

## DECONSTRUCTING KERNOWEK KEMYN: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF *AGAN YETH 4*

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In 2003 the UK government belatedly and somewhat reluctantly included Cornish among the languages it was statutorily bound to protect under the terms of the Council of Europe's Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. As a result the Cornish language entered a new world. Throughout the twentieth century it had been the jealously guarded preserve of the tiny group of voluntary amateurs attracted to the Cornish Revivalist movement. But now its status has become that of a public language, the heritage of the Cornish people and the birthright of all those who live and will live in Cornwall. This is a momentous step. But the potential benefits are threatened by the failure of the twentieth century Cornish Revival to produce an agreed system for spelling Cornish. Instead, a deep and apparently irreconcilable divide exists between proponents of different spelling systems for the revived language. As a result, many observers sympathetic to the language have called for the involvement of outside experts to establish a standard written form of Cornish for use in schooling and in signage.

The demand for outside involvement stems from a major frustration confronting anyone attempting to evaluate and assess the current debate on the way Cornish should be spelt. For all contributors to the debate share the same shortcoming. They are all pleading a special case for one or other of the existing spelling systems. The three papers in *Agan Yeth: Cornish Language Studies 4*, by Pol Hodge, Ken George and Julyan Holmes, are no exception. They set out a vigorously argued case why Kernowek Kemyn "should now be used officially in public documentation and in education". But in doing so they also turn a blind eye to the widely-expressed demand for a compromise standardized Cornish spelling system that might be more inclusive and acceptable to *all* users of Cornish. This article contains a preliminary assessment of some of the arguments in *Agan Yeth 4*.

Of course, I am not immune to this criticism; I cannot escape the fundamental problems bedeviling this long overdue "debate" about Cornish spelling. This contribution too is an example of special pleading. Ultimately, I believe that the base of Cornish should be shifted to somewhere around 1700, in order to get as close as possible to the eminently sensible proposal put forward by John Humphreys on Radio 4 (17 September 2005) that revived Cornish should pick up at the point when its native speakers ceased to use the vernacular language. After all, had Cornish survived into the age of the tape recorder, as did Manx, we would not be having this debate. The vast majority of languages trace a continuity of development to the versions spoken in the present day. Only in the most unusual circumstances does a society decide to break that chain and consciously revert to an archaic form of the language spoken half a millennium earlier. Yet this is exactly what those who have chosen late medieval Cornish have done, in my view mistakenly, when sufficient knowledge now exists of the language in its more modern form for the latter to be the preferred form. This "common-sense" default position for any revived language—pick up where the last speakers left off—should only be rejected in exceptional circumstances. The case of those who wish to use a medieval base for Cornish has to be equally exceptional in

order to convince the 99.95% of people in Cornwall who cannot speak Cornish to follow them.

However, I do not intend to spend the rest of this paper building a case for Revived Late Cornish. Instead, I want to deconstruct the arguments put forward by our Kernowek Kemyn colleagues. First, the publication of these articles is to be welcomed. The authors of *Agan Yeth 4* have taken a major step forward by admitting that a debate about the spelling of Cornish actually exists, and they should be congratulated on this belated recognition. Their willingness to discuss this must now be embraced openly and transparently by their detractors. Nevertheless, the three articles in *Agan Yeth 4* contain the usual strange combination that we have come to expect from those who defend Kernowek Kemyn, namely a mix of “scientific” truth statements asserted with excessive bravado combined with highly questionable assumptions, the whole shot through with glaring contradictions. I do not intend to confront directly here the linguistic content of the arguments put forward in *Agan Yeth 4*, leaving that to others who are far better qualified to do so. Instead I want to use this as an occasion to foreground some less familiar aspects of the language debate, ones that are usually ignored by defenders and critics of Kernowek Kemyn alike. These lie outside the preferred linguistic paradigm within which the “debate” is artificially restricted, at least on the surface. I intend to discuss the language used in *Agan Yeth 4* to discuss language rather than its content. I want to use this opportunity to examine the rhetorical strategy employed by Kernowek Kemyn supporters and the values explicitly or implicitly underlying their arguments. The debate about which Cornish spelling system to use is at heart not a question of simply identifying and adopting the “correct” linguistic solution but one about competing assumptions about what the Cornish language actually is and what its purpose should be in the twenty-first century.

