
Publishing on the Margins: The Celtic Literary Revival in Cornwall

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Abstract

Academic scholarship on the Celtic Revival has been directed towards the literary movement in Ireland. However, the revival encompassed a far greater area, reaching all the Celtic nations along the fringe of Britain. As a marginalised nation, Cornwall has been overlooked. This article seeks to redress the balance and highlight the people and publishing presses that helped to shape Cornish identity in the early twentieth century. Using theories of nationalism provided by Benedict Anderson and the collaborative work of Eagleton, Jameson and Said as a framework, this article will explore the importance of print culture in shaping a national identity.

Keywords

Celtic Literary Revival; Cornwall; Nationalism; Henry Jenner.

Introduction

Why should Cornishmen learn Cornish? There is no money in it, it serves no practical purpose, and the literature is scanty and of no great originality or value. The question is a fair one, the answer is simple. Because they are Cornishmen.

(Jenner 1904, xi)

Writing in *A Handbook of the Cornish Language* in 1904, Henry Jenner (1848-1934) sought to address the deficiencies of a nation in decline. Like W. B. Yeats in Ireland and Saunders

Lewis in Wales, Henry Jenner was acting within a multifaceted movement to renew and revive interest in Celtic language and literature. The Celtic Revival of the early twentieth century was a movement inherently tied to notions of nationalism and patriotism. The territories along the Celtic fringe of Britain (Scotland, Wales, Ireland, the Isle of Man and Cornwall) sought to assert themselves as separate nations. Benedict Anderson defines nations as “imagined communities”, asserting that print culture is integral to shaping the identity of the individual: “members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 2006, 6).

Similarly, Seamus Deane et al. in *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* explains how all nations have a metaphysical dimension: “[Nations] are all driven by an ambition to realize their intrinsic essence in some specific and tangible form” (1990, 8). In many facets of the Celtic Revival this was realised through both a political and literary tradition.

Academic scholarship on the Celtic Revival has focused predominantly on the literary movement in Ireland. However, the other Celtic nations of Britain were also undergoing their own literary revivals: “Such a willingness to confront the contemporary world head-on was not, of course, by any means limited to Ireland among the Celtic realms. Throughout the Celtic world there was solid and progressive work being done” (O’Leary 1986, 111-12).

Cornwall, as a marginalised nation, has been overlooked by academic scholarship. This article seeks to redress the balance and highlight the people and publishing presses that helped to shape Cornish identity in the early twentieth century. The first section of this article will contextualise the Celtic Revival and explore notions of nationalism. The second section will focus on Henry Jenner who is widely regarded as one of the most prominent figures of the revival in Cornwall. The final section of the article will explore how local newspapers, journals and magazines acted to advance the Cornish cause. Far from being trivial publications, the local newspapers were central for uniting the people of Cornwall together as a Celtic nation.

Seeking Identity

For a colonised nation, nationalism often emerges out of a radical dispossession and desire to reinstate identity free from outside influences. This is the case with the Celtic Revival which arose out of a need to redefine what it meant to be a Celt. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Celt was seen as racially “other” and inferior to the Anglo-Saxon.

During this period, the British Empire was at the height of its power and the territories along the Celtic fringe of Britain were widely recognised as a part of England’s colonial conquest; historian J. R. Seeley described them as “England’s inner empire” (Rayne 2012, 9). The growth in literacy and industry during the nineteenth century was central to England’s expansionist intentions. The colonised people were subjected to a centralised “English” culture that demeaned their local language, literature and traditions. Indeed, Said argues that culture has an indispensable role to play in colonialism:

At the heart of European culture during the many decades of imperial expansion lay what could be called an undeterred and unrelenting Eurocentrism. This accumulated experiences, territories, peoples, histories; it studied them, classified them, verified them; but above all, it subordinated them. (Said 1990, 72)

Print culture was integral to the dissemination of ideas. It was through contemporary literature, newspapers and magazines that stereotypes of the Celt emerged. In *Punch*, the Irish were portrayed with ape-like features implying degeneracy and solidifying the notion of the Celts as a racial “other” (Wohl 1990). Cornwall, as a nation of Celtic people, was not excluded from this discrimination: “although the Irish were the most vilified of the Celtic peoples, the Cornish, both by association with their fellow Celts and due to the prejudices specific to them, were also encumbered with a myth of inferiority” (Rayne 2012, 42). Print culture was utilised as a form of oppression, but it was through this same medium that the Celtic nations were able to form a national consciousness distinct from England.

