

## **Chameleon Celts: the Cornish in the Americas**

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Cornwall is an ambiguous place. Geographically at the edge of Europe, it balances precariously between continental land mass and Atlantic Ocean. Politically part of the English state since medieval times its people look back to cultural roots in a non-English and Celtic past. Narratives of the Cornish past echo this ambiguity. One, prominent among the Cornish themselves, is a tale of worldliness, of an industrial rise and fall. The other, more familiar outside Cornwall, is etched with distinctly other-worldly mystery, magic and romance. Yet, these stories are on closer inspection less starkly opposed than they first appear. Indeed, the same element can appear in both narratives. Physical artefacts of the Cornish landscape move from stony realism to subtle representation, their meaning transformed in the process. For instance, the buildings housing the steam engines that pumped Cornwall's mines, hoisted its minerals and stamped its ores, were classic parts of realist Cornwall. But they are now also part of romantic Cornwall. Their bleak ruins point to a long-lost golden age. Rather than distinct and separate, the realist and romantic narratives within which the Cornish have been located are themselves hybrid and ambiguous, with movement across blurred borders. Furthermore, just as narratives of the Cornish oscillate between gritty realism and ethereal romanticism, so the Cornish have sometimes integrated with their English neighbours, but at other times loudly proclaimed their difference from them.

The emigration of thousands of Cornish people in the 19th century is often designated with the descriptor "great" and given upper case letters. This "Great Migration" has not escaped a typically Cornish ambivalence. At the time it was viewed as a great accomplishment, as the Cornish helped to wrest "civilisation" out of the "wilderness." But it was also seen, then and increasingly later, as a symptom of Cornwall's decline. The exodus of the brightest and best of its people was a journey of loss and decay (Payton 1999: 17). Ambiguous or not, Cornwall's emigrants were firmly set within a realist narrative. Histories were solidly economic and social in orientation, focusing on heroic family sagas and individual epics, the emigrants' contributions to their receiving societies (Rowe 1974; Rowse 1967; Todd 1966). Yet this economic and social narrative was at the expense of the cultural. According to Rowse, the Cornish

“have not been much a writing folk – more expert with pick and shovel than with the pen” (1967: 18). Only recently have rich veins of hidden literature been exposed and the literary life of the Cornish overseas re-introduced to the folk back home.

Back there – “over home” as Cornish emigrants in 19th century America would have said – the traces of the “Great Migration” are “the defining trait of modern Cornish identity” (James-Korany 1993; Kent 2000: 223). For the modern Cornish person, locked into a politically ignored territory undergoing rapid anglicization, emigrant forebears offer a way of escaping an ambiguous location either as an indistinguishable part of England or an often-overlooked minor player in a Celtic symphony. The international links forged by past generations in the Americas, Australasia, and South Africa open the horizons of those Cornish left in Cornwall. They speak of an outward-looking, international aspect to Cornishness, an added layer to its Celticity and a potential release from the confines of its constrained contemporary political and cultural dilemma.

The rest of this contribution will attempt to bring together the hitherto separate strands of the Cornish migration experience – the realist focus on the course, causes, and contribution of Cornish migrants and the representations of themselves that the resultant transplanted communities created. It first outlines the context for the chameleon-like character of the Cornish in the New World, the continuation of an ambiguity that can be traced throughout its history (for hybridity in Cornwall, see Deacon 2007a; Kent 2010). Second, it focuses on the course and causes of Cornish migration to the Americas, before identifying the characteristics of visibly Cornish communities. Third, it synthesises the evidence for the presence of the Cornish language in North America, but first argues that the real contribution of the Cornish linguistically was not via its former Celtic language but its post-Celtic Cornu-English dialect. Finally, it notes the astonishing rebirth of a hybrid Cornish-American ethnicity and the re-appearance of the Cornish language on the western side of the “herring pond” before concluding with some suggestions for further work on the Cornish in the Americas.