The three articles in *Agan Yeth 4* aim to construct a particular mental model of Cornish. In doing this they provide a fascinating insight into the mind-set of the Kernowek Kemyn evangelist. Their arguments might be viewed as comprising a discourse, a set of related concepts, statements and suppositions that convey their macroproposition—that the late medieval period is the best basis for the revived language and that Kernowek Kemyn is the preferable way to spell it. A series of local meanings are then created through the implications, presuppositions, allusions, etc., adopted and through the lexical and syntactical choices the authors make.

### **THE ASSUMPTIONS OF KERNOWEK KEMYN**

My intention here is to uncover the taken for granted assumptions of the Kernowek Kemyn project. Ultimately, its discourse of Cornish revolves around its value system rather than technical arguments over quantity rules, minimal pairs and phonemes. The most obvious unstated assumption of the Kernowek Kemyn position flows from its manifest strength. George has done valuable work in uncovering the phonology and pronunciation of one form of Cornish—that of the late medieval period—and the spelling system he came up with seeks to be direct, cutting through the ambiguities of historical spellings. (Although in practice it fails to do this – see the criticisms in Williams 2001.) However, there is a tendency to assume the language had a larger number of phonemes at any given point in time than it probably did—“in cases of doubt, KK defaults to more rather than fewer phonemes” (p. 21). This appears a somewhat strange default situation given the apparent aim of simplifying

Cornish for learners. But let's try to escape the details for a moment and look at the wood rather than get lost in the trees.

Core defenders of Kernowek Kemyn adopt a narrow and restrictive genre for discussion—that of linguistics. In doing so they echo the tendency of the historic Revival and collude with some of their detractors, who also contain debate within this genre. The net result of such a genre selection is conveniently to restrict the debate to those schooled in the terminology of linguistics, excluding all other factors as being irrelevant. This allows the gatekeepers of the language to confine discussion to a tiny proportion of, in the main self-appointed, “experts” who have the right to speak, while prohibiting all others who may have a stake in the language and who feel equally deeply about it. As the Cornish language is the birthright of all those who consider themselves Cornish and of generations yet unborn who might wish to learn about their heritage, to restrict debate in this way only to “experts” in linguistics or “fluent” Cornish speakers is to adopt a mind-boggingly exclusive franchise. On the contrary, given that the twentieth century Revival only created a relatively tiny pool of such “fluent” speakers, we have a unique historic opportunity to involve as many people as possible in the consultation over a standardized spelling, as Cornish tentatively moves from the private to the public sphere and into the light of public scrutiny. Indeed, I would go further. We have a positive duty to widen out the debate if public money is now going to be used to support the language.

With half an eye on that impending public scrutiny much is made in this issue of *Agan Yeth* of “choice”: “most Cornish speakers have already chosen KK as their standard written form” (p. 27) and “the majority of speakers have already chosen this as their standard” (p. 34). Putting aside the pathetically small number of “speakers” for a moment, what “choice” has in reality been exercised by consumers of Cornish? As Kernowek Kemyn inherited the institutional resources of the language movement and the Cornish Language Board in the 1980s it also benefited from the legitimacy of apparent continuity, not to mention the publishing resources of the Board, which enthusiastically set about re-publishing Cornish texts in this newer version of medieval Cornish. Thus, when the curious seeker after knowledge met Cornish texts in bookshops and libraries, the chances were that they were Kernowek Kemyn texts. And when enquiring after local Cornish classes the likelihood was that these would be using Kernowek Kemyn. However, in how many of these texts or classes was the putative learner actually offered a choice? In how many texts and classes is the background to the current pluralist spellings of Cornish set out and the criteria for making a sensible choice explained, coolly and logically?

