

A prophet with honour: an appreciation of the work of Ronald Perry

With the death of Ronald Perry in 2016, the New Cornish Studies, concerned with contemporary Cornwall, lost a key practitioner. In 1993 Ronald noted wryly that Exeter University academics had claimed in 1947 that only after many years of residence would people understand the 'strange mentality of people in remote and rural parts'.¹ Ever the gentleman and unfailingly polite, he would never have dreamt of patronising its native inhabitants in such a way. On the contrary, it had not taken Ronald, resident in Cornwall from 1965, too long to become someone who understood Cornwall and its problems a lot better than most of those born and brought up there.

Ronald's work can be neatly divided into two phases. The first, covering the years from 1974 to the early 1990s, produced a series of studies of the Cornish economy. Initially, these were based on research projects directed by Ronald and conducted by his students at Cornwall College's Faculty of Management, Business and Professional Studies. An early spotlight on employment issues was then turned onto the population turnaround in Cornwall that had been ongoing since the 1960s. Ronald led a pioneering survey of in-migration to mid and west Cornwall in 1982/83, analysing this as part of the wider phenomenon of counterurbanisation. His conclusions about the nature of the Cornish economy and the role of population growth led him towards an opposition economics that persistently critiqued the taken-for-granted strategies of Cornwall's policy-makers.²

Ronald's second phase of published work, after retirement in the 1990s, concentrated on an older Cornwall – producing an influential re-assessment of the economic history of the late Victorian and Edwardian period. Uncovering a dynamic native 'modernising bourgeoisie', Ronald focused on one person, throwing himself into the work of the Silvanus Trevail Society. A series of short articles flowed from that, many written in collaboration with Hazel Harradence, and in 2008 the co-written book on Silvanus Trevail appeared. By that point, Ronald was also working closely with Charles Thurlow and publishing a parallel stream of works on the clay industry. Again, this found its ultimate outlet in a book on the clay industry in Cornwall (as well as Devon and Dorset), published in 2010 as *Extraordinary Earths*.³

Five features marked Ronald's contribution to our understanding of modern Cornwall. The first was a sound and robust foundation of empirical data. The second was a willingness to challenge and dispel taken-for-granted myths. This led inexorably to the third, the proposal of alternative approaches and an uncanny ability to prefigure later developments. In short, Ronald was often well ahead of the game. Fourth, Ronald's output was marked by a willingness to collaborate with and advise others. The number of co-written books and articles is testament to his ability to work with a wide variety of other scholars, all of whom he managed to get along with, a major achievement in its own right. Finally, the thread that bound Ronald's work together can be seen in his consistent desire to re-assess and rehabilitate the role of native actors in Cornwall's economy, both in the present and the past. For him, the glass always seemed half full rather than half empty. Whether his theme was contemporary or historic Cornwall, Ronald opened a window onto the opportunities co-existing with economic and social change. Furthermore, he linked the history of nineteenth and twentieth century Cornwall to the situation in which we find ourselves in the early twenty-first, identifying the historical roots of our present predicament.

Ronald's early work on the Cornish economy was mainly published under the auspices of the Cornish Industrial Development Association (CIDA), set up in 1974. His pioneering empirical work on the Cornish economy aimed to produce an 'internally coherent and consistent model of the Cornish economy'. Ronald first dispelled various myths, some of which still unaccountably linger on into this century. For example, in his very first report, he pointed out that retirement migration

was not the major component of inward flows to Cornwall in the 1960s. In contrast, people of working age made up the majority of in-migrants, attracted by the short-lived growth in manufacturing jobs that marked the decade preceding the oil crisis of 1973/74.⁴

