Propaganda and the Tudor State or propaganda of the Tudor historians?

Bernard Deacon

The 16th century has undoubtedly become the principal battlefield of Cornish historiography. For almost half a century after A.L.Rowse’s ground-breaking Tudor Cornwall the period lay relatively undisturbed, a quiet backwater where only local historians fished. Instead, attention became focused on more interesting events of the industrial revolution, mass emigration and de-industrialisation as these seemed to be more relevant for understanding the contemporary situation of the Cornish people. As for the early modern period, the Tudors centralised, the gentry rose and the Cornish were, with some reluctance, integrated into English state and society. However, things began to change in the 1990s. In the context of a new interest in Cornish resistance to centralisation the Tudor period, from 1485 to 1603, began to take on greater importance.

In the later 1990s the half-millennial commemoration of Angove’s rising of 1497 and the renewed threat of re-centralisation accompanying top-down ‘regionalisation’ stoked up a popular interest in the events of those years. Meanwhile Philip Payton had argued that this was the period when Cornwall’s ‘first’ or ‘older’ peripheralism of territorial and cultural isolation began to be broken down. A long process of transition, stretching into the 18th century, was one ‘against which the Cornish reacted – in 1497, in 1549 and again in the Civil War’. Enthused by this, Mark Stoyle picked up the baton and began to run with it. In a series of sparkling and provocative articles he began to put more flesh on Payton’s interpretation. This culminated in 2002 in the publication of West Britons, in which he argued that a sense of ‘Cornish ethnic identity’ underlay Cornish ‘politico-religious behaviour throughout the Tudor and Stuart periods and ‘underpinned the violent series of rebellions between 1497 and 1648. The Tudor period saw a visible identity of resistance in Cornwall to the encroachments of the Tudor state. The Cornish rose, not just in the period before 1550 but also in the 1640s, in a heroic but ultimately doomed series of desperate risings, struggling against their allotted role as a mere ‘county’ of England. Others have gone even further. These were the years when a heartless Tudor monarchy destroyed the
Cornish language and the flower of Cornish (speaking) manhood in the killing fields that accompanied the ‘Prayer Book War’ of 1549.¹

But this so-called ‘Kernowcentric’ perspective does not hold the field unchallenged. Recently, Mark Stoyle has predicted that a Kernowsceptic backlash may be just around the corner, one that would aim ‘to thrust the historiography of early modern Cornwall firmly back into the box labelled “English local history”’.¹⁴ In fact the ‘Kernowsceptic’ interpretation was already well-established by the time he was writing his review article. Ian Arthurson’s detailed studies of the 1497 risings had already placed them in a wider context of royal pretender manoeuvrings and high politics.⁵ He had also argued for a ‘south-west’ framework for understanding the ‘culture of rebellion’ of those years.⁶ From another angle, local historians of the Cornish gentry constructed a picture of a content and anglicised group in the Elizabethan and Stuart periods.⁷ John Chynoweth even, over-ambitiously, strode into the fray with all guns blazing by constructing a ‘theory of Cornish distinctiveness’ from the writings of Rowse, Payton, Stoyle and Juilan Cornwall. He then proceeded, at least to his own satisfaction, to demolish his Aunt Sally point by point.⁸ However, this exercise was marred by uncritical and eclectic use of secondary sources and rendered unconvincing by the clearly romantic assumptions about ‘Cornish distinctiveness’ that Chynoweth held and his obvious disappointment at not meeting them on the ground.

But ‘Kernowsceptic’ and ‘Kernowcentric’ historians alike have tended to unite in accepting the view that Cornwall, or the south-west, was a region of rebellion and resistance. Turning this representation of the people of the west, and particularly Cornwall, on its head, J.P.D.Cooper, in his book Propaganda and the Tudor State⁹ finds evidence that, on the contrary, Cornwall (and Devon) were havens of ‘obedience and uniformity rather than rebellion and resistance’ (p.261). For most of the time subjects obeyed their rulers and indeed during the 16th century Cornwall was located ‘within England’s national imagination, as well as its administrative and judicial framework’ (p.3).