In reality, very little if no information has been provided by Kernowek Kemyn or by organizations such as the Language Board and magazines such as *An Gannas* that have adopted it (or by other Cornish language organizations come to that) that might come anywhere near providing our Cornish punters with useful information on which meaningful choices can be based. Quite the opposite, as we have all met Kernowek Kemyn learners who, at an advanced stage, still seem oblivious to the fact that there is more than one form of “Cornish”. “Choice” is precisely what is not on offer. This can be further illustrated by looking at the organization Kowethas an Yeth Kernewek. This body noisily re-launched itself in 2005 as an umbrella for all forms of Cornish. Yet the more prosaic reality is readily visible on its website, where the only Cornish on offer is Kernowek Kemyn.

Furthermore, there are no links to the websites of organizations using other spellings and an entire absence of information on the background to the spelling debate. For 'Cornish' read "Kernowek Kemyn". Real "choice" requires real, and as far as possible objective, information and that information is seriously lacking at present.

Choice implies pluralism and diversity and it is gratifying to see that the authors of *Agan Yeth 4* at last admit that pluralism is a feature of the current Cornish language movement. Yet the Kernowek Kemyn learner remains locked in an imagined world of uniformity and homogeneity. This is a world of Cornish rather than Cornishes, where there is just one pronunciation of Cornish, where one spelling provides signs faithfully recording clear sounds which never change. But in reality, as George states, "like any language, the number of phonemes in traditional Cornish changed over time, and we cannot be sure of how many there were at a given epoch" (p. 21). However, this careful recognition of complexity is replaced by a confident, arrogant certainty on the part of George's disciples who, running amok on internet discussion lists, apparently sincerely believe that they are dealing with a transparently simple language where each sound can be represented by one symbol. The less comfortable truth is that the phonemes of Cornish have changed radically over the course of its history since the language appeared over the horizon of literacy in the fourteenth century.

The historical language was anything but homogenous (like all living languages). Indeed, it's claimed here that there was a major change in pronunciation somewhere in the fifteenth or early sixteenth centuries (p. 31). Because of this we face an unavoidable choice; on which era do we base our pronunciation of Cornish? Kernowek Kemyn has in theory chosen 1500 (p. 31). But why this date? As George admits, if he was "starting from scratch with reviving Cornish ... there would be an argument for going the other way, i.e. earlier" (p. 33), presumably basing the pronunciation on the Cornish of, say, 1400. In reality, placename evidence might suggest that the base of revived middle Cornish is indeed more like 1350. However, such proper uncertainty over a chosen date then dissolves as the *Agan Yeth 4* authors unite in demanding that "the spoken system must be accurate" (p. 41). But, as their own discussion makes crystal clear, there are a number of different historic pronunciations and therefore a number of potentially "accurate" possible spelling systems. A choice must be made. George has gone for 1500 although revived middle Cornish is based de-facto on a far earlier date; I prefer a date around 1700; others want to go for 1550 or 1600. Unfortunately, the discussion about which epoch to base Cornish on now appears to take second place. It needs to be reopened and resolved first before we can begin to talk about "accurate" spelling systems.

Furthermore, an aim of achieving "accuracy", a "logical systematized" spelling based on Cornish as it was at one fixed point in time may well be incompatible with another stated aim that a standard should be "compatible with all styles of Cornish ... of every period" (p.41). George argues that "it would be possible to read a passage written in KK using the pronunciation of LateC. But it would need some practice" (p. 32). But why on earth would we want to read Modern Cornish in Kernowek Kemyn when a perfectly valid and easier alternative exists—a logically systemized spelling system based on the pronunciation of Late Cornish? This possibility would be aesthetically more pleasing, simpler to learn, more fluent when heard spoken and possess clear and transparent links to the traces of the language that

exist around us in the twenty-first century Cornish environment. That possibility already existed even in 1986 as George shows in his thesis and in *The Pronunciation and Spelling of Revived Cornish* (pp. 110ff), where the phonemes of “Late” Cornish are set out in some detail. Now that we know much more about the pronunciation of Modern Cornish it is surely time to revisit its hasty and premature rejection in the mid-1980s, based on an over-simplistic discussion (George, 1986, pp.33-34).

