

Cathryn Pearce, *Cornish Wrecking 1700-1860: Reality and Popular Myth* (The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2010). xi + 265pp. ISBN: 978-1-84383-555-4. £45 (h/b).

A visitor to Cornwall in 1775 wrote that there was nothing the natives enjoyed more than sitting in front of the fire wringing out their rain-sodden boots. This no doubt provided a brief interlude of pleasure before venturing out to attach lights to donkeys' tails to lure innocent mariners to their doom. As this book points out, the 'folk devil' of the Cornish wrecker was firmly entrenched by the mid-eighteenth century. The solidified into stereotype and endured over the centuries. By the twentieth century the myth of the Cornish wrecker was firmly ensconced, to be either defensively denied or cautiously claimed by the Cornish themselves. The beauty of Cathryn Pearce's book on Cornish wrecking is that it successfully addresses both aspects of this phenomenon. It sets out both to deconstruct the stubborn myth that surrounds the topic and assess the subtle historical realities of wrecking. This is achieved through building up an impressive and diverse set of sources, including wreck presentments at a local manor, East India Company letter books, wreck case papers, salvage accounts, family papers relating to wrecks, broadsheets, Trinity House correspondence, assize records, diaries, newspapers and government reports.

Pearce breaks down wrecking into three separate activities. Only the first of these - the direct attack and plunder of vessels - was prominent in the myth of wrecking. But cases of violent attack on wrecked ships were in fact rare. Of 155 recorded wrecks in Mounts Bay in the period 1738-1860 there were only eleven reports of attack, involving just 7%. In contrast 77% of cases involved life-saving activity. Much more frequent was the less spectacular harvesting of wrecked goods from beaches or shorelines or the salvage of goods washed ashore by the tides from a wreck that may have lain many miles over the horizon.

Noting that a reputation for wrecking adheres to Cornwall rather than Kent, even though there were more wrecks in the latter county, the author first establishes the context of this representation. As she points out, this rests on a central paradox of Cornwall's history. While its geographical peripherality reproduced the idea it was 'isolated' from the rest of the British isles, its early involvement in international markets and metal mining drew trade and shipping to its shores. In addition of course, its location on the edge of the Atlantic world meant a constant stream of shipping headed past its coasts for other places. The occasional shipwrecks this traffic provided was the basis of a popular view of goods wrecked up on the shore as a 'godsend' or 'providence'. But, legally, such goods were the property of the crown (which had granted away most of its rights to wreck before the twelfth century), the lord of the manor, or the owner of the goods.

In chapters 4 and 5 Pearce analyses the relation between wrecking and popular morality, taking as her cue John Rule's view of wrecking as a 'social crime', an example of 'communal solidarity' to protect perceived customary rights. However, she finds this too simple. Wrecking, she argues, was not an activity legitimated by cultural or community consensus. Instead, it rested on a series of justifications, including providence and a sense of moral entitlement for customary salvage practices. Or maybe it was just an instinctive reaction, as coastal populations reacted to the prospects of harvest from the sea. Pearce concludes that wreckers were 'neither

a monolithic population practicing a socially acceptable crime nor were they involved in wrecking simply as a way to assuage their poverty'. Instead, they were a 'diverse population whose justifications and motivations ... illustrate a more complex popular morality' (p.103).

In the second part of her book Pearce moves from popular morality to the law and its enforcement. The law exercised considerable discretion in the eighteenth century before the arrival of the coastguard from 1809 improved the effectiveness of maritime policing. Discretion was exercised in offering rewards for goods and information, in deciding whether to prosecute or not and in pardons. Indeed, the contradictions inherent in the legal discourses allowed commoners to maintain their belief in their right to harvest. But wrecking was not confined to the commons. Stories of landlords and clergymen leading their tenants and parishioners to wrecks feature in the myth. While actual examples of this are rare landlords' roles as lords of the manor holding rights to wreck were jealously guarded and defended at court. Inter-landlord disputes intermeshed with landlord-tenant relationships of reciprocity and paternalism as tenants' testimony became weapons in the rivalries of manorial lords who viewed wreck rights as an important symbolic form of cultural capital. However, this capital came under attack after 1800, not from the dispossessed, but from the state which in the course of the nineteenth century expropriated landlords' customary salvage rights. The Merchant Shipping Act of 1854 gave the victory to the centralising state, transferring wreck rights from the local lord of the manor to a remote Board of Trade. Pearce agrees with Hay and Rogers that the loss of wreck rights was yet another example of 'the disruption of custom, the triumph of law' in the mid-nineteenth century (p.187).

Pearce concludes that wrecking neither involved an eighteenth century elite assault on customary rights nor was a custom wholly practiced and accepted by the population. In fact it was a 'multifaceted, sophisticated cultural practice and cultural construct' with complex attitudes and multiple points of view that included mediation, constraint, wrecking, salvage and lifesaving. The stereotype may have it otherwise but the average Cornish wrecker was more prosaically 'normal individuals who chanced upon "gifts of the sea"' (p.215). In this excellent account of a topic hitherto shunned by academic historians Pearce has succeeded admirably in analysing both the mythic and material history of wrecking in Cornwall. Other topics of social history and everyday life – in Cornwall and elsewhere – might be candidates for similar treatment.