

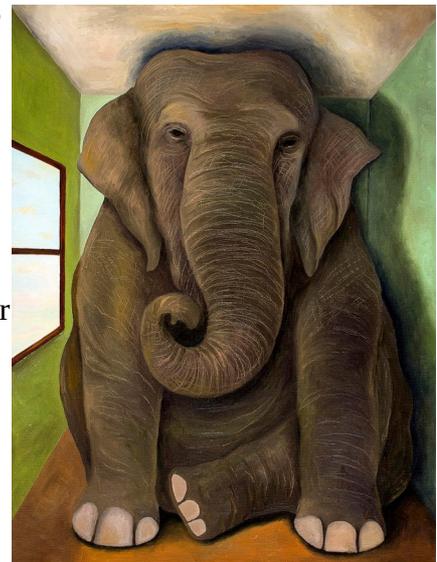
## Cornish Solidarity: the Cornish Movement and the future of Cornishness

In 2013 Neil Kennedy completed his doctoral thesis at the Institute of Cornish Studies, reflecting on the pressures and potential surrounding Cornishness. Last year, a shortened version of the thesis was published as a book - *Cornish Solidarity: Using culture to strengthen communities*. The book asks how a 'resilient, socially inclusive Cornish future' can be achieved in the face of major economic transformation and demographic shifts. More uncomfortably perhaps for those active in the Cornish movement, it also asks which versions and myths of Cornishness best strengthen sustainable communities. What I want to do here is briefly to summarise the argument of *Cornish Solidarity* in order to encourage more people to read it and think through its propositions or, as Neil has it, its '(pro)-positions'.

If Cornwall was at a crossroads 30 years ago, it can now sometimes seem well down the road past that crossroads, having taken a wrong turning and steering for the cliff edge. Yet, in other ways, the context can look a lot more positive. We are now recognised as a national minority under the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, even if the state, both centrally and locally, seems determined not to engage fully with its implications. The revived Cornish language has official protection under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, even though funding is given, abruptly withdrawn and then dribbled out with a palpable sense of patrician dismissiveness. A vigorous music and dance scene exists (I'm told). Cornish symbols, such as the flag, the revived language, tartan clothing have become increasingly visible, and in domains from which they were formerly excluded, such as commerce and local government. Cornwall is still distinctive. And in some ways more than it was a generation backalong.

### *The elephant in the room*

Yet an elephant shares the room. Multiplying performances of Cornishness cannot overcome the unsettling awareness that a shrinking proportion of the population share a family heritage of Cornishness, while many of the traditional institutions of Cornishness have withered. Does this matter? It does for Neil. 'Cornwall is distinctive because the indigenous Cornish make it so ... The practices and artefacts that are labelled Cornish only make sense if embedded in indigenous culture and society'. Thirty years ago in *Cornwall at the Crossroads* we argued that 'if the Cornish people are not there underpinning Cornish identity then all the talk about Cornish culture or the Cornish heritage [is] just idle talk. We will have an empty culture with a disjointed identity.' No matter how many practices and symbols of Cornishness we encounter 'Cornwall will be populated by ghosts of its past - no longer Cornwall in any real sense of the word but merely another spot on the map'. For a variety of reasons- fear of being labelled racist, the dismissive or hostile reactions of some non-Cornish, the myths clung to by an unsympathetic and peripatetic project class who staff our institutions, the absence of a self-confident native intelligentsia – this demographic and housing context tends to be avoided in discussions of distinctiveness.



Yet anxieties about survival are producing a post-Cornish moment and an end of Cornwall/last of the Mohicans rhetoric. Neil pinpoints the feelings of despair, defeatism, acceptance, resignation and grief that undermine well-being, promote self-deprecation and the rejection of personal family backgrounds. A cult of loss also produces narratives of historic victimhood and identities that are 'closed, moribund and nostalgic' as the drawbridge is raised. Few Cornish institutions or networks outside the family have arisen to replace work and chapel-based traditional means of cultural

transmission. (To an extent networks of local sport, pre-eminently rugby in the west, soccer in the east, cricket and pub-based sports such as euchre or pool also fulfil this function). Given this semantic vacuum the Cornish Revival/Cornish Movement plays a particular role as the only institution outside the family transmitting Cornishness. Incidentally, Neil distinguishes the Cornish Revival, concerned with language revitalization and cultural retrieval and invention, from a wider Cornish Movement that encompasses those concerned with other socio-economic issues in maintaining identity.

