The Cornish: A Neglected Nation?

By Professor Mark Stoyle

For centuries Cornwall retained the marks of a separate country - the Cornish people having their own language, style of dress and folklore. Yet by 1700 there were only 5000 Cornish speakers left in the land. Dr Mark Stoyle explains how it happened.

Introduction

What are the constituent nations of Britain? To most of us, the answer to this question will seem obvious: the English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh nations. The idea that Cornwall, too, might have a right to be regarded as a separate nation is one that - outside Cornwall itself - has practically vanished from the popular consciousness. Yet 500 years ago, matters were very different. Throughout the mediaeval and early modern periods, the inhabitants of Cornwall were generally agreed - both by themselves and by their English neighbours - to be a distinctive people or 'race'.

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The story of how this slowly changed - of how, in the words of A.L. Rowse, the Cornish were gradually 'absorbed into the mainstream of English life' between 1485 and 1700 - is one of the most intriguing chapters of British history. Yet, until very recently, it has also been one of the most neglected. Now - as the drive to create a 'Europe of the regions' and the accelerating 'break-up of Britain' have aroused a growing interest in Cornish identity and distinctiveness in the present - a new generation of historians is beginning to explore the nature of Cornish identity and distinctiveness in the past.

A land apart

Physical isolation provides the key to Cornish history. A rocky peninsula, jutting out some 90 miles into the Atlantic Ocean, Cornwall stands at the extreme south-western corner of the British Isles. Surrounded by waves on all sides but one, it is practically severed from the adjoining lands to the east by the River Tamar, which runs almost from sea to sea.

Following the collapse of Roman rule in Britain, this natural fortress became a place of refuge for many of the original British inhabitants (sometimes referred to as 'Celts') of these islands, after they were driven westwards by Saxon conquerors. An independent British polity was established in Cornwall and was defended against Saxon incursion for many hundreds of years. Not until 838 were the 'West Britons' finally subdued - and for centuries after this Cornwall retained many of the marks of a separate country.

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Although mediaeval Cornwall was - technically speaking - an English county just like any other, the culture of the ordinary Cornish people remained entirely different from that of their English neighbours. They still spoke in the Cornish tongue: a Brythonic language, closely allied with Welsh. They still prided themselves on being descended from British ancestors, rather than Saxon ones. And, as late as the mid-16th century, they still possessed their own styles of dress, their own folklore, their own naming-customs, their own agricultural practices and their own games and pastimes.

In addition, the English Crown had established two special administrative institutions in Cornwall - the Duchy of Cornwall and the Stannary organisation (which oversaw the local tin-mining industry)- and this made it easy for ordinary Cornish people to believe that they had been granted a unique constitutional status to reflect their unique cultural identity.

A separate people

Throughout the early modern period, many Cornish people continued to regard Cornwall, not as an English county, but as a British country, called Kernow. Foreign observers saw things in very much the same way.

In the introduction to his famous 'Anglica Historia', first published in 1535, the Italian scholar Polydore Vergil wrote that:

'the whole Countrie of Britain ...is divided into iiii partes; whereof the one is inhabited of Englishmen, the other of Scottes, the third of Wallshemen, [and] the fowerthe of Cornishe people, which all differ emonge themselves, either in tongue, ...in manners, or ells in lawes and ordinaunces.'

Elsewhere, Vergil observed that Cornwall was the smallest of the three distinctive territorial units that made up the kingdom of England. This was a view that continued to be widely held until well into the 17th century. Writing in 1616, Arthur Hopton stated that:

'England is ...divided into 3 great Provinces, or Countries ...every of them speaking a several and different language, as English, Welsh and Cornish.'

the Cornish were commonly regarded as a separate ethnic group

Remarks made by a series of foreign visitors to England during the Tudor period make it clear that, if Cornwall was commonly regarded as almost a separate country, then the Cornish were commonly regarded as a separate ethnic group. Lodovico Falier, an Italian diplomat at the Court of Henry VIII, had no doubts on this score. 'The language of the English, Welsh and Cornish men is so different that they do not understand each other', Falier informed a correspondent in 1531 - adding that it was possible to distinguish the members of each group by their alleged 'national characteristics'. Thus 'the Welshman is sturdy, poor, adapted to war and sociable', he observed, while 'the Cornishman is poor, rough and boorish; and the Englishman mercantile, rich, affable and generous.'