Cooper establishes his credentials as a ‘Kernowsceptic’ historian by adopting an explicit Devon and Cornwall framework. Nonetheless, he seems to be less than
wholeheartedly committed to this ‘regional’ framework? This is a region which is not by any means a homogenous Devonwall but one in which Cornwall and Devon are much of the time discussion separately. Whole chapters, for instance those on ‘Tyranny and Drama’ and ‘The Duchy and the Stannaries’ are effectively reserved for Cornwall alone, while an epilogue self-consciously justifies the treatment of ‘Cornwall and Devon together’, admitting ‘such a division requires a willing suspension of belief’ (p.252). Unlike other texts Cooper does not deny Cornwall’s distinctiveness and he is aware of the modern sense of Cornish identity, albeit caricaturing it as ‘separatist sentiment’ (p.4). But his admission that ‘there was certainly something distinctive about the culture of Tudor Cornwall setting it apart from Devon and the rest of England’ (p.254) does not rest comfortably with his intent to combat the ‘Kernowcentric’ position. For this reason alone this is not the ‘Kernowsceptic’ backlash’ that Stoyle predicted. On the contrary, Cooper’s intervention is an interesting one and, stripped of its normative assumptions, does offer us some pointers towards a more nuanced approach to the 16th century that might allow movement beyond the often stereotyped polarities of the current ‘Kernowcentric versus Kernowcseptic’ debate.

All of which makes it a pity that Cooper’s argument is fatally flawed, normatively, methodologically and empirically.

Normatively, he condescendingly dismisses the argument that Cornish popular politics in this period had an ethnic undertow as ‘the nationalist school of Cornish history’. That may be so, but equally, Cooper writes from a recognisably English nationalist position that is well ensconced at Oxford University, from where this book emanates. Strange, therefore, though hardly surprising, that he fails to describe his own position as part of an ‘English nationalist school’. An unreflective perspective from within this school of history leads him to ignore the corpus of work in Cornish Studies almost entirely, concentrating on just one article that appeared in *Cornish Studies* back in 1993. The result is thus the same sort of tilting at windmills that we are familiar with from chapter 1 of Chynoweth’s *Tudor Cornwall*. More crucially, while apparently unaware of more recent work that has appeared in both *Cornish Studies* and elsewhere since 1993, Cooper’s approach also betrays a serious lack of historical imagination.
This is particularly serious given his attempts to identify the popular culture of the common people, something that requires a great deal more sensitivity to both text and context than Cooper is able to marshal. For example, arguing against Philip Payton’s interpretation of *Beunans Meriasek*, that the audience would have read the play as an anti-Tudor text, with the Duke of Cornwall fighting for Cornwall against the tyrant Teudar, Cooper states that it is ‘far from clear that a play audience would have identified itself with the county of Cornwall in this way’ for ‘allegiance to the shire was largely a thing of the future’ (p.78), Quite so, but he does not explore the possibility that people in Cornwall, perhaps especially those within the Cornish-speaking community, while lacking a modernist territorial identity, may well have possessed an allegiance to the idea of the Duchy of Cornwall. This institution in the early 16th century just might have given rise to forms of allegiance that were very different from later ‘county communities’ but nonetheless, rooted in place and in jurisdictional as well as territorial authority. Given the interesting role that Cooper later maps out for the Duchy in the production of English regnal loyalties, the possible meanings evoked by this institution in the early 16th century are unfortunately not pursued. More generally, Cooper tends to adopt a very black and white, modernist view of identity, seeing it as a question of being either English or Cornish (see, for example pp.144/145). Unwittingly occupying the same ground as the extreme Cornish nationalist position, Cooper seems unable to appreciate that identities in the early modern period could be much more contested and fluid than this with cultural and political identities perhaps ‘nesting’ in unexpected ways.12