### *Cornish capital and commodification*

In the absence of inputs from the Cornish Movement, the danger is that Cornish distinctiveness and Cornwall itself succumbs to a process of widening commodification that undermines resilience and resistance. In contrast, usable cultures are those that can nurture cultural and symbolic capital. Neil identifies the missing element of Cornishness - an aspirational vision rooted in community movements. For such a vision to emerge, 'specifically Cornish knowledge' has to be respected and deployed. Ways have to be found to use the symbolic elements of Cornishness without losing ownership of them or reproducing stereotypes. A more critical approach to marketing and branding Cornish difference needs to be adopted, so that the costs of commodification are assessed as well as the benefits.

For Neil the Cornish Revival is not Cornishness. Cornishness is found in the still recognisable though shrinking, Cornish communities. He outlines how Classic Cornishness, that semi-rural, industrial culture, sharing practices with the English and Welsh coalfields, with democratic manners, tastes of the American mid-west and, by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, transnational connections, had become Late Classic Cornishness by the 1950s. Taking issue with the model of paralysis, he nonetheless agrees that its low status reduced community resilience in the face of the demographic regime unwittingly or wittingly imposed after the 1960s. Late Classic Cornishness, still in the 1950s and 1960s a chapel-going culture recognisable to our great-grandparents, segued into what Alan Kent has called residual Cornishness and what Neil terms Proper Cornishness. For him this comprises an assemblage of artefacts and identifications from Late Classic Cornishness. Significantly, the attitudes of Classic Cornishness, its tastes and human relationships, have been passed on but not the practices. Chapel-going, mining and a culture of making-do have become for most a remembered difference or even post-memory. Nevertheless, qualitative continuities exist bridging Classic and Proper Cornishness.

To describe this Neil borrows the concepts of structures of feeling from Raymond Williams and habitus from Pierre Bourdieu. Rather mischievously, he calls this a common Cornish habitus. This involves a constellation of styles, dispositions, attitudes and behaviours that create the feeling of being Cornish, while the Cornish Movement furnishes it with discourses and symbols. It becomes essential therefore that revivalism and the Cornish Movement re-valorize existing Cornishness, not undermine it.

### *Cultural hygienes and the Cornish Movement*

But Neil's concern is that the Cornish Movement is in danger of stumbling into another wrong turn.

In the 1920s Robert Morton Nance welded together a comprehensive assemblage of Cornish practices and artefacts into an inclusive project. Yet it contained within it the seeds of a 'wrong turn', in its overly prescriptive notions of linguistic purity and corruption, which obscured the links to tradition. Moreover, the preferred myths of the Nancean synthesis looked to late 19<sup>th</sup> century Celtic romanticism, the constructions of which were sometimes at odds with Cornish myths of technological invention, modernity and movement. In particular, that strand of revivalism

emphasising ceremonial, spirituality and saints distanced the revival from popular Cornishness and on occasions adopted a condescending attitude towards Cornishness and its practices. In consequence, the inventions and rituals of revivalism to an extent became more important than the pre-existing culture that inspired them.

Moving to the present time, some Cornish activities invented in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are now being reshaped by counter-urban and leisure oriented lifestyles and associated with rural alternative culture, echoing aspects of traditional Celticism, remote yet accessible, pagan and carefree. This resymbolization of Cornish Movement activities as part of a counter-urban culture risks a second wrong turn in the context of a dominant Lifestyle Cornwall 'offer'. Neil notes that superficial performances and consumptions of Cornishness can act as a 'substitute for [the] deeper acquisition' of a culture. Just as people can watch *The Hobbit* but not have to believe in the existence of elves, so they can consume and enact performances of Cornishness without necessarily acknowledging a Cornish culture. This risks a double illegitimacy for Proper Cornishness. Already lacking status in the eyes of metropolitan high culture, it can also be dismissed or patronised by the cultural prescriptivism clinging to the Cornish Revival, which acts as gatekeeper imposing the admission criteria of Cornishness.