*A rational ethnicity?*

The Cornish perpetually hover on the brink of invisibility. To a large degree this is a function of size. Even in the 21st century the 540,000 people who live in Cornwall, not all of them Cornish, make up less than 1 per cent of the population of Great Britain. This was equally so in the 19th century when Cornwall's population peaked somewhere around 370,000 in the mid-1860s. That figure was around a quarter of the population of Wales, a ninth that of Scotland and a mere fifteenth the size of the Irish population even after its depopulation following the Famine (Woods 1995: 10).

Numerically challenged, the Cornish could seem invisible on the Celtic stage for other reasons. First and foremost was language. In 1901 the Pan Celtic Congress voted to postpone admittance of Cornwall on the grounds that Cornish, a Brythonic language closest to Breton, was no longer a living Celtic language, having ceased to be used as an everyday means of communication at the very end of the 18th century.

Nonetheless, almost as soon as it was decently dead and buried, antiquarians had begun to try to bring the corpse back to life by collecting and publishing its fragments. This eventually led to attempts to revive a version of the spoken language and the appearance of a Cornish grammar in 1904, which belatedly convinced the Pan Celtic Congress meeting at Caernarfon to accord Cornwall membership (Williams 2004: 96-97). Although "perhaps the most obscure of Celts" (James 1994: 34), the loss of their language had not prevented some Cornish stubbornly maintaining a Celtic status in the face of scepticism from their bigger siblings. In fact, the term "Celtic" had been used in Cornwall as a self-descriptor from the 18th century and was given greater impetus in the middle of the 19th century after the idea of a "Celtic" literature emerged and Cornwall's archaeological remains began to be described as "Celtic" (Naylor 2003).

If the status of Cornwall was and is indistinct in Britain, sometimes a Celtic country, at other times an English county, the ethnic status of its emigrants could also be unclear. A series of books on the ethnic groups of the Pacific North West published in 1981 for example includes the Scots, Germans, and Chinese among others but the Cornish are subsumed as part of the "English" (Green 1981). On the other hand Calhoon (1986), when listing the various ethnic groups in early California, separated the Cousin Jacks (as the Cornish were commonly known) from the English. The manner in which the Cornish in the States seemed content enough to join civic

associations such as the Sons of St George, restricted to those of “English” ancestry, added to the ambiguity surrounding their ethnicity (Ewart 1998: 35). This ambiguity continued a familiar theme back in Cornwall. Sometimes the Cornish would be English but, when it suited them, not of England. There were advantages to this flexible strategy, especially for a small, vulnerable group living next to a powerful and often aggressive neighbour. There were also advantages after migration. Todd (1966: 26) has called the Cornish in America “at one and the same time the most and least American of all the emigrants for they could don and doff the costume of a new people almost at will.” The Cornish were able, perhaps more than others, to choose their ethnicity. Mulligan (1958) pointed out how the Cornish were an “extreme case” of Charlotte Erickson’s invisible English immigrants in the USA. English-speaking, Protestant and with economically saleable skills, they were “able to enter American society with few difficulties.” Others have more recently built on this insight. The Cornish could choose whether to “perpetuate their ethnic character.” Often they did so as a strategy “to secure preferential employment in the mines” (James 1994). At other times and in non-mining contexts there was no occupational advantage to be gained from stressing their separate ethnicity. In such cases, as in Victoria, British Columbia, “the non-mining Cornish exhibited few of the ethnic group behaviours” of their mining compatriots (Mindenhall 2000). The visible Cornish were a particular variety of Cornish, the Cousin Jacks of the mining communities. To understand their distinct culture we have to first place them in the broader context of Cornwall’s migration experience.

#### *Miners on the move: from Cornwall to Little Cornwalls*

By the end of the 1860s homogenously Cornish communities could be found scattered across the globe. The two most clearly Cornish places were the northern Yorke peninsula of South Australia and Grass Valley in California. Grass Valley grew during the 1850s as streaming for gold was supplanted by deep mining and Cornish miners flocked to a district where their expertise found a ready market. While these were the epicentres of a global Cornish identity, there were other recognisably Cornish communities. The Cornish had arrived in the upper peninsula of Michigan on the northernmost edge of the US in the 1840s and soon made it home. In the same decade the lead mining region of south-west Wisconsin around Mineral Point

contained distinct Cornish communities, as did towns like Virginia City, Colorado and Butte, Montana later in the century.