Exploring issues of popular identity requires a certain degree of speculation and theoretical awareness as well as historical imagination. And, from the evidence of this text none of these are met with in abundance in the closeted ivory towers of English academia at Oxford. There English empiricism still reigns supreme. Such a historical approach leads to a ‘failure to find fallacy’; if it wasn’t written down then it just couldn’t have happened. Instead of adopting the sensible path that the absence of evidence for a phenomenon does not necessarily mean that such a phenomenon did not or could not have happened, in the Oxford method the empirical vacuum tends to be promptly filled by the assumptions of the historical observer, a subjectivity strangely at odds with a purportedly ‘objective’ method. Thus the possibility that
Arthur was still a folk hero in early Tudor Cornwall is discounted as ‘there is little or nothing in the way of drama or literature to prove it. This leads Cooper to disagree with Stoyle’s claim that Henry Tudor ‘aroused near-millenarian expectations among the Cornish people in 1485’ (pp.108/09). Whether it did or not, one wonders what Cooper would conclude now that we know that the newly discovered play of St Kea has an Arthurian sub-text. This should alert us to the perils of being over-dogmatic in the absence of evidence when studying this period of history.

But, if the assumptions are unexamined, the approach partial and the historical imagination limited, the underlying absence of critical depth fundamentally weakens Cooper’s argument even on its own terms. This is because they lead him to misrepresent and distort the evidence that he does find. This is particularly noticeable in two areas, though by no means confined to them. The first occurs when building up a case for popular loyalty to the Elizabethan regime and to the person of Queen Elizabeth I herself while the second is found when discussing the state of the Cornish language. And, as we shall see, this latter, being crucial for Cooper’s argument, fatally undermines it.

A central plank of the book’s overall thesis is that ‘far from being a dangerous and restless borderland, Devon and Cornwall were integrated within the allegiance demanded by the English state, and were increasingly keen to celebrate the fact’ (p.51). To prove this, Cooper relies principally on evidence in churchwardens’ and borough accounts for payments for celebrating and mourning royal births and deaths, in particular through bell ringing. These, according to him, ‘prove the existence of an earlier provincial culture of the celebration … of royal news’ (p.15). The death of Henry VIII in 1547 was thus ‘conspicuously mourned by parishes in the south west’ (p.18). Yet, later on the same page, we are informed that ‘unfortunately Cornish accounts for this year are scarce’. For scarce read virtually non-existent as the only one mentioned is Stratton. One parish at the far northern extremity of Cornwall hardly seems sufficient evidence to conclude that Cornwall ‘shared in the general reaction’ of ‘unprompted national mourning’ in 1549 (p.19). Moving on to Elizabeth’s reign, we are told that ‘by the 1570s, parishes in Devon and Cornwall were participating vigorously in the national culture of celebrating her ascension day’ (p.24). Cooper goes on to list eight Devon parishes before stating unequivocally that ‘Cornwall, too,
shared in this popular culture of loyalism’ (p.25). Yet the evidence from Cornwall comes from just three parishes: Antony (from 1579 onwards), North Petherwin and Stratton. Cooper fails to provide a map for his readers and appears to regard it as unnecessary to inform the more geographically-challenged of them of the location of these parishes at the very borders of Cornwall (North Petherwin was in fact administered as a part of county of Devon at this time).

The only evidence from the whole of the rest of Cornwall comes from Camborne. But here we are told that ‘the first definite reference to the culture of Elizabeth in Camborne comes rather later, in 1585’ (p.25). Camborne’s tardiness in joining these government-inspired ‘popular celebrations’ could equally, of course, be read as a significant exception, as the lack of any ‘popular culture of loyalism’ in the west into the 1580s. Cooper’s claim that ‘the accession day peals throughout Devon and Cornwall from the 1570s affirmed the loyalty of the distant region to the political centre’ (p.26) is supported by churchwardens evidence from less than two per cent of Cornish parishes, and those all situated on the eastern land border. Such use of evidence is disingenuous at best and downright dishonest at worst. The reality, from Cooper’s own evidence, could equally be that there is no evidence of a widespread popular culture of loyalism in Cornwall before the 1580s at the earliest. Gentry loyalism was another matter and it is not difficult to find evidence for this, as Cooper does.13