In seeking “accuracy”, Kernowek Kemyn’s greatest strength, its single-minded systematization, becomes also its greatest weakness. In emphasizing systematization and phonemic, morphemic and etymological fitness Kernowek Kemyn loses sight of the historical language as it really was. Fundamentally, they are not discussing the really existing language at all, with all its quirks, ambiguities and inconsistencies, but a Cornish language as they wish it had been. Moreover, the disturbing implications of a language that did not live up to their expectations are air-brushed out of the picture through constructing a conceptual binary polarization between Cornish and English and, by implication, between “good” and “bad”.

### **CONSTRUCTING THE KERNOWEK KEMYN “OTHER”**

All three authors are at great pains to differentiate between Cornish and English; the two languages, we are reminded incessantly, are “distinct” (e.g. pp. 11, 14). This desire to keep them hermeneutically separate reaches the height of absurdity with the claim that “Kernesh (Cornish dialect) is not a bridge between the two [English and Cornish]. It is also a separate language in its own right” (p. 11). If Anglo-Cornish dialect is a separate language then clearly a rather loose definition of language is being adopted. But even this flimsy argument must be pursued in order to ram home the message that Cornish is different from English. In the Kernowek Kemyn world English borrowings are not just “borrowings”; they become “flagrant borrowings” (p. 29), corrupting the pure unsullied language of their imagination. Changes in pronunciation as the language developed are not just linguistic developments. They have to be sorted between “those features which were a natural development in Cornish and those which could be interpreted as corruptions from English” (p. 33). The key word here is “interpreted” for there is little if no *scientific* justification for such a distinction. Pursuing the chimera of linguistic purity in this way leads to the view that what Cornish people were actually saying—in Cornish—by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was a “breakdown” and should be rejected as it destroys the “unity” of the language (p. 37). This is a romanticized idea of “unity” which, together with notions of purity and Celticity, has for too long been imposed on the Cornish language by the Revival. The genre of scientific linguistics slips here, to reveal the language of nineteenth century romantic nationalism. Within this, every nation had to have its distinct language and each language had to seek uncontaminated purity.

It’s a short step for the Kernowek Kemyn enthusiast to define their opponents as those “people” who are “so attached to ... English graphemes” (p. 23). If Cornish is distinct from English any opposition to Kernowek Kemyn can be conveniently re-defined as “English influence” (p. 23) and those who demur from the project to differentiate Cornish as far as possible from English stand accused by implication of un-Cornish activities. “Is Cornish in an English style really what we want?” (p. 17) then becomes a rhetorical question with which no right-minded Cornish patriot would dare to disagree.

This disturbingly totalitarian argument serves to distract attention from the fundamental problem at the core of the Kernowek Kemyn case. We read that Old Cornish, Middle Cornish and Late Cornish were not “distinctive Cornish orthographies”, but were “English” (p. 20). All historical Cornish literature was therefore actually “English” in its spelling. Even Middle Cornish, the chosen basis for Kernowek Kemyn, was, in its written form, “over-rated” and was merely “based on English” (p. 30). This notion, that all the written Cornish handed down to us by our ancestors was affected by English, should tell us something. It surely tells us that Cornish, in all its historical phases, did in fact borrow freely from English vocabulary and was in fact influenced by English grammar—something hardly unexpected given the relative power of the two languages. It also chimes with a broader historical reality. However much we might regret it, Cornish culture and society has been bound up with and affected by its neighbour to the east of the Tamar for at least a millennium. Nineteenth century romantic nationalist dreams are just that—romantic dreams—and bear little relation to the unsettling truth which is that Cornish is not totally distinct from English. Granted, Cornish is a different language, but it is not and has not been, since the first miracle play was written, uninfluenced by English.