In *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature*, Seamus Deane et al. explains how a subjected nation must manipulate its image to escape oppression: “In the attempted discovery of its ‘true’ identity, a community often begins with the demolition of the false stereotypes within which it has been entrapped” (1990, 12). Print culture was vital to disseminating these new ideas and could, for the first time, reach a wide literate audience: “The general growth in literacy, commerce, industry, communications and state machineries that marked the nineteenth century created powerful new impulses for vernacular linguistic unification” (Anderson 2006, 77). For the first time, the printed word could not only reach all social classes, but also those remote parts of the country (many part of the Celtic fringe) where communications had been limited. As John Carey clarifies:

The difference between the nineteenth-century mob and the twentieth-century mass is literacy. For the first time, a huge literate public had come into being, and consequently every aspect of the production and dissemination of the printed text became subject to revolution. (Carey 2002, 5)

Indeed, by the twentieth century, the elite were no longer the sole purveyors of the printed word; newspapers and magazines became integral to unify the general population or “mass” together as an “imagined community”. In the case of the Celtic Revival, Anderson’s concept of “imagined community” is not limited to individual nations. Indeed, communication between the Celtic nations in the form of the Pan-Celtic Congress created a sense of the Celtic nations being united as a cohesive whole. But Cornwall was late to join the Pan-Celtic Congress and its route to revival was problematic.

Henry Jenner

Cornwall has had a complex relationship with the other Celtic nations. Its early adoption into the English nation-state and the near-loss of its language has meant it has been regarded as not being “Celtic”, or not “Celtic enough” (Kent 2000, 15). Central to Cornwall’s acceptance and recognition as a Celtic nation was the work of Henry Jenner. As a Cornish

cultural activist, Jenner “was committed to [...] the unity of the Celtic nations and the idea that Cornwall was part of that family of nations” (Rayne 2012, 8). But Cornwall’s reputation was difficult to inaugurate.

In 1902, Professor Magnus Maclean wrote in *The Literature of the Celts* that Cornwall “never produced much of a Celtic literature” and furthermore, “Cornish dialect has no literature to show, and therefore is not concerned in the special Celtic revivals characteristic of the literature in other dialects” (Rayne 2012, 250-51). Maclean’s dismissal proved detrimental to Jenner’s efforts and, as Alan Kent has highlighted:

Given the lack of an institute of higher education in Cornwall during this period, such a critique had a powerful effect in the world of Celtic Studies and once asserted, such arguments have been difficult monoliths to counter and destroy throughout the twentieth century. (Kent 2000, 15)

Cornwall’s marginalisation, not just by England but by the other Celtic nations, shaped and distinguished its route to revival. Unlike many facets of the Celtic Revival, Cornwall’s revival was purely cultural and not concerned with political revolution. Indeed, Henry Jenner supported Celtic unity whilst remaining loyal to England: “he was, publicly at least, opposed to anything that would threaten this unity, including Irish Home Rule.” (Rayne 2012, 9)

Jenner saw Celtic unity as a separate issue and remained distant from the political movements occurring overseas. He understood that in order to be accepted into the Celtic community, it was crucial for the Cornish language to be revived. One of his most significant acts was to write *A Handbook of the Cornish Language* in 1904. The book was published by David Nutt, a publishing company specialising in folklore and antiquities in London (Tedder 2004). In its preface, Jenner explains his intentions: “This book is principally intended for those persons of Cornish nationality who wish to acquire some knowledge of their ancient tongue, and to read, write, and perhaps even to speak it” (Jenner 1904, ix). Shortly after its publication, Cornwall was accorded membership of the Pan-Celtic Congress.

Although Cornwall had finally been recognised by the other Celtic nations, there was still a long way to go. A single publication about the Cornish language would not revive the “ancient tongue”, but it had authority within a growing trend for Celtic publications and inspired later studies on the language. Cornish identity was still threatened by English culture “with centralised education and the imposition of a standardised English accent eroding local traditions and differences” (Rayne 2012, 65). Alongside other revivalists, Jenner shared the opinion that “those who spoke in their native dialect were made to feel embarrassed and inferior when in the company of those who did not share it” (Rayne 2012, 260). Collaborating with the Cornwall Education Committee, Jenner helped to publish a pamphlet encouraging Cornish school children to collect dialect words. This led to a general scheme which was implemented in 1919 for the collection of rural lore and language by school children in Cornwall (Rayne 2012, 259).

Although language is an important aspect of identity, it is not the only indicator of a “nation”. Indeed, “[d]espite being remembered as the champion of the Cornish language, Jenner himself saw language as secondary to the feeling of ‘national consciousness’ as a way of binding a group of people together” (Rayne 2012, 256).