### *Lifestyle Cornwall and the Cornish Movement*

Adopting the concept of Lifestyle Cornwall, Neil describes how the branding exercises of externally oriented institutions are devoid of connections with Cornishness and contrast sharply with ethno-cultural claims in the rest of the Atlantic Arc. In Cornwall it looks as if policy has been handed over to tourists. But the representations peddled by tourist interests have reinforced constructions of inferiority for a century or more. What we have now is a qualitative change, as the lifestyle 'offer' is embraced by elected and unelected economic and political institutions and reinforced by publicly funded flagship attractions. Even some decision-makers are aware of the contradictions of the 'Cornwall Brand', where Cornwall's distinctiveness is reduced to a package of exclusive 'green-washed leisure lifestyles', foody trends, craft beers and designer sports.

The Cornish Movement could potentially offer the focus for opposition to this dispiriting trend. Yet its practitioners are unable to agree a position on Lifestyle Cornwall. For some, it brings its own seductive allure, by offering a place for selected aspects of Cornishness in the quality tourism package. Reactions to this vary, from opposition, through fatalistic acquiescence to short-term opportunism. But collaboration with Lifestyle Cornwall brings dangers. It can distort Cornish Movement discourses, undermine community resilience and distance the Cornish Movement from Proper Cornishness. Cornwall becomes merely a counter-urban refuge from 21st century life, 'rather than a forward-looking community with an ethno-cultural dimension', with the Tamar transformed from historic ethnopolitical border to the entrance to a gated community.

Is a revamped revivalist package becoming part of an upgraded lifestyle offer, a safe simulation of Cornishness that exists independently of lived reality? And is there, as Neil claims to detect, an internal struggle within the Cornish Movement for meaning and ownership? Do Proper Cornish motivations compete with re-symbolizations, resigned to the direction of travel of Lifestyle Cornwall and over-eager for any recognition?

### *A Cornish standpoint*

So what can we do to resist this cultural commodification and avoid a second wrong turn? Neil raises the uncomfortable possibility that Cornishness is now below the level that prevents the emergence of simulations that are unrestrained by realities. As performances of Cornishness multiply, the proportion of the Cornish in the population decreases. Cornishness is now

unthreatening, 'hardly more real than the spriggans, piskies and giants of legend'.

Yet maybe we are not living through THE post-Cornish moment, but A post-Cornish moment. Cornishness can still change, in order to address social divisions and integrate new residents if there is a coherent approach and strategic intervention to support preferred mythologies and build affirmatively on insider knowledge. (Neil suggests the Industrial Celt would be central.) The familiar can still be evoked, but in new and creative ways. Solidarity could still be built on the strengths of Cornwall's small size, group identity and a sense of marginalization.

Despite its cultural prescriptivism and the dangers of a second wrong turn, the Cornish Movement remains the best and in some ways only opportunity for discursive formations to emerge that can counter the prevailing wisdoms. Ideally the Cornish Movement needs to work with and on Cornwall Council, challenging the 'systemic inertia of decision-making' and offering an alternative to replace the Council's current disjointed practices with a coherent strategy. But in order to do this there has to be more conscious thinking about the consequences of taking easy paths. For instance, should we be effectively legitimating the Duchy's mega-settlement at Newquay by putting the sticking plaster of Cornish language signage over it? And was it wise enthusiastically to support thousands of houses and the subsequent destruction of countryside west of Truro just to attain a long-awaited sports stadium? More consideration must be given to the longer-term impact of such collaborations.

Neil ends his book on a hopeful note. 'We can start from where Cornwall really is and look to a future that is different, perhaps even unrecognisable to former generations, but nevertheless part of Nance's cultural tradition that is recognisably Cornish'. While its arguments may make some of us uneasy, the intention of this book is not to unsettle those active in the Cornish Movement, but to encourage them to think through their practices. It's an essential read for anyone concerned for the future of Cornwall and Cornishness.



(*Cornish Solidarity* is published by Evertime of Portlaoise, Ireland and is available from the publisher or from Amazon and other online booksellers.)