But Kernowek Kemyn logic denies this unpalatable truth, preferring to take refuge in its own fantasy world where Cornish is sealed from the “corrupting” influence of English. Determined to avoid English at all costs they do not stop with the unjustifiable rejection of widely used English vocabulary in Middle Cornish (see Williams 1997, 174–79). Their logic leads them to reject historic Cornish spellings entirely. Kernowek Kemyn is proud to have moved furthest from Middle Cornish spelling and revels in being “less close to the MidC textual spellings than either Unified or UCR” (p. 31). At the same time, ironically, Modern Cornish is criticized in *Agan Yeth 4* as creating “a complete barrier between the new Cornish user and the bulk of traditional Cornish literature” (p. 41). Yet Kernowek Kemyn itself creates a barrier between the Cornish user and all Cornish literature of whatever period. At least the Modern Cornish learner is able to read the Cornish of the Bosons, Rowe, Tonkin, Gwavas and company. But Kernowek Kemyn learners are airily told that “if anyone seriously wishes to study the texts, then they must use the original spelling in the manuscripts” (p. 31). In its written form Kernowek Kemyn has ceased to be “Cornish” in any recognizably historic sense even while claiming to base its pronunciation on the Cornish of the late medieval period. Links with history are broken in the name of a linguistic purity that denies what really happened in the past. It is this denial of our past that others cannot accept. And, inevitably, Kernowek Kemyn is unable in practice to deny that past. For its whole case is premised on the basis of re-interpreting spellings which were “English”. When necessary, Kernowek Kemyn spellings are justified because “they are historic” (p. 23) even as the historic spelling is rubbished as “English”. Contradictions abound!

The excessive distance travelled by the *Agan Yeth 4* authors to distance Cornish from English is best explained by resort to issues of identity and not linguistics. The vast majority of Cornish learners—irrespective of spelling system—come to Cornish for reasons of identity, as an expression of being Cornish or from a desire to commit themselves to Cornwall. Yet, ever since the 1920s when Morton Nance based revived Cornish on the late medieval period, those choosing to adopt Cornish as a symbol of their identity have also had to jettison half a millennium of Cornish history. Interestingly, most of the leading lights of the Revival

movement have been marginal to popular working class Cornishness, themselves influenced deeply by a middle class “English” culture. This has had two consequences. First, it strengthened the appeal of a medieval, apparently purer, more unambiguously non-English “Cornish”. Second, it convinced the revivalists that the Cornishness of the people was a corrupt anglicized cultural wrong turn and one that could be either safely ignored or condescendingly patronized. But this attitude cut the Cornish Revival off from the majority of Cornish people, whose distinctiveness was a product not of medieval Cornwall but of the industrialization of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, an industrialization that, ironically, produced the confidence that underpinned the Cornish revival of the late 1800s. While the majority of Cornish speakers have adopted a medieval language and rejected the ambiguities of the Cornish identity since the Reformation, inhabiting a dream world where they possess the more “Cornish” credentials, the majority of Cornish people were and are a product of exactly those post-Reformation ambiguities.

The Kernowek Kemyn project goes even further. Arguing that Middle Cornish was no more “Cornish” in its spelling than was Late Cornish and aware (though sometimes reticent about it) of the uncomfortable truth that medieval Cornish was also deeply affected by English, Kernowek Kemyn rejects historic spelling entirely, preferring a simpler form that inscribes Cornish’s non-Englishness visibly in texts and on signs. But the net result is that Cornish becomes an alien and foreign product for most actual Cornish people. While Kernowek Kemyn may well have produced a more logical system it has also stripped out the links between language, history and identity. If Kernowek Kemyn became the standard form the Cornish language would be left becalmed on a timeless and lifeless beach safely remote from the tides of history. It would certainly not be English but it would also not be recognisably “Cornish” either. Such a Cornish resembles nothing more than the “Christmas game” that our forebears complained of when rising against the imposition of religious change in 1549. Then they rejected the breaking of the links with their traditions and customs. Similarly, Kernowek Kemyn has to be rejected because it also breaks too abruptly with tradition.

Cornish is not Latin nor Esperanto—a diverting intellectual problem to be solved like a crossword puzzle. It is a living language with a history and a tradition. Moreover, it is a critically important bearer of the Cornish identity. But in being so, and this is the bit that revivalists have found difficult to swallow, it also bears the contradictions of our past. The answer is not, however, to ignore those contradictions by taking refuge in a Cornish language that rejects all historic forms. Instead, it is healthier psychologically to embrace the ambiguities. By doing so we can come to terms with the reality of our identity and align the language revival more closely with the popular consciousness of being Cornish. Doing this inevitably demands adopting a later and more sensible base for the revived language, thus finally healing the rift between revivalism and the Cornish people.