Ronald cast a critical eye over this growth and found a 'rising tide of branch-factory implantations and acquisitions by outside interests'. Its branch factory economy made Cornwall more sensitive to external shocks and more dependent on outside decision-making. Moreover, his research discovered that independent entrepreneurs establishing new businesses in Cornwall had a high failure rate. This fed a growing scepticism about the dynamic, incoming entrepreneur myth that still casts a long shadow over policy-makers in Cornwall. In stark contrast, Ronald's careful empirical dissection convinced him that the supposedly dynamic in-migrants were in too many cases 'satisficers', with a strong leisure orientation. While 'not seeking a life of leisure, they were often looking for a more leisured life-style' and ended up reinforcing the semi-retirement atmosphere he saw around him. As his work on the Cornish economy progressed, Ronald became aware that prevalent images reinforced Cornwall's economic disadvantages. Principal among these was the 'employer's (and planner's) perception of Cornwall as a remote terminal of a land-locked system in which everything begins and ends at London', a view he pithily dismissed as a 'steam-age mentality'.⁵

Along with supporting businesses rooted in Cornwall's 'natural strengths', which for Ronald included new skill clusters around health care, food processing, heritage tourism and the care of the elderly and disabled, as well as more traditional pursuits like fishing and mining, he was also swimming against the centralist tide. In the early 1980s, he pointed out that 'small is peripheral' need not be the case and noted the 'extraordinary over-centralisation of decision-making in this country'. One of his main themes became the need for 'recentralisation'. A key element in this was Cornwall's under-used maritime location. The sea was not a barrier but a highway and Cornwall was not a remote terminus at the end of a road, but at the heart of a potential Atlantic economy.⁶ He began to study the way Breton business leaders had forged an economic renaissance in the 1970s. In parallel with an interest in the recentralisation occurring in Finistere, Ronald continued to urge policy-makers to make more of Cornwall's strengths. In addition, he called for office jobs to be relocated to Cornwall to provide more opportunities for women, and prefigured later moves in the 2000s to improve Cornwall's informational and intellectual infrastructure. He could also come up with more left-field proposals. These included suggestions that everyone in Cornwall should learn French, that businesses in Cornwall could be part of the London telephone exchange and that the Camborne-Redruth by-pass might be used as a race track. Not surprisingly, these did not get much further than the drawing board.

Even in the 1970s, Ronald was acutely aware of the increase of working age migration to Cornwall. As the manufacturing boom of the early 1970s fizzled out and then dissolved, yet in-migration continued at a high level, he turned to the 'puzzle' of why people continued to flock to a disadvantaged, low-wage area, contradicting established economic wisdom. Ronald had, as early as 1976, brought the unwelcome news to planners that if their efforts to raise income succeeded then the flow of migrants 'would become a deluge'. He had also recognised the 'futility of policies that created more jobs, which were then promptly filled by people who moved to fill them', who then required more jobs, a paradox that policy-makers in the 2010s still prefer not to dwell on. By the mid-1980s Ronald was presciently predicting that the 'challenge for the next several decades will be to cope with the influx of people whilst preserving the very features that these people come in search of', a conundrum we are still failing to solve.⁷

The major survey into in-migration in selected areas of mid and west Cornwall, conducted by Ronald and his team in 1982/83, surprisingly remains the only major analysis of a phenomenon that

has been central to the re-shaping of modern Cornwall. Placing this in the context of a counterurbanisation process recognised across the 'developed' world, Ronald and his associates found that the 'new settlers' in Cornwall were not classic 'clean-breakers', giving up the urban rat race for a slower, back to the land existence. They were in fact 'notably higher in educational attainments, of superior socio-economic status ... and more likely to be owner-occupiers', clustering in the more attractive coastal and rural areas, 'a group of middle-class, middle-aged people, continuing traditional urban-based working lives in new, and preferred, surroundings.' Moreover, the West Cornwall Study of in-migration was an early example of a smaller-mesh micro-scale approach to Cornish society, pre-empting later calls for more attention to be paid to intra-Cornwall differences by at least a decade.⁸

Ronald's localised research conveyed unwelcome news for many Cornish men and women. The 'bourgeois invasion' of the 1960s and 70s, together with other economic changes, had finally destroyed a traditional Cornwall based on farming, fishing, mining and Methodism. As a participant in the in-migration process which he was describing, Ronald was able to use language that, if employed by a Cornish person, might have been met with howls of disapproval. He did not pull his punches. Cornwall was 'swamped by a flood of middle-class, middle-aged, middle-browed city-dwellers who effectively imposed their standards upon local society'. Integration and assimilation was a one-way process - of 'urbanisation' rather than 'ruralisation'. The tripartite structure he detected, of an English majority, a large anglicised native minority, and a marginal group of Celtic and Cornish enthusiasts, had resulted in an 'irremediable loss of rich traditions', while being a 'tragedy' for Cornish nationalists.⁹