What produced these Little Cornwalls? Mass emigration from Cornwall became the norm in the 1840s and continued into the middle years of the twentieth century. We can calculate from census records that there was a net emigration flow of around 144,000 from Cornwall overseas in the second half of the 19th century, 80 per cent direct from Cornwall and 20 per cent via intermediate places in England and Wales (Deacon 2007b). If we assume a return rate of 30 to 40 per cent this suggests a gross migration of between 185,000 and 200,000 in the years before 1900. At least half of these, perhaps as many as two thirds, must have gone to the Americas. This was a considerable number in relative terms given that Cornwall's 19th century population never exceeded 370,000. Indeed, Cornwall has been described as "an emigration region comparable with any in Europe" at this time (Baines 1985: 157). Nevertheless, while relatively important, Cornish emigrants made up only a small minority of the estimated four million emigrants from "England" and in absolute terms hardly compared with the seven million who left Ireland (Richards 2004: 6). A small group of this size could easily have been lost among the millions heading west, especially given that the Cornish seemed pre-programmed to become Americans. In 1842 it was reported of the mining communities of west Cornwall that there was "a character of independence - something American - to this population" (Barham 1842: 759). While the geographical distance between Cornwall and North America was considerable the cultural distance was less so.

The reason the thousands who left Cornwall for the Americas were not irrecoverably lost in that melting pot was not because they were a culturally distinct Celtic people but because they made up an occupationally distinct group. By the late 18th century the Cornish economy was moving to the rhythm of international metal markets. By the 1850s around a third of Cornish men were directly employed in the tin, copper and silver/lead mines of Cornwall. Miners followed the mines, determined to pursue their occupational calling rather than try something new (Burt and Kippen 2001). The vicissitudes of the mining industry structured the geography of Cornish settlement and concentrated sufficient Cornish folk in certain places to produce the Little Cornwalls that mimicked the mining communities of home.

The characteristics of migration from Cornwall also changed over time. When large-scale flows began at the very end of the 1830s farmers and labourers from agricultural parts of Cornwall were prominent. Much of this was to Canada, although that migration stream tapered off rapidly in the late 1850s. That first flow of free migrants joined a separate and slightly earlier movement of miners contracted to open up metal mines in Mexico, Chile, and Brazil from the 1820s. Migrants continued to move to Latin America into the mid-century and afterwards. Indeed, Pachuca in Mexico attained Little Cornwall status for a time in the third quarter of the 19th century (Schwartz 2005). During the 1840s however, these dispersed flows gave way first to a focus on the lead mining region of southern Wisconsin around Mineral Point and then the copper and iron mines of the Keweenaw Peninsula of upper Michigan. Nonetheless, in the 1840s migrants from Cornwall remained a mix of agriculturists and miners.

That changed after the discovery of gold in California. By the 1860s destinations shifted westwards, first to California and then in the 1870s and 1880s to the states of Colorado, Nevada, Utah, Montana, and Arizona, which joined Michigan as favoured destinations. The discovery of the Comstock lode in western Nevada in 1859 heralded new opportunities in western mining for the “Cornish expert, self-trained and uninhibited, who formed the backbone of practical mine management during the entire period” (Spence 1958: 13). Later in the century there is evidence that the proportion of women among emigrants to the USA fell – from around half the number of men at mid-century to between 30 and 40 per cent by the 1890s, a far lower proportion than English and Scottish migrants (Gabaccio 1996). This indicates a migration stream characterized more by the classic single roaming miner than families. It also hints at a greater likelihood of return migration, something supported by a rapid growth in remittances from the States back to Britain from the late 1870s to the 1910s (Magee and Thompson 2005). Meanwhile, in the later 1850s migration from agricultural districts suddenly declined and Cornish emigrants were increasingly likely to be miners and their families. By the 1880s the highest numbers of emigrants set out from the mining parishes of Redruth, Camborne, Breage, Crowan, St Agnes, Lelant, and St Ives. This occupationally concentrated migration stream culturally replenished the transplanted Cornish communities dominated by mining overseas.