If the evidence used to buttress the central argument of popular loyalism is insufficiently sound to bear its weight, then so is the evidence cited in order to explain a limited culture of rebellion in Cornwall. For Cooper is forced to admit that the latter, had it existed, would have been found in the culture of the Cornish-speaking part of Cornwall. A chapter-length review of the play Beunans Meriasek begins confidently by attacking the ‘political and anti-English reading’ of Philip Payton. Yet the conclusion rather lamely comes around to the view that ‘it cannot be denied that Beunans Meriasek might have had political overtones to an audience in and around Camborne when staged after the uprisings of 1497’ (p.81), a conclusion that seems to bear out Payton’s original argument Cooper is forced to admit a linguistic distinctiveness had ‘important implications for the sense of Cornish identity, and the integration of the county within the rest of the kingdom during the Tudor period’
Thus far he agrees with Mark Stoyle. He also admits that in 1549 the request for the translation of the English prayer book meant that there were ‘still enough monoglot speakers of Cornish to turn the English prayer book into a political as well as religious issue’ (p.65) The distinctiveness of the culture of Tudor Cornwall rested on the continued existence of a Cornish language which could contain an ‘anti-English feeling’ (pp.254, 256).

However, in order to square this conclusion with his argument on popular loyalty and obedience, Cooper then proceeds to assert that this anti-Englishness was already by 1549 ‘residual’, found only ‘in the remote west’ and on the wane. ‘Rather than constructing the river Tamar as a cultural dividing line between the English and the Cornish, we should think in terms of a recognisably Celtic society having survived only in the extremities of Tudor Cornwall’ (p.257). Taken on its own this is a useful warning against over-enthusiastic re-writings of 16th century Cornwall in terms of 20th or 21st century nationalism. But, continuing that ‘plotting cultural maps is never an easy task, and we should be wary of claims that are too clear-cut’ (p.257) he then goes on to do exactly that. For, in order that his thesis should survive, Cooper must play down the extent of the Cornish-language community, following Richard Carew in despatching it to the ‘uttermost parts of the shire’.  

The Cornish language, we are told, ‘died east of Bodmin as early as the twelfth’ century (p.257). Only ‘isolated pockets’ in mid-Cornwall continued to use Cornish up to the Tudor period (p.71). ‘By the mid-sixteenth century, Cornish was little spoken beyond Penwith and the Lizard’ (p.65). These were ‘both pockets of land … isolated from the rest of Cornwall’ (p.257). Indeed, his enthusiastic reduction of Cornish-speaking Cornwall leads him to go even further, to claim that only ‘the parishes south and west of Helston had a particular identity’ as displayed in the language, patronymics and a fragmented field system (p.258). The absence of named ‘rebels’ in 1549 from Penwith and Kerrier Hundreds is, for Cooper, evidence that the leaders of the 1549 rising did not speak Cornish as was the proclamation of the rising at Bodmin in his view, well to the east of the Cornish language.

What evidence does Cooper employ to place the cultural divide between Cornish and English speaking communities so far west in 1549? The answer is shockingly little.
The principal secondary source cited is Crysten Fudge’s *The Life of Cornish* (1982). Whatever its strengths this popular introduction to middle Cornish was never intended to be a definitive academic text on the historical geography of Cornish. Much is also made of John Norden’s statement, coined in the 1580s, that in Cornwall ‘from Truro eastward it is in manner wholly English. In the west part of the country, as in the Hundreds of Penwith and Kerrier, the Conrish tongue is most in use amongst the inhabitants’ (p.71). Yet even Norden also wrote that ‘of late’, presumably that is in the generation before the 1580s, ‘the Cornish men have much conformed themselves to the use of the English tongue’, implying that there had been a recent language shift since the 1550s. Norden’s phrase ‘in manner wholly English’ has been seized on uncritically by those who wish to argue Cornwall east of Truro had ceased to be Cornish-speaking by the 1580s. But this is an awful lot of weight to be borne by just one ambiguous phrase.

Indeed, elsewhere in *Propaganda and the Tudor State* we are warned against relying on Norden as he was non-resident, only visited Cornwall for a few days and relied heavily on drafts of Carew’s *Survey* (p.256) This, according to Cooper, ought to make us wary of Norden’s account of the Cornish having a ‘concealed envy against the English’. Critical of Norden when it suits his case, Cooper totally accepts his description of the state of the Cornish language, losing all powers of critical analysis in this latter area.