Some of those Cornish nationalists were less pessimistic. In 1976, in a report from CIDA, Ronald had been careful to distance his work from 'nationalistic' aims, even while calling for 'regional democracy or devolution'.¹⁰ However, over the next decade his work on Cornwall's branch-plant economy and in-migration and his growing advocacy of recentralisation, was, wittingly or unwittingly, leading to a convergence with some in the loose 'Cornish movement' who had been influenced by ideas of internal colonialism. Two of us made contact with Ronald in the 1980s, at first taking issue with his pessimism about the prospects for the native Cornish and assuring him we were alive and well, if a little dispirited. At around the same time, Ronald and Ann turned up to enrol on a WEA class on Cornish history that I was running at Cornwall College. All this helped the process of convergence, as did the lucky accident of Cornwall College's Management Department sharing Trevenon House with the Institute of Cornish Studies in the 1970s and 80s.

Recentralisation, and the need to 'alter both the self-image of its local leaders and the perception of its outside rulers', was central to *Cornwall at the Crossroads*, which, with Andrew George, we co-wrote in 1988. This collaboration was in hindsight the inevitable outcome of Ronald's growing admiration and identification with Cornwall's 'democratic, egalitarian and cellular society with its structure of dispersed and self-contained settlements and its distaste for rigid hierarchies', his support for indigenous business ventures and his scepticism about the benefits of counter-urbanisation.¹¹ *Cornwall at the Crossroads* painted a more optimistic picture of a different route for Cornwall. Unfortunately however, its policy prescriptions and Ronald's vision of a recentralised Cornwall came to little, coinciding as they did with the hegemony of neoliberal free-market ideologies. Cornwall's political elites stuck with the same familiar and failed strategies. As they did so Ronald turned to the second phase of his work, studies of Cornwall's history, focusing on the period from the 1890s to 1914.

This second phase of Ronald's prolific output intimately followed on from his concerns with modern Cornwall, its economic structure and the problems of regeneration. He had earlier identified

a group of medium-sized companies in Cornwall - Holmans, Silley and Cox, Harveys, J and F. Pool, English China Clays - that had been 'thoughtful and outward looking in the first half of the twentieth century'.¹² This stimulated a search for the roots of this indigenous entrepreneurial talent, a quest that took Ronald back to the late Victorian and Edwardian period.

Earlier interpretations had seen this period as a 'great paralysis'.¹³ As the sun set on the glorious days of Cornish mining, its capital was dissipated and its people scattered to the four corners of the globe. Cornwall was socially and economically scorched earth, pathetically dependent on remittances sent back from those more enterprising folk who had left for mining frontiers overseas. Here was a conservative backwater, immured in introspective defeatism with dreamers of Celtic twilights obscuring its industrial legacy and jostling with other romantics yearning equally hopelessly for a return of the great days of mining. Ronald rejected this picture, pointing to the economic diversification that swept the Cornish economy after the mid-1890s. The expansion of tourism, clay works, shipyards, dairy farms, market gardens, engineering and dynamite works was for him hardly evidence for socio-economic torpor. In fact it raised serious questions about the 'great paralysis'.

Ronald proceeded to replace the accepted, gloomy interpretation with an alternative narrative. The contraction of mining was not all bad. On the contrary, it released constraints and opened up opportunities in sectors where Cornwall enjoyed a comparative advantage. In short, the 1900s saw a 'remission in the great paralysis'.¹⁴ However, this turned out to be another of those 'false dawns' that Ronald noted in the 1900s, 1950s and 1970s. (We may now perhaps add the 2000s.) These were periods when the Cornish economy seemed to be surmounting its chronic problems, only be dragged back into depression by external factors, missed opportunities and policy follies.