However, I am now in danger of leaving the Kernowek Kemyn discourse far behind. So far I have identified an over-simplistic approach resting on outdated notions of “purity” and “corruption”, a failure to engage with the real complexities of the historic language and a greatly overdrawn binary opposition between Cornish and English as some of the elements of the Kernowek Kemyn discourse. Yet perhaps the most striking and regrettable aspect of this discourse is not so much its assumptions and content but its tone.

## THE RHETORIC OF KERNOWEK KEMYN

As in former interventions (Dunbar and George 1997) the overall style of the discourse is stridently and overtly confrontational, infused with a sense of righteousness. It is assumed that those who do not wish to adopt Kernowek Kemyn are misguided unfortunates who will gratefully see the light once the phonological and orthographical holy grail of kemmyn is laid out before them. The result is a patronizing and condescending attitude towards those who cannot or do not wish to debate merely on the narrow grounds of graphemes, phonemes, quantity rules, minimal pairs and the like. Thus we are bluntly advised on page 6 that “unless you intend to take your fourth grade, write a novel in the language or do something useful [?], stop reading this now”. All genres of argument act to exclude those who do not or cannot share the language of that genre. The language of linguistics and its specialist terminology does not normally need to exclude people explicitly. But, just in case they aren't already excluded the above quote implies very firmly that the real debate should only be carried on by those cognoscenti initiated into the mysteries of linguistics. The role of the rest of us is to stand around and wait for the tablets to be brought down from the mountain after the restricted selectorate who might qualify (how?) to discuss such things make their decisions.

Perhaps dazzled by their own faith in kemmyn, the loyalists remain blind to the wider perspective, impervious to the way the twentieth century history of the Revival could be read as a story of the hi-jacking of the Cornish language by a tiny group who have used it as a vehicle to pursue their own visions. After a century of revivalism the result—around 100 fluent speakers if that—a proportion equal to 0.002% of the Cornish population, is hardly an earth shattering endorsement of the methodologies adopted by the Cornish revival. Yet such inconvenient evidence is either denied, or refuge is sought in comforting conspiracy theories; the Cornish language has failed to grow exponentially, we are told, because “the authorities have refused to fund it properly” (p. 17). Really? Nothing at all to do with the twee amateurism of the early language revivalists or the shambolic impression given by the Cornish language movement over the past 20 years then.

Arrogance is moreover coupled with a second rhetorical strategy of the Kernowek Kemyn discourse—vituperative name-calling. Those who prefer to use other, more historical, forms of spelling or who base their Cornish on its pronunciation at a more modern period are described as “splinters” (during discussion at Tremough conference on language planning, September 2005). Or they are dismissed as “anarchists, kilt-wearers and flag wavers” and “conservatives” (pp.16–17). Once demonized as part of this unusual collection of fellow-travellers they can be safely classed with “those who don't have the capacity to debate” (p. 17). This style of argument—first stereotype and caricature your opponents and then, second, define them as unfit to debate and therefore to be actively excluded from that debate—when linked to an unswerving faith in Kernowek Kemyn, is much more reminiscent of seventeenth than twenty-first century, more relativist, discourses. Kemmyn spokespersons seem locked in a strangely old-fashioned world, where computer-based methodologies rub shoulders with pre-modern discourses and nineteenth century taken-for-granted assumptions.

A third aspect of Kernowek Kemyn discourse is a deep disinterest in or knowledge of the work of the other groups active in disseminating the Cornish language since the 1980s. This

is best illustrated in their approach to Modern Cornish, of which they apparently know little and care less. The Cornish of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is routinely dismissed as having a “reduced competence” (p. 26, though here George is gracious enough to admit that this is “arguable”). The later manuscripts are described as “reduced and sometimes faulty” and contrasted with the “subtle, sophisticated, literary language” of the late medieval plays (pp. 35–36). While Kernowek Kemyn was “devised” in the 1980s, Modern Cornish was being simultaneously “concocted” (p.19), a revealing choice of words that is fundamentally at odds with the trope of “objective” scientific rationality that Kernowek Kemyn defenders like to think they adopt in discussing the mechanics of the language. Moreover, this drip feed of disparagement is sometimes coupled with complete misrepresentation. We are informed that “proponents of a Late [Cornish] base ... use no source texts earlier than CW [Creation of the World]” (p. 26). This came as news to me. Those of us who wish to base Cornish on its later period, that of the bulk of the prose works in the language and on the register actually used by Cornish people living around 1700, of course have to resort to source texts earlier than CW if words or grammatical forms are unavailable in the later texts. We too adopt a policy of *tota Cornicitas*; it is just that the base is shifted towards a more modern period when, arguably, we have a lot more first-hand knowledge of the pronunciation of Cornish—both from the rich variety of spellings used by native writers and the revealing work of Edward Lhuyd. So let’s not exaggerate the difference in approach between those who favour Modern and those who prefer late medieval Cornish.