Other evidence strongly suggests that Cooper is just plain wrong about the Cornish language, describing as fact a situation that he has constructed purely to bolster his argument that the Cornish-speaking culture, potentially harbouring subversive and anti-English sentiment, was restricted to Penwith and the Lizard by 1549. Even in east Cornwall there is evidence from placename formation that Cornish was being used in places many years after the 1100s (Dunbar and George, 1997, 158). Turning to mid-Cornwall, Padel suggests that ‘Cornish was in use in St Columb in the mid-sixteenth century’. Meanwhile, in 1583 fisherman at Gorran ‘could not speak or understand English’, while in a court case it was claimed that two women at St Ewe were talking together both ‘in Cornish and English’ in 1595. These citations, based on primary evidence and implying that Cornish was spoken in mid-Cornwall well into the sixteenth century, were available to Cooper yet he chose to ignore them, instead
concentrating on the speculations of John Norden, by his own admission a casual visitor. Other evidence he presents serves to compromise his own case. Thus he cites a production of a Cornish drama at Perran Round on Queen Mary’s succession – a strange thing to do at a time when, as he argues elsewhere in the book, no-one could understand Cornish in this district. This is followed by evidence for a play being performed in Penryn in 1587, to the east, not the west of Helston. Finally, he notes that Carew was still describing the Cornish miracle plays in the present tense as late as the 1590s (p.74).

The argument that Cornish was restricted to parishes south and west of Helston as early as 1549 (and if it was there was surprisingly little change in the geography of the language between 1549 and Lhuyd’s trip to Cornwall in 1700) is just not credible given the weight of evidence that points to language shift in Pydar and Powder Hundreds between 1550 and 1600. Such a cavalier approach to the evidence together with misplaced assumptions about language shift make Cooper’s characterisation of the cultural geography of 16th century Cornwall unreliable. Moreover, it is not difficult to find other examples elsewhere in this book of partial presentation of evidence. Thus we are informed that 91 per cent of the Cornish gentry took wives from ‘within’ Devon and Cornwall on p.253. But what we are not told is that 80 per cent of Cornish gentlemen in Tudor Cornwall married Cornish-born brides and only 11 per cent Devonians.

It is unfortunate that this book has so many empirical shortcomings. For Cooper actually makes other points that could help move us beyond the often simplistic and polarised debate about 16th century Cornwall. While not the first to raise the issue of cultural zones within Cornwall, Cooper’s observation that ‘overlapping English and Celtic languages, law and religious practices’ were contained in the one region is a fair one (p.248). But of course the ‘region’ in question was the territory of Cornwall. It was Cornwall that contained both English and Cornish language cultures. Early sixteenth century Cornwall was a land where a rough balance prevailed between these cultures. During that century, the pendulum began to swing inexorably towards the English language and, ultimately, the Cornish-speaking culture was almost extinguished. This Celtic culture could itself be viewed in larger geo-cultural terms, as the remnant of a trans-regional British culture looking to north and south, to Wales.
and particularly to Brittany. For Cornwall can be viewed as having been located at least since the 9th century on a cultural border-zone, influenced by both its maritime connections to other parts of Celtic Europe and by its land links to England to the east. Within Cornwall there has been and still is a fluctuating border, both socially and geographically, between English and non-English influence. Though the former apparently secured its hegemony in the 17th century, Cornwall’s industrial revolution restored new links with Wales, this time economic rather than cultural, while in the 20th century the Cornish revival began to revive cultural links with the rest of the Celtic world. Cornwall is, therefore, a land of two historical traditions, one that looks towards England and the east and the other taking its inspiration from places to north, south and west. Celtic, industrial and family connections combine to point away from England and towards cultural cousins in Wales and Brittany and kin cousins in those of Cornish descent scattered across the globe during the emigration of the 19th century.

Cooper’s argument about cultural zones could, moreover, be extended. He suggests there are two such zones in Cornwall, with the Cornish of east Cornwall linked more to ‘the people of Devon’ than to the Cornish-speaking western Cornish (p.202). But, while he is right to note the cultural divide within Cornwall, the repercussions of which demand a lot more serious research, he fails to apply the same argument to Devon. Devon appears as a homogenous unit, where many of the elements of an independent regional political culture – a history of insurrections, riots, piracy and tinning - also apply. But did they? And did they really apply to the whole of Devon?