What caused this outpouring from Cornwall? On the surface the explanation looks straightforward, a simple case of the movement of miners from a declining mining region with a shrinking labour force to new regions with higher pay. Baines (1985: 159) asserts that the quantity of emigration from Cornwall was “obviously connected with the decline of copper and tin mining after the crisis of 1866.” “Connected” perhaps but not quite so “obviously.” For migration was already running at a high level before the late 1860s, during the relatively prosperous years of the 1850s. Moreover, the detailed chronology of migration suggests that it may have been at its peak when mining was booming at home, rather than in crisis (Schwartz 2005). It was precisely then that demand for skilled miners within a global labour market was greatest. Having established a myth of Cousin Jack’s mining expertise, by the 1830s Cornwall was a “major reserve of skilled mining labour” (Richards 2004: 133). The early emergence of a global labour market in mining had also produced what Payton (1995) terms an emigration trade, as emigration agents found profitable business in Cornwall. Their activities reinforced migration chains already forged and a cultural context predisposed to look favourably on emigration. These overcame the poverty constraint on migration from an early point, with virtually all Cornish migration to North America being self-financed or aided by remittances from previous migrants.

Later there was less choice. Then, according to Schwartz (2002), a strategy of individual and family advancement gave way to one of risk diversification as younger male members of the family migrated, often roaming vast distances and between continents as they pursued the mining frontiers in order to mobilise financial remittances. Schwartz’s important critique seeks to replace an explanation of Cornish emigration that stresses push factors and the collective tragedy of a diasporic scattering with a more flexible, less pessimistic, and less structural view of Cornish migration. This intervention serves to qualify earlier reliance on more structural models of a flexible reserve army of labour (Burke 1984) or the inherently peripheral location of the Cornish economy within the British state (Payton 1992). It does not necessarily replace those broader explanations but can be combined with them, reminding us of elements of the migration story missing in previous accounts, for example the role of remittances in Cornwall, the extent of return migration, especially

in the later phases of migration, and the role of women in a traditionally extremely male-biased narrative.

Women played a critical role in the maintenance and reproduction of the values characteristic of the Little Cornwalls. Much of their activity would have been outside the formal associational networks that bound male Cornish migrants together. These latter would have included freemasons lodges (Burt 2003), which Payton (1999: 37) argues functioned as surrogate Cornish associations in many places. Later, in the 1890s, formal Cornish Associations arose but these tended to become nostalgic reminders of home with a limited rather than mass membership (Payton 1999 378; Schwartz 2006). But perhaps the most ubiquitous social institution colouring the lives of the Cornish was one more likely to have involved women in its activities: the Methodist church. Wherever the Cornish roamed they invariably recorded the building of Methodist chapels. Methodism and the round of religious life was a world within which women played a critical role although it remains an under-researched one. Their Methodist allegiance was one part of the “cultural baggage” that the Cornish brought with them (Lankton 1997: 63). Accompanying it were distinct foods, notably the meat, potato and turnip filled pasties that were a mainstay of the Cornish diet, and folklore such as the underground tommyknockers, spirits who, like the Cornish, exercised their cultural sway underground (Manning 2005). The Methodist heritage included hymn-singing and this gave rise to a stereotype of the Cornish as an especially musical people. Brass and silver bands were commonly encountered in mining communities but perhaps the best known Cornish musical contribution was their love of choral music and in particular carols. This achieved its institutional expression in the annual Christmas carol-singing at Grass Valley (McKinney 2001). Other cultural activities flourished to a later date in the Americas than in Cornwall itself. Wrestling was one, with well-attended wrestling tournaments recorded on the Keweenaw peninsula into the 1930s (Turner 1994: 253).