Ronald's assessment of the economic history of the Edwardian period rescued the Cornish bourgeoisie of the time from obscurity. These 'establishment antiquarians' were not the romantic, anti-industrial group portrayed by Cornish Studies specialists.¹⁵ They were modernisers, making use of return migrants and remittances to renovate the Cornish economy. The cultural 'renaissance' of the Cornish revival and industrial regeneration were firmly reserved for separate compartments, but not at all incompatible. This 'modernising bourgeoisie' was as dynamic as their buccaneering predecessors of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century had been.

From 1996 Ronald threw himself into the work of the Silvanus Trevail Society. Quarrying the huge archive left by Trevail, the Society's members restored the reputation of this 'true adventurer'. Trevail's clashes with local vested interests, the 'riots' at Newquay in 1897 around his Atlantic and Headland Hotels, and his eventual suicide had clouded his memory. However, in a series of articles, which later formed the core of an extremely readable book, Ronald, with Hazel Harradence, outlined the kaleidoscopic and energetic life of this Cornish architect, detailing the scores of schools, libraries, hotels, houses and public buildings he designed over his too short lifespan. His role as an early publicist of 'Celtic tourism' was approvingly noted, while Trevail served as a case study for the comparatively under-explored themes of return migrants, remittances, and the difficulties encountered in overcoming the pretensions of civic pride among Cornwall's 'independent city-states'.¹⁶

Overlapping his interest in Trevail, Ronald turned in the late 2000s to the pre First World War clay industry. There he found an under-appreciated group of modernisers in the clay merchants of the St Austell district. A series of articles co-written with Charles Thurlow eventually came together in *Extraordinary Earths*, the history of the early clay industry not just of Cornwall but Devon and Dorset too. The wider comparison with the Devon ball clay industry allowed the authors to re-

interpret the clay strike of 1913. Their re-assessment extended to the clay masters, who were 'prophets without honour in their own country', treated only incidentally and cursorily by the considerable number of writers mid-Cornwall gave birth to in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In a revision of their role, Ronald and Charles dispelled the myth of technological backwardness that clung to the pre-1914 clay industry. Instead, the clay bourgeoisie had overseen an unrecognised but unprecedented 'transformation in extraction, refining and materials handling', while finding new markets for their product and achieving a massive rise in productivity that would have been the envy of most other British industries.¹⁷

Thus Ronald ended his prodigious output as he had begun it, by re-discovering the role of a dynamic group of native businessmen and entrepreneurs. He was acutely aware of the seeds of genuine, endogenously-led regeneration that could release native energies and offer a lifeline for our future, reminding us and future generations of the abilities and potential of the indigenous Cornish. Together with his rehabilitation of a Cornish entrepreneurial class, Ronald has bequeathed a number of enduring concepts to Cornish Studies. In particular, his identification of the spatial fragmentation that followed the decline of mining is a key factor in explaining Cornwall's twentieth century history. Moreover, his re-assessment of the 'great paralysis' succeeded in re-writing the accepted account of later Victorian and Edwardian history. Ronald will be sadly missed. But, after mourning, we should remember and act on his advice; the point is to 'valorize ... Cornish difference, not essentialize it'.¹⁸

