwith in outside imaginations is hardly new - a stream of English visitors have sought inspiration in this locality, symbolically so close to the Land's End. They have included W.H.Hudson in 1908, who discovered his 'aboriginal Irish' type in West Penwith, D.H.Lawrence in 1917, who dreamt about his utopia on the cliffs of Zennor and the romantic writer Denys Val Baker (himself part Welsh) in the 1950s.

But the moral geography of romantic and spiritual Celticity also has telling gaps. The urbanised areas of Camborne and Redruth are, we are told, places around which the ley line curves, deviating in apparent distaste at its crass newness. In contrast, for the ethnic Cornish it is surely more significant that this supposed ley line drawn from St Michael's Mount to the Cheesewring on Bodmin Moor passes straight through Redruth Brewery and Redruth rugby football ground (itself near to a Plain an Gwarry – site of the performance of the old mystery plays). For, in modern Cornwall all Cornish landscapes contain the capacity to be defined as Celtic landscapes. Although even here it has become easier to define engine houses and mine stacks as 'Celtic', as 'emblematic of a past Celtic society' and a sacred site, once the actual activity of mining recedes into the past.<sup>24</sup> Socio-economic change thus adds to the discarded resources that can then be re-defined as Celtic without stretching either the parameters of that signifier or the credibility of the observer too widely.

Engine houses might be Celtic but can surfing be Celtic? Alan Kent has intriguingly argued that youth culture in contemporary Cornwall is creatively appropriating

‘Celtic’ icons in a popular culture that is ‘actively reinforcing both new and old constructions of Celtic’.<sup>25</sup> Celtic lettering and logos on surf boards, clothing and tattoos generate ‘interesting new notions of Cornish Celticity’ and act as identity markers for a dynamic youth culture. The popularity of Celtic jewellery, with three major manufacturers in Cornwall, also attests to this desire to assert oneself as part of an older tradition, one with roots in the past, but re-engineered to meet the requirements of post-modern identity politics. Celtic, according to Kent, appears to mean ‘tribal, earthy and green’. In stark contrast to the situation 100 years ago, Celtic traditions are apparently being re-packaged from the bottom up.

In music too, Celtic in Cornwall seems to be breaking free from its more traditional focus on Celtic revivalism and folk music. *Dalla* show the potential for a Celtic folk-jazz fusion. *Anao Atao* breath new life into a specifically Cornish folk tradition. Meanwhile, further from Celtic revivalism, alternative folk bands like Sacred Turf try to bridge the gap between Celtic revivalism and contemporary musical forms. All this may be anathema to the Celtic purist, just as the Old Cornwall movement’s re-definition of Anglo-Cornish dialect as Celtic met with the stern disapproval of inter-war academics. But it opens up the Celtic to a wider audience, makes it more accessible and in turn affects that popular culture, albeit at the margins. This is still Celtic heritage but used in ways that subvert traditional meanings and invert the usual definition of tradition by melding the old with the new.

There may well be a new sense of ease within youth culture about the Celtic, an unselfconscious blurring of the borders between ‘Celtic’ and ‘popular’ traditions in Cornwall, as Kent suggests. In addition, this spills over into a wider commercial culture. ‘Celtic’ icons are beginning to be turned into advertising motifs by companies such as Ginsters Pasties or, in a more self-parodying way, by Skinners Brewery of Truro. The insertion of the images of Celtic revivalism in advertising culture is a measure of how far those images have now been inserted into the ‘mainstream’ culture in Cornwall. It will no doubt affect the way people understand those images. But it also, crucially for the argument here, carries the possibility of changing the very meaning of the word ‘Celtic’. Although there will, of course, be considerable argument as to whether this will be a good or a bad thing.