Whenever Little Cornwalls arose this mix of cultural activities and the Cornish monopoly of the better-paid, supervisory jobs at many mines helped to give rise to a very common stereotype of Cornish clannishness. In the 1860s it was stated that on the Keweenaw peninsula “the Cousin Jacks have everything sewed up” (Turner 1994: 155). A Grass Valley newspaper of 1871 described the Cornish as “more

clannish than any other foreigners” (cited in Payton 1999: 216). Residential segregation, occupational exclusivity, religious homogeneity, and cultural particularity were the everyday aspects of Cornish immigrant mining communities:

the Cornish took with them an American frontier version of their Cousin Jack (and Cousin Jenny) ethnic identity, one moulded in Wisconsin, honed on the Lakes and given expression in a score of western mining camps from Grass Valley to Virginia City to Leadville, Nevadaville and Butte. (Payton 1999: 160)

Cornish control of the best-paid mining jobs and their confusing chameleon identity – sometimes Cornish, sometimes English – led to longstanding animosity from the Irish which was fully reciprocated. There is little evidence of any inter-Celtic solidarity in the behaviour of these groups on the western mining frontiers of the 19th century or on Michigan’s Keweenaw peninsula. In the 1860s it was reported from Hancock that the “Cornish-hating Irish ... viewed all English as inveterate enemies” (Turner 1994: 77). Economic competition combined with religious difference to reinforce the mutual suspicion of Cornish and Irish, a suspicion that on many occasions spilled over into violence. Conflict reached a head in the early 1890s when the Western Federation of Miners was fatally “handicapped by chronic Irish-Cornish feuding within the Butte Union” (Payton 1999: 337).

#### *Talking Cousin Jack: Cornish emigrants and their language*

An occupationally-specific people who were technological leaders in their chosen field could be expected to contribute much to the technical language of that economic sector. And so it was. Perhaps the Cornish emigrants’ greatest contribution was to provide “a language that became a lingua franca in mining camps the world over” (Todd 1966: 16). As miners scattered across the globe they took with them their specialised vocabulary of mining, a vocabulary infused with older words, some of which had their origin in the Cornish language.

While their vocabulary dominated underground, dialect terms and Cornish intonation would have been commonplace in the Little Cornwalls overground for a couple of generations at least. The final oft-commented upon characteristic of the Cornish in the Americas was their dialect of English. In 1880 the folklorist William Bottrell wrote of the “ancient Cornish language in the colonies” but he was referring not to Cornwall’s

Celtic language but to the way Cornish-English dialect was deliberately deployed by Cornishmen to ensure jobs went to Cousin Jacks. The Cornish could always find work in Butte for example provided they “spoke the right spoke” (Hand 1946: 175). Meanwhile, in Grass Valley in 1911, where it was estimated “three quarters of the people were of Cornish birth or descent” their dialect was described as “almost unintelligible” (McKinney 2009: 293). Even as late as the 1930s it was reported that “you couldn’t get a job unless you talked ‘Cousin Jack’” [Cornish dialect] (McKinney 2009: 272). Yet, even here we might suspect that dialect was sometimes deliberately employed instrumentally as part of a conscious ethnic display for economic advantage, for there is contradictory evidence. A boy arriving at Grass valley from St Austell in Cornwall in 1885 dropped his accent because “everyone” at his school made fun of his “heavy Cornish accent” (Ewart 1998: 45).