Occasionally the discourse in *Agan Yeth* 4 about Modern Cornish moves into a pure cloud cuckoo land of incomprehension. Thus we are informed that “a supporter of late Cornish once admitted that ‘we will’ and ‘we will not’ are written in exactly the same way and that this caused so much confusion he had to ring up his mates to see if they were coming or not” (p. 15). This is sheer, unadulterated nonsense. In no version of Modern Cornish spelling could this pair be possibly given the same spelling, as ‘we will’ is *ny vedn* and ‘we will not’ would be *navedn ny* or *na veddony*. But, as the ordinary Kemynite foot soldier appears to be told little if anything about historical forms of Cornish, he or she will presumably swallow anything, however bizarre or outrageous, with few questions asked. Or at least that’s what the inner core of the Kernowek Kemyn project seems to assume.

A fourth and final rhetorical strategy used by Kernowek Kemyn writers is more recent. It involves deliberately emphasizing the plurality of Cornish spelling systems. Thus we are told that “there are at least eight different orthographies of Revived Cornish (not three as is sometimes heard)” (p. 27). This echoes discussions I have had with supporters of Kernowek Kemyn where it was noticeable how eager they have become to differentiate between Unified and UCR, despite the former being dismissed by George as now a “historic” spelling system (p. 24). On the surface this strategy may seem strange as for two decades Kernowek Kemyn supporters have gone out of their way to deny the existence of any form of Cornish other than Kernowek Kemyn, the “official” choice of the Language Board back in the chaotic days of the mid-1980s. But this volte-face can be understood as part of a strategy of muddying the waters for the non-Cornish user (and for many Cornish users). By exaggerating the choice of spelling systems the aim is to elevate the role of Kernowek Kemyn as a giant among these competing pigmies, the only spelling system fit to receive the

government endorsed mantle of “official” status. But, as George almost admits, in reality only Kernowek Kemyn, UCR and Modern have any “significant” following (p. 27).

A blustering, hubristic tone, name-calling, selective misrepresentation and exaggeration are therefore some of the rhetorical strategies adopted in *Agan Yeth 4* and are part of the Kernowek Kemyn discourse. Unfortunately, the authors of *Agan Yeth 4* appear to be naively unaware and unconcerned how many people are alienated by this rhetoric. Furthermore, it appears to give the green light to the vicious personal attacks indulged in by the more vigorous supporters of Kernowek Kemyn, attacks that can in turn trigger off equally rabid responses from some who align themselves with other spelling systems. The net result has been a downward slide in the tone of debate and the stoking up of bad feeling within what is already a very small group of Cornish users. Kernowek Kemyn, as the largest group, has a particular responsibility here. The failure of leading Kernowek Kemyn proponents to present a more tolerant and less aggressive face to their detractors and their persistent use of a confrontational style that leaves little if no space for compromise has deepened and entrenched differences within the Cornish language movement. Had they developed a less dismissive and more open discourse back in the late 1980s, it is quite possible that we would not be in the sad situation we are today.

## CONCLUSION

What I have done here is deconstruct the discourse of Kernowek Kemyn, a discourse that creates an over-polarized “us and them” attitude to the language, that over-simplifies the real complexities of the historical language, that trades excessively – to the point of totalitarianism – on concepts of homogeneity and certainty and that at bottom rests on outdated values of romantic nationalism that are inappropriate to the needs of Cornish as it becomes a public language. I have also tried to suggest that the debate about a standard orthography is as much, if not more, about values and assumptions as it is about linguistics. (Although even within the restricted genre of the latter the over-confident claim that “the principal written objections to Kernowek Kemyn ... made by Nicholas Williams ... have been dealt with in *Cornish for the 21st century*” (p. 23) has been exploded by Williams’ comprehensive critique of Kernowek Kemyn, *Towards Authentic Cornish* (2006).)