Finally, if the Celtic can be performed in religious practices, read in the landscape, enjoyed in music and seen in advertising then what about that central iconic element of our Celtic heritage – the Cornish language. Here, the signs are, on the surface, promising. Signage in Cornish, while lagging behind Wales and Brittany, is no longer invisible and can turn up in unexpected places, such as the practical instructions on how to open the doors at Liskeard Town Museum. *Meerastawhye, Gweethva an Drea Liskerres, rag rye an skeeanz'na tha nye*. Cornish poetry appears to be in a healthy state, with the work of Tim Saunders ranking among the very best of contemporary poets writing in a Celtic language.<sup>26</sup> Quality, however, is perhaps not buttressed by a depth of quantity. The most promising development for language activists in Cornwall has to be the belated decision in 2002 by the British Government to sign Cornish up to the European Charter for Minority Languages. Cornish is now specified under Part II of this Charter and a Committee is, even as I speak, formulating a strategy for the language. But the official recognition of this aspect of Cornwall's Celtic heritage also reminds us how the political context in Cornwall constrains the full development of this particular facet of our heritage.

### *Politics*

It is most unlikely that the Cornish language would have received even this minimal level of recognition had it not been for years of campaigning on this and a variety of other issues by Cornish pressure groups. Although Henry Jenner in the 1920s eschewed all discussion of politics, the cultural nationalism of his generation was inevitably and gradually transformed from the 1930s to the 1970s into a Cornish political nationalism.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, we can go so far as to suggest that the existence of a Cornish ethnoregionalist party calling for powers to be devolved to the territory of Cornwall and expressing the view that the Cornish people have a historic right to a measure, at least, of self-government, is itself a Celtic tradition. And this is a tradition that continues to run a steady course in Cornwall. Although not breaking through in spectacular fashion, the electoral performance of MK – the Cornish Party – compares very favourably with the numerous political parties in and around the Breton *Emsav*. Currently MK has more elected councillors than at any time in its history.

But another well established tradition in the Celtic countries, or at least in some of them, is a sense of shame or embarrassment about one's identity. While Cornwall is

changing culturally, with the gates of the ghetto that was the Cornish Revival having been well and truly battered down since the 1970s, a deeper cultural malaise is still entrenched in the political corridors of power. This is expressed in a lack of confidence and an inability to seek Cornish solutions to the Cornish crisis. It is perhaps most obviously the case in Cornwall's County Council where defeatism festers in an environment where suspicion of Cornwall's Celtic heritage and traditions is rife in some quarters.

For an example, we might return to the European Charter for Minority Languages. At a meeting earlier this year to discuss a strategy for the language it was pointed out that strategies require financial resources. At present the County Council give a grant of just £5,000 a year towards development of the language. It was asked whether the County Council would either be providing more resources or be mounting a campaign to win more money for the language in order to help meet the Government's commitments under the Charter. At this question the assorted council officers present went into panic mode, terrified by the very notion of approaching the London government for more money. Rather ironically, it was left to the representative from Government Office South West, the prefectoral central government voice in the 'regions', to point out that the Council had every right to ask for more resources. Nonetheless, given such attitudes, it is unlikely that the current annual budget will grow. Contrast that with the £2 million a year being given to the Ulster-Scots Agency in the north of Ireland. Ulster Scots, like Cornish, is recognised as a language under Part II of the Charter. Where there's a political will, there's a way.

The limits imposed upon Cornwall's Celtic heritage by its local government institutions, by widespread cultural assumptions, and by Cornwall's administrative position as part of an English region serves to remind those of us from Cornwall that, while a Celtic tradition has partly made Cornwall, Cornwall is actually a society of two traditions. The English tradition is by no means new in Cornwall but has co-existed with the Celtic for a millennium. Two brief historical examples will suffice as evidence. In manuscripts written in Wales and Cornwall in the period from 800 to 1100 the handwriting in the Cornish examples are more influenced by English script; the Welsh closer to specimens from Ireland.<sup>28</sup> Moving on half a millennium, in east Cornwall surnames had become hereditary before 1450. This pattern was similar to

that in neighbouring Devon, where it has been claimed surnames were hereditary by 1350, even among the peasantry.<sup>29</sup> Yet in mid and west Cornwall surnames followed the Welsh pattern and did not become hereditary until well into the 1500s or even 1600s.<sup>30</sup> Two naming patterns co-existed, side by side, separated by the two languages and the two cultures they bore – one English-speaking, the other Celtic. Paradoxically, as the Cornish language receded, it became easier for anyone in Cornwall to affiliate to and identify with Cornwall's Celtic heritage and traditions. Those Celtic traditions will no doubt play a crucial role in the changing identity of Cornwall. But Celticity and the Celtic tradition provides only one route to understanding Cornwall. This is a point that the Cornish Celt can never forget and one that he or she will, for the foreseeable future, be forced continually to confront and ultimately to negotiate.