More generally, dialect was a “signifier of Cornish difference” Kent (2004: 124). Thurner (1994: 136) reports that a key element in that difference was a “practical joke, for the Cornish played them often, with subtle sardonicism.” What was noted in upper Michigan re-appeared in Montana where Cornish miners were described as possessing “delightful humour and colourful speech” (Hand 1946: 174). The humour was most effective in short, pithy tales with a punch line that worked by playing on misplaced words and malapropisms. A tendency to mix up pronouns was evident. As the common Cousin Jack story tells us “We do call anything ‘she’ excepting a tomcat, and we call ‘er ‘e’” (cited in Kent 2004: 130). The Cornish did not hesitate to poke fun at themselves; their humour contained a strong element of the in-joke, not always easily decoded by outsiders. Many of these tales were originally part of an oral tradition, the extension, argues Kent, of a Cornish droll telling tradition back home that was fast dying out in the mid-19th century. This was overlain in turn by written dialect tales, a popular commercial genre of later 19<sup>th</sup>-century Cornwall. Kent likens the droll telling tradition to the travelling storytellers of Gaelic Ireland and Scotland, although James (2010) reminds us that, unlike the conservatism of the Gaelic version, the Cornish drolls were spontaneous and innovative, changing form and content to suit their audience.

With a uniformly mining metaphorical base (exactly reflecting dialect tales in Cornwall) many of the Cousin Jack narratives of North America were committed to

paper in the 1920s and 1930s. The stories of D.A.Charlton and the recently rediscovered collection of Walter Gries from upper Michigan supplied a “new droll of modernism.” For Kent this is “a vital literary form, uniquely linked to industrial experience” and “perhaps our finest representation of industrial Celtic culture.” The 1930s and 1940s were not only the great age of the Cousin Jack narratives but also “the golden age of the great novels of the Cornish emigration experience” (Kent and McKinney 2008: 20-21). Interestingly, they were written about a generation later than a wave of indigenous novels in Cornwall chronicling industrial Cornwall. These had appeared as the sun was most definitely setting on the great days of Cornish mining and engine houses were fast joining Celtic standing stones or medieval castles as romantic ruins. However, the survival of mining communities into the inter-war period overseas postponed the demise of the Cornish culture there by a few decades.

Timing was not the only difference between the novels of Cornwall and the Cornish novels of America. While literature at home was suffused with fatalism and loss and increasingly introverted, that in America contained a strong theme of accomplishment and achievement (Payton 1999: 378). Jim Holman, the central character in Newton G.Thomas’s *The Long Winter Ends* (1941), about a year in the life of an immigrant on the Keweenaw peninsula, charts his gradual realization that his future lies in America as he abandons his original intention of returning. By implication, his hope of preserving Cornish traditions in America is replaced by an optimism induced by becoming American. Both Cousin Jack narratives and Cornish-American novels creatively used Cornu-English, a genre that in the last decade Alan Kent has done much to rehabilitate to its proper place in the Cornish literary tradition.

Nonetheless, while containing the odd survival from Celtic Cornish, this was a literature written in a variety of English. But is there any evidence of traces of Cornwall’s Celtic language in the Americas? As Mulligan (1958: vii) observed, the Cornish had seen “their distinct language all but disappear before they began large-scale migration to America in the 1840s.” That has not stopped considerable speculation about individual emigrants carrying that language over the Atlantic with them (Kent 2007). Clearly, in the 16th century when up to half the Cornish population spoke Cornish, it is almost certain that some emigrants would have been Cornish-speakers. There was Cornish involvement in the doomed Roanake colony of the

1580s but it seems to have been mainly from eastern, English-speaking, Cornwall. A more likely colonisation venture to include Cornish speakers would have been the second Virginia charter of 1609, when some western landlords were involved. While this may have provided an “early tight window of opportunity” for the Cornish language in America (Kent 2007) that window closed very quickly in the 17th century. Moreover, migrants at this time tended to be part of wider groups more likely to be bound together by religion than ethnicity. The dominant means of communication was no doubt English so even families whose home language was Cornish would have been forced to employ English to communicate with other settlers.

