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I shall take it that there is a difference between Culture in Cornwall and Cornish Culture. Of the former there is much to be said. With its drama and musical life, and the many artists and writers who make Cornwall their home, we may claim to have no ordinary share of cultural amenities here. But it is only to a very small extent that we can connect these with any indigenous tradition of culture, and leaving them aside, I should prefer to search for something like a continuous tradition of culture that is natively Cornish.

We have still with us things visible and- invisible to remind us of very ancient cultures in Cornwall. Every common granite field-hedge formed of stones cleared from the land it encloses has in its great "grounders" and its well-adjusted smaller fragments some suggestion of the pre-celtic raisers of megaliths or the builders of Celtic hill-forts and British villages, and this is not lost even in the masonry tradition of recent times, with its preference for great masses of stone to form doors and windows rather than using small units. To a Celtic culture, at least, we can trace our choice of long-hilted "showls" (1) rather than Saxon crutch-handled ones such a treatment of the soil as "beat-burning", or the tiny hamlets or isolated farms which spread in Celtic fashion over a Cornish landscape instead of gathering themselves into large villages and leaving homeless tracts between, in the usual Saxon way. Some of our customs, such as that of midsummer bonfires, and old beliefs, as in the creative ties of certain wells, are likely to be pre-Celtic as well as pre-Christian in their origin, giving us here and there some slender thread of which has survived the fabric of a lost culture to which they belonged.

The whole known history of Cornwall accounts far 'more readily for gaps in tradition than for anything continuous. The Celtic influx caused- the non-Aryan language of an older people to vanish without a trace to be identified, even from the place names of Cornwall, which implies a very thorough break with the past. The effect of a very partial Roman occupation was slight as compared with that, introducing a few Latin words into the Celtic speech, but not ousting this language, as it seems to have done in most parts of Britain, and scarcely affecting Cornish place names at all. Neither were these at first affected except over a comparatively small area by the later Saxon invasions.

Some of the Cornish words from Latin are due to Church influence rather than to Roman rule, like *pronter* [priest] from *provendarius*. It may be that Christianity came to Cornwall before the Romans left Britain, and has remained here ever since, but we learn from one of the few authentic lives of saints, that of St. Samson of Dal, that even in the seventh century pagan worship of stones was practised, since he interrupted such a ceremony while- crossing the Bodmin Moors as an overland break in the sea journey from South Wales to Brittany. His cutting of a cross on the worshipped rock rendered it thenceforth proper to pay it such reverence. This was in line with the dedication of venerated wells to saints and the Christianizing of midsummer fires by dedicating them to St. John the Baptist, both of which may be taken also as bridging the gap between pagan and Christian cultures.

The fact that, as for St. Samson, sea passages were shortened by avoiding the Land's End route in going from other Celtic lands to Brittany, had much influence on the religious culture of Cornwall in the Dark Ages. Saints from Wales, Ireland, and Brittany came to know Cornwall and founded cells or small monastic enclosures here, giving their own names to the places, either alone or prefixed with "Saint" or following such words as Lan [enclosure] eglos [church], chapel, merther [martyr], porth [landing-place], bod, or bos [dwelling], and plu [parish], the last much commoner while Cornish was still in use. The personalities behind such names had usually become quite forgotten by the time their legends were prepared to be read on their feast days, and, as Canon Doble warned us, in such "lives" names and sexes were mixed up, birthplaces and family details were invented and miraculous deeds were supplied from stock, often with grotesque anecdotes to season them, so that the actual history to be learnt from them needs expert sifting from the fiction.

Far many more Cornish place names contain the personal names of men of whose lives we have not even a fictitious account. These are the only memorials of the secular great men, founders of the first Celtic homesteads or hill-forts, whose British names have car [fort], tre [homestead], bod or bos [dwelling] as the commonest prefixes before them. It is only to be believed that for some generations at least tales of these great ones would be 'handed down, but unless they later became mixed up in folk-lore with giants, as some of the saints certainly did, there has been here another terrible break with tradition, and scarcely one modern inhabitant of a place with such a name as Carveddras, Tregassick, or Tremellick would know that he owes its existence to some ancient Modred, Cadoc, or Maeloc. Still less could a place called now "Crumplehorn" recognize itself as Tre-Maelhorn, though in Elizabeth's reign it was still at least Tremblehorne. Such names, especially as Anglicized, are often terrible puzzles to us all, yet they may throw light on the darkest places in our history at least as well as the saint's names, when they find their own Doble to sort them out. The reading of a saint's legend or a miracle-play 'about him kept the holy man in mind, but can we assume that hero-tales paid similar tribute to the secular great?

Whether they were written in verse or handed on orally in prose, there seems no doubt that we can, for the Breton scholar Loth has shown that one of the finest tales of all, that of Tristan and Yseult, was first put into French from a tale told with all the circumstance that accurate topography could give it of actual places in Cornwall, and thus originated here. Whether the tale was one among many, and whether we had Cornish bards to versify such romances, we can only ask, but it seems likely enough that we had here a Celtic culture like those of Wales or Brittany, to which such romances would be a necessity. That they should pass without leaving a trace is less difficult to believe than that all our Celtic folk-songs and music of a much later period should have perished as completely as we know they did.