Fundamental to forming a national consciousness is the sense of a shared cultural heritage. Folk tales proved central to the Celtic Revival; tales passed down through the oral tradition gave an insight into a culture that pre-dated Christianity. Jenner recognised the value of such tales and the way in which the general population could connect to Cornish folk culture much more readily than the language. Indeed, *A Handbook of the Cornish Language* did more for establishing Cornwall’s Celtic identity amongst the other Celtic nations and England than for the actual Cornish population. John Parry in *The Revival of Cornish* asserts that “although Jenner’s Handbook [...] give[s] all that a linguistic student needs in order to acquire a good knowledge of Cornish, [it is] not elementary enough for the person who has had no linguistic training” (1946, 260). A large proportion of the Cornish population was unable to connect to Jenner’s work.

Newspapers, Journals and Magazines

Although Henry Jenner was a pivotal force in the Celtic Revival, he had an “inability to engage with the majority of the Cornish people” (Rayne 2012, 273). As stated earlier in this article, the general population needs to form a cohesive identity in order to recognise itself as a separate nation: “[N]ational consciousness is a mass phenomenon, not an elite one, and although it begins among the elite, the amount of time it takes to disseminate to the majority of the people may take centuries” (Rayne 2012, 74). Integral to the filtering process from “elite” figures (such as Henry Jenner) to the general population was the presence of local newspapers, journals and magazines.

In *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, Carey explains how “the popular newspaper presented a threat, because it created an alternative culture which bypassed the intellectual and made him redundant” (2002, 6). As highlighted earlier in this article, increased literacy rates had initiated a new readership amongst the working classes. Publishers of newspapers took advantage of this new audience and found a new stream from which to derive their monetary income. This proved vital in advancing the Celtic Revival and forming a national consciousness amongst the general population.

In Cornwall, the local newspapers and magazines contained plentiful material on the Celtic Revival for the consumption of the “masses”. As more coverage was provided on the exploits of Henry Jenner (among other revivalists) and the collection of folk tales and traditions, the general population could start to see a shift in how the Celt was perceived in the media. No longer the degenerate and ape-like racial “other”, the Celt stereotype had radically altered; to be associated as a Celt became an association as part of a “fierce, imaginative, poetic tribe” (Deane et al. 1990, 12). The Celts of Cornwall could finally recognise and find pride in their heritage.

The Cornish writer, Arthur Quiller-Couch or “Q” (1863-1944), was one of a number of figures involved in the production and dissemination of local literature. Q was editor of *The Cornish Magazine* (Image 1), which set out to collate local work:

Our aim is to produce a Magazine which shall cost sixpence, and be worth more than sixpence to anybody, and considerably more than sixpence to any Cornishman; to fill it with sound and readable information, honest fiction, good illustrations; to satisfy the judges at home and carry to our kinsmen abroad a word of home and an assurance that their home remembers them; finally, to do some good for Cornwall, or at least earn the respect due to a brave attempt. (Quiller-Couch 1898, 80)