Much has been made of a letter written in Cornish in 1710 by the early 18<sup>th</sup>-century revivalist William Gwavas. This was addressed to “*An poble hui, en pow America*” (“you people in America”) and contained a simplified version of the Apostles’ Creed in Cornish. Nance (1925), the leading early 20<sup>th</sup>-century language revivalist, viewed this letter “as a specimen of the language” sent “to some persons or group of persons in America.” Others have been less cautious. Pool (1982: 16-17) states the letter implies “that some Cornish speakers had emigrated and that the language was spoken, or at least understood in America.” Berresford Ellis (1974: 100) went even further, saying that “these letters [sic] were sent to exiled Cornishmen who had taken their knowledge of the language with them.” But as Kent (2007: 202) observes, “most Cornish-language scholarship has failed to grasp the nettle of this text.” In reality, the letter tells us nothing at all about anyone’s ability to speak Cornish. All it suggests is that some person or persons read a Cornish text in the Americas. It is likely that Gwavas sent it to one of his antiquarian correspondents in the thirteen colonies as an example of written Cornish, an extension of his activities in Cornwall. The intended recipient may have had some knowledge of spoken Cornish or may have been a non-speaker interested in seeing an example of the written language. We do not even know if they were Cornish.

While Gwavas addressed his letter to people “*uncuth dho nei*” (“strangers to us”) we do know the name of one individual emigrant recorded as being able to converse in Cornish. In the 1770s the English antiquarian Daines Barrington visited Cornwall seeking evidence of the Cornish language. In addition to the famed fishwife of

Mousehole – Dolly Pentreath – reputed almost certainly erroneously to be the last speaker of Cornish, Barrington mentioned a John Nancarrow. Nancarrow emigrated from Marazion to Philadelphia in 1774 and was “one of the few persons who could speak Cornish; he having learned it from the country-folk in his youth,” which would have been around the 1750s (Anon 1932). He was last heard of alive in New York in 1804 after a number of unsuccessful business ventures. Even in the case of the elusive Nancarrow, keeping one step ahead of his creditors, “the extent of his ability to speak [Cornish] remains a mystery” (Jeffery 1985). Nevertheless, Nancarrow may have a claim to be the last Cornish-speaker in the Americas. One further possibility remains. William Rowe was a farmer in the St Just district in the far west of Cornwall who set out in the late 17th century to translate parts of the Bible into Cornish, getting as far as one chapter of the Book of Genesis and two of Matthew. Some of Rowe’s descendants were known to have emigrated to North America from Sancreed and it has been suggested that they may have taken some of Rowe’s Cornish language work with them. However, this remains speculative and perhaps is best seen as an example of the wishful thinking of a modern Cornish revivalist movement desperate to uncover any evidence for use of the language into the 19th century.

*Rediscovering Cornish roots: Cornishness in present day North America*

As Cornish language enthusiasts in Cornwall continued to hunt for specimens of the language, the vibrant Cornu-English communities and Cornish culture of the Little Cornwalls in the States began to wither. Formally, few Cornish Associations survived the Second World War. Informally, the second and third generations of migrants lost their distinctive accent. Sometimes, this process was encouraged by the first generation. Harvey Wearne’s parents migrated to Grass Valley in the 1910s. He recalled that his parents

raised their children as Americans ... My father got rid of his brogue as soon as he arrived in this country, and when I went back to England for a visit and learned the brogue and brought it back with me, he told me ‘You’ve had your fun, now knock it off.’ (cited in Kent and McKinney 2008: 253)

Although Grass Valley – where mining survived into the early 1950s – was perhaps the last place to retain a distinctive Cornish ambience, even here its “unofficial designation as the Cornish capital of America” was fading (McKinney 2009: 293). By 1953 it was reported that it “becomes increasingly difficult to tell who’s a Cousin Jack

or a ‘Cousin Jenny’” (cited in Schwartz 2006: 176). By mid-century both here and in upper Michigan, the two epicentres of Cornish culture in the Americas, “many Cornish cultural events were increasingly stage-managed.” “As Americanization proceeded, the descendants of the Cornish became even more self-conscious of their culture” (Turner 1994: 138). Sometimes, memories had all but dissipated completely. Donald Rickard was proud to assert his Cornish antecedents when at school in Wisconsin in the early 20th century but “we had no idea what Cornish was [and] were never able to find out anyone very interested or willing to be aware of its importance” (Payton 1999: 143).