During the earliest Middle Ages Cornwall and Brittany had what was still a common language and culture, with Cornwall as the parent country, so that other tales of the Arthurian cycle gathered by French authors in Brittany could well have originated here.

It was in West Cornwall and in 'the fifteenth century and early sixteenth that we had the most evident approach to a native Cornish culture – a reflection, no doubt, of the common European culture, but moulded by its surroundings so as to take a very local turn. This is most obvious in the very Cornish use of granite and oak in our adaptations of contemporary styles in stone and wood-work which are still seen in most of our churches, but even more evident is it in the surviving remnant of manuscripts written in Cornish. All with a religious intention, these allow little scope for originality in their authors, but advantage is taken of

opportunities to localize their detail by introducing Cornish place names and to lend life to incidents by expanding the bare story.

The language of them is a later development of the ancient British that was common to Brittany and Cornwall, and, like the contemporary English, had adopted many words from Anglo-French as adornments. The bulk of these writings takes the form of

mystery plays for open-air' performance in the parish plen an gwary, or playing-place, on feast days, and it suggests a high general level of culture that the standing audience were expected to gather the sense of an occasional scrap of English or French as well as their rather refined Cornish. The then Anglicized half of Cornwall had no playing-places and, presumably, no plays like these, and it is probable that West Cornwall owed all these works – Passion poem and plays that survive and far more that has vanished – to the good monks of Glasney at Penryn. One good reason for believing this is the introduction into the most important set of these plays of local place names of that district.²

Besides place names our mystery plays give us hints of such non- scriptural beings as the mermaid [morvoren] and the hobgoblin [bucca nos], but it is in the miracle-play Life of Meryasek that we get what is most to our purpose – a hint of a continuous tradition from the days of Arthurian tales. The manuscript is mainly in the attractive handwriting of a priest named Ralph Ton, who signed it as finished by him in 1504, 3. but the first ten - pages are in another hand, which may be that of its author, as Thurstan Peter suggests, John Nans, the then parson at Camborne, whose church was dedicated to Meryasek (4) and who had been trained at Glasney. The author has used the Latin Life of the Breton saint Meriadec, who never came to Cornwall, and either joined to it incidents that belong to the Life of another – Cornish – saint of the same name (in Latin Meriadocus) who was associated with Camborne, or else invented all the Cornish part. A point in favour of the latter view is that the play itself admits that there were no relics of the saint at Camborne, an unlikely thing if there had been a local Meriadocus. As in the reputed Lives of some other Cornish saints, a usurping “ tyrant ”, Teudar, is Meryasek's persecutor in the play. In a scene where this heathen chief, who has strongholds as Lesteadar, "Teudar's Court", and at Goodern's Roman camp, is about to give battle to the lawful Christian Duke of all Cornwall, unnamed, whose headquarters, like those assigned traditionally to King Arthur, are Castel an Dynas and Tintagel, following the convention usual in mystery or mumming play battles, he begins with big talk and threatens: "King Alwar, and Pygys, noble King Mark, as well as a king called Casvelyn, are coming to my with assistance ”.

That such names, thought of as those of petty kings in Cornwall, should still have been familiar in 1504 seems to imply that semi-historic traditions such as we have guessed at, did exist, even if unwritten. Again, attached as an interlude to Meryasek is a play taken from the medieval “Miracles of the Blessed Mary ”, and acted in honour of Mary of Camborne, whose chapel preceded Meryasek's church. Much new detail is added to the tale "The Woman's Son ", as usually told, in order to localize it in

Cornwall, and amongst other things the son is made to enter the service of a Cornish king, Massen, this time a Christian, who fights a nameless devil-worshipping "tyrant". His name suggests a lingering tradition of Maximus, the Maccsen Wledig of Wales, a slender thread of continuity from Romano-British culture.

Such mystery or miracle plays were acted in Cornwall until the Civil War put an end to such pleasures. The latest manuscript of one in existence was transcribed by one William Jordan in 1611, and has full stage directions for an actual performance. This –” The Creation of the World ’with Noah’s Flood ”– uses bits of the fifteenth-century Creation play, and 1540 would be a likely date for the rest, apart from some possible re- spelling. By 1611, if we can take Richard Carew’s funny story of a volunteer actor in one as typical, performers in such plays were no longer expected to learn their parts (we have a written-out actor’s part to show that in the fifteenth century they did), but only to say aloud what the ”. ordinary” spoke softly behind them. Carew’s gentleman brought the play to a close in bursts of laughter by repeating, instead of the ordinery’s words, his curses against the fool who would not say them. Carew, as a Cornishman of the non-Celtic fringe, would have only a slight curiosity about Cornish, but we can forgive this lack when we think of the rest of his wonderful Survey of Cornwall, which gives us such a picture of life in the county in Elizabeth’s time. If miracle plays were thus crudely acted then, they had much more time to degenerate for lack of help from the clergy before Dr. William Borlase saw the last relics of them in the “miserable dialogues from Scripture.” that in his youth were taken round from house to house with the mumming-play of St. Christmas. This tradition of acting, however, gave guise-dance plays in Cornwall an importance that they did not get elsewhere. By 1800 Scripture subjects had given way to local folk-lore, but ”Duffy and Devil ” was a versified play in several acts, as Bottrell and Hunt’s extracts show, and another, ”Tom and the Giant Blunderbore ”, (5) was known though its doggrel lines are lost. Probably there were many more, some improvised, others versified by .the best rhymester of the village, schoolmaster or otherwise.