It seems, on the contrary, that such traditions were confined to upland and west Devon. The ‘rebels’ of Sampford Courtenay and the tinners of Dartmoor may imply that a cultural border, though less sharp, can nonetheless be traced within 16th century Devon, separating the uplands and north west Devon from the lowlands, the large towns and southern and eastern Devon. Cooper, for example, tells us that Devon retained a community of miners, a community that, as in Cornwall, ‘developed a sense of insularity [sic] and common identity’ (p.189). Again this intriguing argument is disrupted by his need to converge the experience of the two ‘counties’ in order to construct a Devon and Cornwall region. For example, we are told that tin was a ‘major contributor to the economies of the two western counties’ and that production
in Devon exceeded its 14th century peak in the mid-16th century. That may be so but Devon still supplied just a quarter of the tin production of Cornwall in the 1540s, a proportion that then declined to a ninth by the 1590s.23 Here again, Cooper misleads his readers. He states that in 1521 Devon tin production was ‘about one half of the Cornish figure’ (p.190) But even at this exceptional period for the Devon tin industry its production according to Lewis was only 39 per cent of that of Cornwall.24 Tinning, while playing a major role in Cornish economy and society, especially in that of western Cornwall, was relatively marginal in Devon and restricted to particular locations. Cooper is forced to exaggerate tin production there as he seeks to argue that the culture of the Stannaries was not unique to Cornwall but also applied to Devon.

Nevertheless, if we ignore the manner in which the need to conflate the experiences of Devon and Cornwall deforms the use of evidence, he makes what is perhaps the most interesting point of the entire book in his chapter on ‘Duchy and Stannaries’. Here, Cooper develops a convincing case that continuing regional distinctiveness could actually work to make a place more ‘loyal to the Tudor centre’ rather than opposed to it. More specifically, the Duchy played a key role in providing both influence and income for Cornish gentry families in the 16th century and in trying to protect the populace from the risk of French and Spanish raids through the construction of coastal fortifications. This led to the population looking towards the Crown for its protection and fostered a sense of loyalty to the centre. When the Stuarts centralised the administration of the Duchy in the 1610s and 20s it was the second distinctive institution - the Stannaries – that had the ‘greater impact upon popular loyalty to the monarchy’ (p.187). By the 16th and 17th centuries the perception of the tinners was that their ‘liberties descended directly from the Crown’ rather than the Crown having merely been the arbiter of pre-existing liberties (p.199). As a result tinners remained loyal to the Crown, while not offering obedience to the gentry, a combination that neatly explains both the royalism of the 1640s and the risings of the 1490s.

If this book stimulates some research on the complex links between Crown, Duchy and Stannaries in the 16th and early 17th centuries and the way these impinged upon popular loyalties then its publication will not have been a complete waste of the earth’s resources. However, loyalism and royalism were fluid concepts in this period and a lot could change between the 1540s and 1640s, the meaning of ‘loyalty’
included. Because of this any research taking this issue further will have to be a lot more imaginative, more alert to different readings and more sensitive to what the sources might be telling us than the reading that underpins *Propaganda and the Tudor State*. More generally, Cooper’s book might have served to open up a debate about the binary tradition that underlies Cornwall’s history and that explains a good deal of the conflicts and tensions of the early modern period. Ultimately, however, it fails to address the subtlety of the Cornish condition as it is drawn by its agenda to enhance the role of one tradition at the expense of the other. In doing this it becomes just a mirror image of the approach that it condemns in other historians of Cornwall.
6 Ian Arthurson, ‘ in Truro, 1997,
11 See, for example the chapters by Amy Hale and Alan Kent in David Harvey, Rhys Jones, Neil McInroy and Christine Milligan (eds), *Celtic geographies: old culture, new times*, London, 2002.
13 And see Chynoweth, *Tudor Cornwall*.
15 This latter point is dealt with by Stoyle, *West Britons*, 23/24.
16 See also Duffin, *Faction and Faith*, 2.
18 Oliver Padel, ‘Cornish Language notes: 3’, *Cornish Studies* 3 (1975), 22.
23 G.R. Lewis, *The Stannaries: a study of the medieval tin miners of Cornwall and Devon*, Boston, 1907, 253-54.