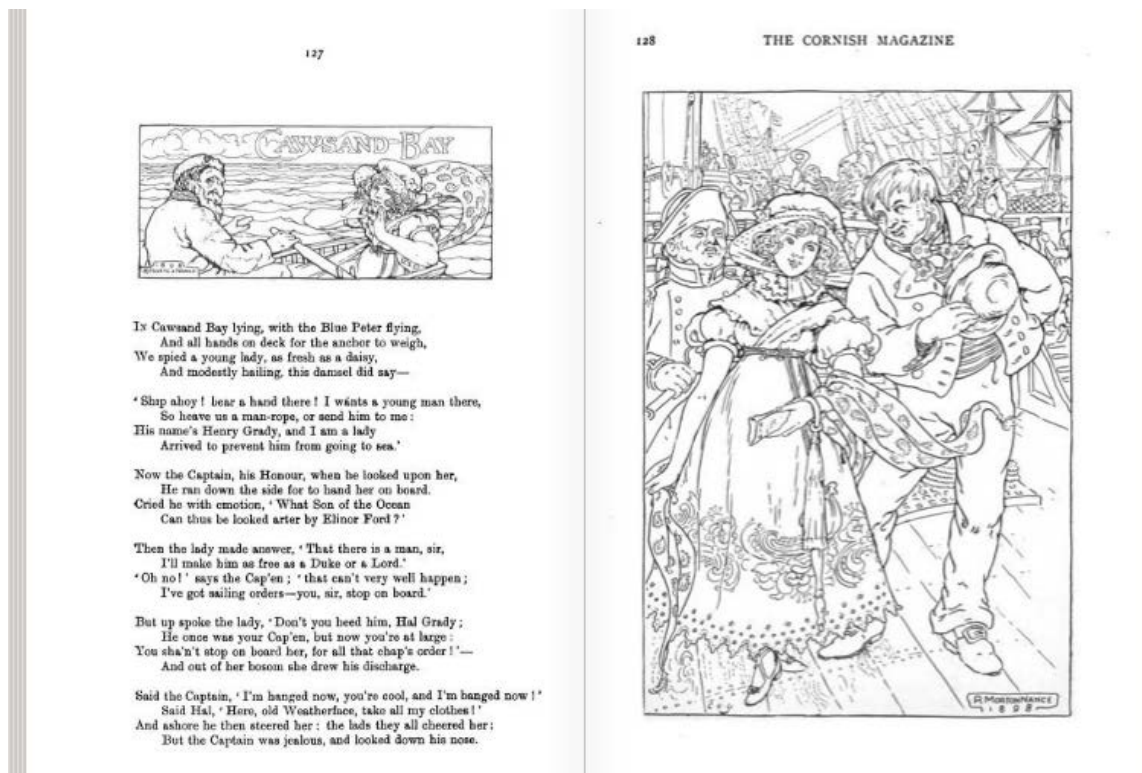


Image 1: *The Cornish Magazine* edited by Arthur Quiller-Couch (1898)

The first volume (1898) contains short stories, poems including *The Merry Ballad of the Cornish Pasty* by R. Morton Nance, interviews, historical information on landmarks including Truro Cathedral and an opinion column on "How to Develop Cornwall as a Holiday Resort". Priced at sixpence, the magazine aimed to be accessible to the everyday Cornishman. Although short-lived, the magazine exemplifies the efforts being made at the time to instil national pride in a marginalised nation.

Arthur Quiller-Couch's magazine was not an isolated publication; other individuals were eager to join the movement. In the late 1920s, A. S. D. Smith moved to Perranporth in Cornwall and set up a monthly newspaper in Cornish entitled *Kernow*. Its aims were:

1. To act as a bond between all of the Cornish who love our language.
2. To furnish reading matter, in Cornish.
3. To raise up a new host of Cornish writers who may form and develop a new literature for Cornwall. (Parry 1946, 263)

The first aim exemplifies Anderson's theory of "imagined community": the newspaper set out to help the general public envisage a shared nationality. Indeed, *Kernow* encouraged the use of the national language and the general public were keen to reciprocate: "They write letters to *Kernow* [in Cornish], just as an Englishman writes to *The Times*" (Parry 1946, 264). Although much of the population was not fluent in the national language, "[Cornish] was well on its way to becoming a living language again when the Second World War broke out" (Parry 1946, 258). In just a few decades, the Cornish language had been revived from near-extinction. This would not have been possible without local publications promoting Celtic nationalism.

As discussed earlier in this article, folk tales were an important aspect for forming a national consciousness. As Henry Jenner pointed out in his *Handbook of Cornish Language*, Cornish literature was sparse and hard to come by. Like many of the other Celtic nations, many traditional stories had been dispersed through the oral tradition. In the early decades of the twentieth century, belief in folklore was dying out. Central to capturing these folk stories, traditions and beliefs was William Henry Paynter.

Born 1901 in Callington in Cornwall, Paynter spent much of his working life as a folklore collector. Significantly, he also worked for the *Cornish Times* newspaper based in Liskeard. Indeed, the local newspapers "became his chief vehicle for the publication of his articles on Cornish folklore" (Semmens 2005, 77). An article he wrote for *Western Morning News* on 4

June 1928 exemplifies his work. A "Helston Witch" concerns the discovery of a portrait of Thomasine Blight (Image 2) and then recounts a number of oral tales surrounding her. Paynter travelled around Cornwall collecting fragments of folklore from the local people, and it was these tales that he reported on in his articles. In "A Helston Witch", he clarifies: "The following was related to me by an old lady over 80 years of age, who was well acquainted with the witch" (Paynter 1928, 6). By involving the local people in his articles, Paynter was helping to foster a sense of community.