Moreover, underlying the aggressive certainties of the Kernowek Kemyn discourse, and the disturbingly intolerant, hectoring and bullying attitude it encourages amongst a minority of its supporters, there is a detectably growing desperation. In *Agan Yeth 4* George states that the users of other Cornish spellings “feel themselves to be increasingly marginalised” (p. 33). Here again, George shows his lack of awareness of what is actually happening in the non-Kernowek Kemyn universe. The evidence of *Agan Yeth 4* suggests the precise opposite: that, while UCR and Modern spelling users are becoming more confident, it is the users of Kernowek Kemyn who are beginning to experience the chill winds of marginalization. The plaintive question on page 17 – “so who is hosting this conference [the Language Planning Conference at Tremough in September 2006]? And why?” betrays a fear that other agendas have imposed themselves and that Kernowek Kemyn speakers are being ignored. (In fact, the conference was organized by a group that included activists from all spelling factions.)

Of course, such paranoid suspicion goes far wider than Kernowek Kemyn and is a major factor preventing a healthy debate about the future of Cornish and its spelling. But the

Kernowek Kemyn publicists must take the lion's share of blame for this situation. Having wrested the institutions of the language revival away from Unified Cornish in the 1980s Kernowek Kemyn was determined to present itself as a de facto "standard" Cornish, trusting that in a Darwinian environment of the survival of the fittest and the absence of public funding, other forms of Cornish would wither away. That strategy has backfired badly. Living in their sealed world and refusing to engage in a real debate about Cornish, Kernowek Kemyn enthusiasts palpably failed to notice that other Cornishes not only survived; they thrived. Now belatedly aware of this, they resort to the argument "that the majority of Cornish speakers had their debate about it 20 years ago, and chose KK. ... The few that do not like KK want to re-open the debate" (translated from p.2). But what proportion of current speakers and users of Cornish were active 20 years ago? And, as I've argued above, what real "choice" has been given to that new generation (probably a majority) who have come to Cornish since the 1980s? In reality this is not a re-opening of the debate. The debate never went away; it was just that Kernowek Kemyn backers refused to engage in it unless it was on their own terms. (Note the complete lack of response to my call in Deacon, 1996 for a new umbrella group to reflect the pluralism of Cornishes). There were always some who rejected the Kernowek Kemyn adopted in the 1980s and who questioned the legitimacy of the decision taken at that time.

At least *Agan Yeth 4* shows that the inner core of Kernowek Kemyn now accepts that the debate is continuing and they have to re-engage with it. And behind this there is also a dawning realization that, in the twenty-first century unlike the twentieth, the Cornish language may well cease to be the plaything of a few and become the property of the many. If we seriously wish to move towards that re-positioning of Cornish then one thing that has to happen is a flowering of debate about the language and the purposes of the Revival. And this has to be within the language schools as much as between them. There is now growing evidence that the guru-fetishization that has held back the Cornish language revival since the days of Henry Jenner is finally being overcome. Users of both UCR and Modern Cornish are no longer accepting the claims of their gurus at face value but are actively discussing, accepting or rejecting them. It is time for Kernowek Kemyn users to follow suit and engender a debate within Kernowek Kemyn, about how to live with a situation of pluralism, about how to build bridges to other medievalists, about how to achieve a workable solution that can accommodate the presence of Modern Cornish, about what compromises can and should be made, about the role of Cornish in the twenty-first century and about how to build a genuine rather than imposed unity within the Cornish language movement so that we can face the many enemies of Cornish with more confidence—together. Perhaps when that discussion starts taking place we can then begin to think outside the box. For example, why do we need one standard spelling for signage purposes; what is wrong with two standards as happens in Norway; why not different standards for different purposes? Whatever solutions we arrive at will have to be innovative, flexible and inclusive and will have to be unique, like the Cornish language itself.

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