- 1 Ronald Perry, 'Cornwall circa 1950', in Philip Payton (ed.), *Cornwall Since the War*, Redruth, 1993, p.45.
- 2 A good summary of Ronald's early work appears in R.A.Nichol and R.W.Perry (eds), *A Brief History of Cornwall Industrial Development Association 1974-1992*, Redruth, 1993.
- 3 Ronald Perry and Hazel Harradence, *Silvanus Trevail: Cornish Architect and Entrepreneur*, London, 2008; Ronald Perry and Charles Thurlow, *Extraordinary Earths: The story of ball clay, china clay, soapstone & china stone from Cornwall, Devon & Dorset 1700 to 1914*, St Austell, 2010.
- 4 Ronald Perry, 'The Cornish economy: the scope and method of the surveys undertaken by the Cornish Industrial Development Association', in Gareth Shaw and Allan Williams, *Industrial Change in Cornwall; proceedings of a seminar on the collection and analysis of data*, Exeter, 1981, p.29 and *the Employment Situation in Cornwall*, Redruth, 1974, p.vi.
- 5 Ronald Perry, 'The role of the small manufacturing business in Cornwall's economic development', in Gareth Shaw and Allan Williams (eds), *Economic Development and Policy in Cornwall*, Exeter, 1982, p.30; *The impact of manufacturing expansion upon employment stability in Cornwall 1974 to 1976*, Redruth, 1976; 'Small manufacturing business', 1982, p.33; *Brief history*, 1993, p.35, 'Small manufacturing business', 1982, p.38.
- 6 Ronald Perry, 'Economic change and "opposition" economics', in Philip Payton (ed.), *Cornwall Since the War*, Redruth, 1993, p.71; 'Small manufacturing business', 1982, p.31 and *the Economy of Cornwall*, Redruth, 1976, p.7; *Brief history*, 1993, pp.11-17.
- 7 Perry, *The Impact*, 1976; *Brief History*, 1993, p.33; R. Perry, P. Noble and S. Howie, *The Economic Influences of the Arts and Crafts in Cornwall*, Exeter, 1986.
- 8 Ronald Perry, Ken Dean and Bryan Brown, *Counterurbanisation: International Case Studies of Urban to Rural Movement*, Norwich, 1986; Ronald Perry, 'Some economic and social impacts of recent working-age in-migrants on west Cornwall', *Cornish Studies* 12 (1986), pp.49 and 51; *The Impact of Counterurbanisation in Cornwall: a preliminary examination of conceptual and empirical issues*, Plymouth, 1983, p.8. For the later calls for a similar approach see Bernard Deacon, 'In search of the missing 'turn': the spatial dimension and Cornish Studies', in Philip Payton (ed.), *Cornish Studies Eight*, Exeter, 2000, pp.213-30.
- 9 Perry et al. *Counterurbanisation*, 1986, p.129; Ronald Perry, *Population Turnaround in Cornwall and Finistere: Contrasting models of development in the rural periphery*, Plymouth, 1987, p.65.
- 10 Ronald Perry, *The Economy of Cornwall*, Redruth, 1976, p.2.
- 11 Ronald Perry, 'Self-image, external perceptions and development strategy in Cornwall', in M.A.Havinden, J.Quéniart and J.Stanyer (eds), *Centre and Periphery: Brittany and Cornwall & Devon compared*, Exeter, 1991, p.232; Bernard Deacon, Andrew George and Ronald Perry, *Cornwall at the Crossroads*, Redruth, 1988; 'Economic change', 1993, p.79.
- 12 Perry, 'Cornwall circa 1950', 1993, p.34.
- 13 For the 'great paralysis' see Philip Payton, *The Making of Modern Cornwall*, Redruth, 1992, pp.119-38.
- 14 Ronald Perry, 'A remission in the Great Paralysis', *Cornish History Network Newsletter* 3 (1998), p.2; 'The making of modern Cornwall 1800-2000: a geo-economic perspective', in Philip Payton (ed.), *Cornish Studies Ten*, Exeter, 2002, pp.166-89.
- 15 Ronald Perry, 'Celtic Revival and economic development in Edwardian Cornwall', in Philip Payton (ed.), *Cornish Studies Five*, Exeter, 1997, p.118.
- 16 For Ronald's work on Trevail see the various articles in the *Silvanus Trevail Society Newsletter* from 1997 to 2010; 'Silvanus Trevail and the development of modern tourism in Cornwall', *Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall* NS2/3 (1999), pp.33-42 and Perry and Harradence, *Silvanus Trevail*, 2008.
- 17 Perry and Thurlow, *Extraordinary Earths*, 2010; 'The 1913 china clay dispute: "One and all" or "one – that's all"', in Philip Payton (ed.), *Cornish Studies Fourteen*, Exeter, 2006, pp.187-2903; 'Literati and claymasters 1870-1914: an unexplored interface', *Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall*, 2006, pp.45-56; 'Technological change in the Victorian china clay industry', *Journal of the Trevithick Society* 33 (2006), pp.72-76 and articles in the *China Clay History Society Newsletter*, 2005-2008.
- 18 Perry, 'The making', 2002, p.185.