In spite of shattering breaks with tradition during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we find Scawen writing his Dissertation on the Cornish Tongue after the Restoration with a very decided wish to keep intact such links as Cornwall still had with its Celtic past. Still more do we find this wish inspiring Nicholas Boson of Newlyn, who was modestly writing at, about the same time ”improving” stories and recording folk-lore in Cornish for his own children, a forerunner of all who have since gathered up the fragments of popular culture in West Cornwall, of whom William Bottrell, ”the Old Celt ”, is chief. Such men, like the old wandering entertainers of whom Hunt and Bottrell tell us, were surely in the direct line descended from the bards of ancient Cornwall. Most of Boson’s work can only be surmised from extracts made by the Welsh antiquary Edward Lhuyd, to whom they were sent, but we have one of his folk-tales, ”John of Chyanhorth ”, (6) intact, all in Cornish; a fanciful ” Duchess of Cornwall’s Progress ”, in Cornish and English, ’only part of which remains, showing that the imaginary progress was the pretext for a little survey of - the popular antiquities of the Land’s End district, and a Cornish essay, Nebes Geryow adro dhe Gernewek [A Few’ Words about Cornish].

It was about this time, too, that John Keigwin was trying to understand the fifteenth-century Cornish manuscripts, and so became the recognized head of a group of local antiquaries and amateurs of the Celtic language that was becoming less and less spoken by the illiterate fisherfolk and country people to whom it had long been relegated. It is to these enthusiasts that we owe ’most of our knowledge of the latest Cornish, as preserved in the Gwavas and Tonkin MSS. or later printed by Pryce and Davies Gilbert. There was certainly a little centre of native Cornish culture around the shores of Mount’s Bay just then, from 1660 to 1730. As the eighteenth century went on it may be that Dr. William Borlase, with his works on the Antiquities and Natural History of Cornwall, turned the thoughts of his neighbours towards speculations about Druids and researches into local history and biology, the latter following up the work done by Ray and Willughby in Cornwall in the previous century, so that popular

traditions and linguistic diversions ceased to attract. Borlase compiled a Cornish vocabulary, but recorded no spoken Cornish, and we have no saying of Dolly Pentreath save one from late folk tradition, and should have had no Cornish from William Bodinar if he had not been able to write a letter in it in 1776. Dr. Pryce printed the collected work of others only nothing of his own. The break between the Celtic enthusiasts of the beginning of the century and the cultured Cornishmen of its end was thus a wide one.

Coming to the nineteenth century, we reach a period when general culture in Cornwall was expanding greatly along with the scientific, engineering, and mathematical studies that were encouraged by the prosperity of Cornish mining. To this period we owe the beginnings of our Cornish learned societies, and Penzance, Sir Humphrey Davy's birthplace, became a little centre of seaside fashion as well as, with its Library and societies, one of learning. To mention even the books that were written on all manner of Cornish subjects by local authors during the nineteenth century would fill pages. Cornish culture, in my restricted sense, was not neglected either. Popular traditions and local dialect, including surviving words of Cornish, were well looked after by Bottrell, Hunt, and Miss M.A. Courtney or Dr. Jago. Davies Gilbert had even printed some Cornish texts for the first (and worst) time in 1826-7, though the new knowledge of Cornish among a few Cornishmen was due rather to the work of non-Cornish scholars: Norris, Williams, and Stokes. With the twentieth century came Henry Jenner's work to arouse interest in the language as well as the ancient history of Cornwall, Charles Henderson's researches into Cornish documents, and Canon Doble's investigations to enlighten us about the Age of the Saints which Canon Taylor had already made more alive for us. As with all these, Cornwall has usually been fortunate in inspiring friendship and co-operation among its workers, and it was easy to add many others to form a Cornish Gorsedd in 1928 that should foster especially what I have called Cornish Culture, and keep alive in Cornwall whatever is most Cornish and most Celtic. More workers constantly come and give their help, but always there will remain plenty for them to do in gaining, instead of that vague feeling of living in a land haunted by a forgotten past, some sense of belonging to a very long series of cultures none of which is quite as hopelessly lost, perhaps, as we used to think.

Notes:

1. "showls" = shovels