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<sup>1</sup> *Celtia*, 1.9, (October 1901), 150.

<sup>2</sup> L.C.Duncombe-Jewell, 'Cornwall: One of the Six Celtic Nations', *Celtia*, 1.9, (October 1901), 151-59.

<sup>3</sup> Manuel Alberro, 'Celtic Galicia? Ancient connections and similarities in the traditions, superstitions and folklore of the Cornish peninsula and Galicia in Spain', *Cornish Studies*, 9 (2001), 13-44.

<sup>4</sup> Amy Hale, 'Rethinking Celtic Cornwall: an ethnographic approach', *Cornish Studies* 5 (1997), 85-99.

<sup>5</sup> Cornwall County Council, *Cornwall: one and all*, Truro, n.d (c1995)

<sup>6</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, 1983. Although Hobsbawm and Ranger tended to assume, wrongly, that, because traditions were invented they were somehow false or inauthentic. Tell that to the person who believes in them.

<sup>7</sup> O.J.Padel, 'Place-names' in Roger Kain and William Ravenhill (eds), *Historical Atlas of South West England*, Exeter, 1999, 89.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Philip Payton, 'Industrial Celts? Cornish identity in the age of technological prowess', *Cornish Studies* 10, 116-135.

<sup>9</sup> John Lowerson, 'Celtic tourism – some recent magnets', *Cornish Studies* 2 (1994), 128-137.

<sup>10</sup> Jon Betjeman, *Cornwall Illustrated*, London, 1934, 15.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Ronald Perry, 'The changing face of Celtic tourism in Cornwall, 1875-1975', *Cornish Studies* 7 (1999), 94-106.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Payton, 'Paralysis and revival: the reconstruction of Celtic-Catholic Cornwall 1890-1945' in Ella Westland (ed.), *Cornwall: The cultural construction of place*, Penzance, 25-39.

<sup>13</sup> *Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall*, 43.2 (1861), 14.

<sup>14</sup> *Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall*, 45 (1863), 21.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Hunt, *The drolls, traditions and superstitions of old Cornwall*, Truro, 1865, 23.

<sup>16</sup> Hale, 'Rethinking Celtic Cornwall'.

<sup>17</sup> Henry Jenner, 'Who are the Celts? And what do they have to do with Cornwall?', Truro, no date (1920s?),

<sup>18</sup> Robert Morton Nance, 'What we stand for', *Old Cornwall* 1.1 (1925), 3-6.

<sup>19</sup> Arthur Quiller Couch, Introduction to Charles Lee, *Cornish Tales*, London, 1941.

<sup>20</sup> A. Rees and B.Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, London, 1990, 192.

<sup>21</sup> David Harvey, 'The evolution of territoriality and societal transitions', *Landscape History*, 19 (1997), 13-23.

<sup>22</sup> Amy Hale, 'Whose Celtic Cornwall? The ethnic Cornish meet Celtic spirituality', in David Harvey, Rhys Jones, Neil McInroy and Christine Milligan (eds), *Celtic geographies: old culture, new times*, London, 2002, 157-170.

<sup>23</sup> Lowerson, 'Celtic tourism'.

<sup>24</sup> Hale, 'Whose Celtic Cornwall'.

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<sup>25</sup> Alan Kent, 'Celtic nirvanas: constructions of Celtic in contemporary British youth culture' in David Harvey, Rhys Jones, Neil McInroy and Christine Milligan, *Celtic geographies: old culture, new times*, London, 2002, 208-226.

<sup>26</sup> See Thomas Rain Crowe (ed.), *Writing the Wind: Celtic resurgence*, Colowhee, NC, USA, 1997

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<sup>28</sup> N.H.Webb, 'Early medieval Welsh book-production', unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 1989.

<sup>29</sup> David Postles, *The Surnames of Devon*, Oxford, 1995, 105.

<sup>30</sup> H.S.A.Fox and O.J.Padel, *The Cornish Lands of the Arundells of Lanherne, fourteenth to sixteenth centuries*, Exeter, 2000, cxxiv-cxxxvii.