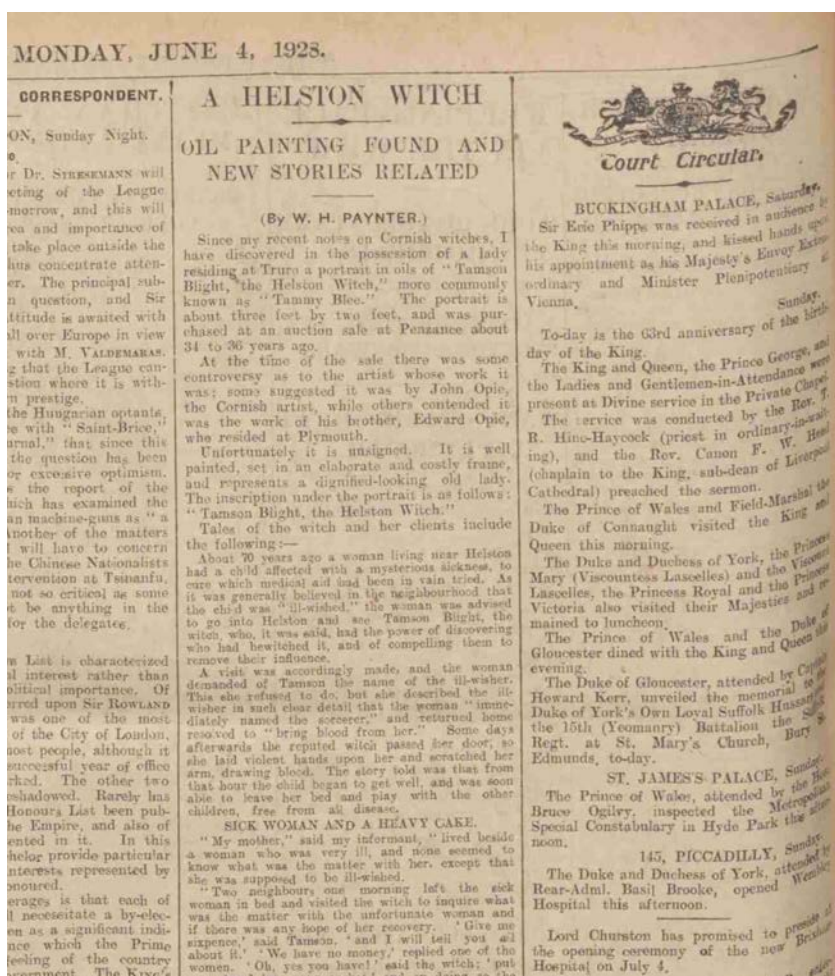


Image 2: "A Helston Witch" by William Henry Paynter. Image © Trinity Mirror. Image created courtesy of THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD.

But it was not just the work of individuals who helped to advance Cornish nationalism through print culture. The Federation of Old Cornwall Societies proved to be one of the largest organisations to publish work on the revival. Whilst Henry Jenner used London-

based publishers and sought a readership with the other Celtic nations, the Old Cornwall Societies were publishing *in Cornwall for Cornwall*:

What the Societies allowed their members in Cornwall to do was to effect change on a local level and to connect with many ordinary Cornish people who would otherwise not have had access to the myriad pieces of information the organisations collected and distributed through the medium of the *Old Cornwall* magazine.

(Rayne 2012, 25)

The Old Cornwall Societies emphasised their quality of being both “local” and “unpretentious”. Members included Robert Morton Nance who wrote extensively for the magazine: “Nance published more than two hundred articles in the journal *Old Cornwall* and elsewhere” (Murdoch 2004). Like Henry Jenner, the Old Cornwall Societies also published work promoting Cornish language and dialect. Indeed, Morton Nance began to write plays using the local dialect. However, the *Old Cornwall* magazine was able to reach a far wider audience and succeeded in providing “a bridge between the Revivalists and popular culture” (Rayne 2012, 26).

Newspapers and magazines proved to be some of the most important publications for advancing the Celtic Revival in Cornwall; they were able to reach and appeal to a wide audience. Indeed, the image of Cornwall conveyed was reaching those outside of the county. An important aspect of Cornwall’s literary heritage is taken by those writers visiting Cornwall:

Hardy, Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence, were the leading lights amongst a group of early twentieth-century English writers who were finding in Cornwall’s apparent marginality an ideology congenial to them. It gave them ‘inspiration’, had a Celtic ‘primitivism’ and offered an early ‘alternative’ lifestyle on the periphery of the island of Britain. (Kent 2000, 148)

They were writing at the same time the Celtic Revival was taking place, working in parallel and inadvertently helping to further the image of Cornwall as a nation distinct from England.

Cornish identity was and continues to be shaped by print culture. Whilst Henry Jenner helped to establish Cornwall formally as a Celtic nation, the local newspapers and magazines helped to foster a sense of shared Celtic identity within the members of the Cornish population.

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