Seven years later, Gaspard de Coligny Chatillon - the French Ambassador in London - showed that he, too, was aware of this ethnic split. The kingdom of England was by no means a united whole, he wrote back to his political masters, for it also 'contains Wales and Cornwall, natural enemies of the rest of England, and speaking a [different] language'. Perceptions remained very much the same throughout the rest of the 16th century. Following the death of Henry's daughter, Elizabeth I, in 1603, the Venetian ambassador wrote that the late queen had ruled over five different 'peoples': 'English, Welsh, Cornish, Scottish ...and Irish'.

Rebellion and its consequences

During the Tudor period, then, almost everyone accepted that the Cornish were a separate ethnic group. Yet by 1700, practically no one did. What can account for this dramatic change? Perhaps the most crucial factor was the decline of the Cornish language: that central badge of Cornish ethnic identity. For centuries, the Cornish tongue had been gradually retreating to the west as the common people of eastern Cornwall steadily abandoned it in favour of English: the language that was already spoken by most of the local gentry and that was therefore regarded as more 'refined'.

The Reformation sharply accelerated this process. In 1549, Edward VI's protestant government decreed that the familiar Latin liturgy should be replaced with a new Prayer Book in English. A huge popular rebellion at once broke out in the West Country: a rebellion that was partially fuelled by Cornish anger at the assault on the traditional church that had been so supportive of their ancient language and culture. 'We will not receive the newe service because it is but lyke a Christmas game,' the rebels declared, 'and so we the Cornyshe men (wherof certen of us understande no Englysh) utterly refuse thys newe Englysh.'

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Bold words - but also, perhaps, unwise ones. The insurrection was eventually crushed with hideous slaughter - some three to four thousand West Country men were killed - and in its wake the ruling classes may well have come to associate the Cornish tongue with rebellion and sedition, as well as with poverty and 'backwardness'. This in turn may help to explain why the Book of Common Prayer was never translated into Cornish, as it was later to be translated into Welsh. What is certain is that the failure to provide a liturgy in the Cornish tongue did much to hasten the subsequent decline of the language.

The death of Cornish?

By 1640 or thereabouts, the Cornish tongue was restricted to the far west of the peninsula. Yet the Cornish sense of difference remained strong. This was made clear during the opening months of the Civil War, when Cornwall - unlike the divided English counties to the east - declared itself wholeheartedly for the King. At least in part, this was perhaps because Charles I was regarded as a British monarch, whereas his Parliamentarian opponents were felt to represent a purely English interest.

The Cornish soon won a reputation as Charles I's most committed supporters and several thousand Cornish soldiers lost their lives in his service. Ironically, loyalty was to prove as disastrous for the Cornish in the 1640s as rebelliousness had done in the 1540s. The King's eventual defeat, in 1646, was another hammer blow for traditional 'Cornishness', and thereafter both the Cornish language and the Cornish sense of ethnic identity faded fast.

By 1700, there were only 5000 Cornish speakers left: most of them living in the coastal parishes between the Lizard and Land's End. From this last, precarious toehold, there was nowhere left for the language to go but into the sea itself - and into the sea it eventually went: ending its days as a technical, ship-board vocabulary employed by a handful of elderly fishermen during the late 18th century. Cornish, it seemed, had died - and with it had died Cornwall's claim to be the fifth British nation. Or had it?

For today's Cornishmen and women - some of them speaking revived versions of Cornish, many of them increasingly fascinated both by Cornwall's distinctive past and by its potential future within a devolved United Kingdom - the answer is by no means clear-cut.

Find out more

Books

- *'Tudor Cornwall'* by A.L. Rowse (Jonathan Cape, 1941)
- *'Cornwall'* by P. Payton (Alexander Associates, 1996)
- *'West Britons: Cornish Identities and the Early Modern British State'* by M. Stoyle (University of Exeter Press, 2002)

Links

- The political party that seeks to promote the interests of Cornwall and the Cornish people today is **Mebyon Kernow** (Sons of Cornwall)
- **The Institute of Cornish Studies** at Truro is at the centre of current research into many aspects of Cornwall's past.