Cornishness was slipping apparently inevitably into the mists of memory, doomed to oblivion as the mining communities of old became monuments to an age of industry fast being replaced by financial services and shopping malls. With the decline of industry there seemed no place left for the industrial Celt. But then the unexpected happened. At some point in the late 1960s or 1970s people began to turn to their Cornish roots with greater enthusiasm; by the 1980s “the Cornish had suddenly re-emerged, as if from nowhere” (Payton 1999: 392). This soon took institutional form. The first Cornish association re-appeared in North America in the Cornish Heritage Society, formed in Illinois in 1982. This was stimulated by an earlier re-emergence of Cornish societies and festivals in Australia in the 1970s. The Cornish Heritage Society organised two Cornish Gatherings in 1982 at Detroit and Mineral Point, before settling into a regular biennial gathering. By the sixth Cornish Gathering at Victoria in British Columbia in 1991, 38 Cornish associations were represented and people attended from Australia and Cornwall. Cornish associations possibly peaked in activity at the turn of the millennium, but many remain active, notably at Keweenaw, Milwaukee, south west Wisconsin, Chicago, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, California and Toronto. With a few exceptions their geography reflects that of Cornish settlement, with half of the sixteen Cornish Gatherings to 2011 hosted on Michigan’s upper peninsula, south-west Wisconsin or California.

In addition to restoring respect for the Cousin Jack culture of the 19th century, such associations unselfconsciously embrace a “Celtic” self-definition. According to the Cornish American Heritage Society Cornwall is “a land of mystery, myth and magic” populated by a Celtic people (<http://www.cousinjack.org>, retrieved 2012, 10 Feb).

Payton notes how a new synthesis of Celtic revivalist and traditional culture has occurred, reflecting a process observed in Cornwall itself since the 1970s. Some Cornish-Americans even set about learning a revived Cornish language based on the Cornish of the 14th and 15th centuries; in the land of hyper-modernity people turned to pre-modernity. A trickle of Americans are regularly made language bards by the Cornish Gorseth, which has itself held mini-Gorseths on North American soil, the first at Vancouver in 1991. Kent (2007) notes how this renewed assertion of Celtic Cornishness acts as a “cultural delineator” but in doing so also adopts an over-romanticised iconography, drawing uncritically from often externally-generated representations of the Cornish Celt. Nevertheless, the growth of “New World Celts” parallels the rise of a pan-Celtic consciousness and feeds back to Cornwall (see Hale and Payton 2000: 95). Perhaps most importantly, it heralds the demise of the chameleon Celt. The Cornish no longer hover on the brink of ambiguity these days but throw their hats more unreservedly into the Celtic ring.

#### *Future Research*

It only remains to suggest some avenues of research on the Cornish in North America worthy of further attention. As we have seen, the possibilities of pursuing the role of the Cornish language after migration are limited. But Kent’s preliminary work on the Cornu-English Cousin Jack narratives would benefit from comparative research, exploring links with the narratives of other Celtic countries both past and present. They could also fruitfully be cross-referenced to similar Cornish drolls across the world and with the dialect tale genre in Cornwall. Three other areas remain under-researched. First, the construction and reproduction of Cornish identity in the Americas, both its presence in traditional Cornish communities and its modern re-assertion and transformation via the transregional public sphere of the internet needs more detailed analysis (for some pointers see Schwartz 2006 and Deacon and Schwartz 2007). Second, the role of women in reproducing the everyday values of Cornish communities and the ongoing synthesis of host and transplanted communities calls for further exploration (Trotter 2011). Finally, there remains the possibility of work on non-mining migrants, on Cornish immigrants in farming communities and others outside the mining Little Cornwalls. In the history of the chameleon Cornish Celt of the 19th century those who chose to remain invisible within an English identity may tell us something of value about those who did not.

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