

‘At One with All - Towards a meaning of ‘culture’

The Cornish miner always paid tribute to the Knockers for their protection.

Introduction

Cornish miners experienced the presence of, and expressed their kinship with hidden forces - with the spiritual environment that is the most real dimension of Cornwall's cultural embrace - and, although treated by sceptical and often mocking observers as comical or quaint, used such personifying devices to describe the depth of their connection with the elements and the earth.

Such expressions and descriptions of innate and sharp experience carry with them echoes of ancient Celtic religion. Just as the great works of John Harris, the Dolcoath Poet, may be seen to draw on the inherited Celtic sense of the poet as Bard, offering mythic interpretation of landscape and journey to his community and people, so too the people of Cornwall are shaped by the flames and smokes of ancient fires, by the untold yet constantly present myths, by the breath of Arthur, by the insistence of family, by the closeness of kinship.

Nothing culturally has changed in the Cornish experience - there remains a cherished and deep-rooted sense of one-ness with place, with elements, with ocean and land, with rock and air. There remains a strong community, often tested by the gaping distances of exile and misunderstanding, but always striving to seek out the truth in things, to speak as a Bard, to interpret the journey, to open the heart. There is continuity, which has outlived the often loud, dissonant rages of change, of suppression, of despair, of joy and salvation. Such a thread, carried like the eternal fuse, deep within each Cornish breast, offers part of the fabric of what we mean by culture. But it is not all.

Two things have emerged in my mind since visiting Ireland, which have affected my view of how Cornwall needs to grow in order to flourish. We need to get off the back foot of needing to protest our existence, our difference, and our perspective before we can discuss our needs and aspirations. We need to understand our culture more easily and clearly, and in understanding it learn from it how to evolve economically, socially, culturally, politically, so that Cornwall becomes more deeply and meaningfully Cornwall - fully Cornish, fully at one with itself, confident, respected, equal - and therefore a good partner; an imaginative driver, a careful yet daring adventurer!

On the back foot!

In Ireland, when a civil servant appears in a small community arts centre in Connemara to discuss with activists in the Gaeltacht how to foster their language as the practical tool of everyday expression for young Irish people, whether in fixing an old Ford Escort or striving to capture the spirits of evening in a thrash metal dirge - then the two of them - civil servant and arts worker - start with a common foundation - they share their culture; it is a bonding force for them. They do not have to debate

terms of reference, or cluck at offensive phrases mistakenly uttered - they start from a common base.

Such commonality does not alter the dynamic between government and citizen - or between funder and artist - but it does mean that both actors on the market-stage are in the same play. I suspect that this unspoken bond - taken so much for granted in Ireland - has made the task of regeneration-through-culture a much easier and achievable objective.

In Cornwall there is always the need to explain - you have to tell conceptualists that their pro-forma models of geography, of administration, of corporation, of settlement, of problem solving cannot be simply applied in Cornwall, because things are different here.

Now, the poverty of spirit bred from denial of the Cornish as a people with a culture and a land by neighbours and peers has generated conditions in which two things are occurring.

1. The Cornish are saying 'enough is enough - we will be who and what we are; we will crusade to achieve the dignity of visibility, the respect of a people amongst peoples'.

2. Identity, distinctiveness, difference - is now widely perceived, as a result of the Irish experience, to be central to rebuilding a vibrant and prosperous Cornwall.

And yet, every time a new face appears, or a familiar face takes on a new brief, there is the need to educate - to patiently choose your moment and set out the context, describe the difference. Too rarely, in our highly charged and regulated world, is there time. How many mistakes are made for the failure to make that time? How costly do they prove to be?

So often, before one can paint the picture one has to explain that Cornwall is a different canvas - the culture of the place, of people, of community, is different. Mainstream presumptions rarely if ever apply. Old baggage from previous appointments and experience has to be left behind - in many cases, wrenched from tight grips and heaved over cliffs or down shafts!

Before we can negotiate fairly or clearly, we have to broker terms of reference. This always places us at a disadvantage, meaning that we either acquiesce in the inappropriate and misplaced, or accept less than we're worth because we've failed to convince, or get nothing at all because the reaction is blank incredulity.

How can we gain the position that others enjoy on the playing field of being players? How can we prove ourselves in the eyes of others, so that we are not always disabled by the twin perceptions of 'us and them' and 'what's the point?'

We have made a start. The Cornish - those who write in 'Cornish' on the 'Other' box in the 'ethnic identity' question on the 2001 census - will be captured as a specific group. The Cornish have gained a new label for statistical purposes - we are 06!

The information gained from such a simple device will enable us to compare this group with others in Britain, and will help in mounting cases for resources. Most of all, this small, binary code offers a richly diverse, indigenous and ancient minority the small comfort of 'statistical visibility'.

The Cornish National Minority Report, recently published, mounts a case rebutting the UK government's nebulous rejection of the claim of the Cornish to be a 'national minority'. Remember, Cornwall receives by far the lowest government grant to support local government in the UK. One of the facts to emerge from the recent campaign to gain recognition as a 'national minority' is that each speaker/reader/user of Scots Gaelic is subsidised to the tune of £172 per year. The whole of the Cornish language receives £5000 - a gift from the departing and unlamented John Mills! There's cash in minorities!

So, we have begun to mount our case. Cornish Solidarity did wonders for a while, mounting stunts which shifted perceptions. Andrew George speaks Cornish in Parliament. And so on. But we need to clearly, unequivocally and stubbornly assert our cultural distinction, until it has become an ordinary, habitual assumption underpinning public policy - the Cornish are an equal opportunities minority; the National Health Service is free at the point of delivery!

Understanding culture

So, let's turn to the second point:

What is this culture we speak so passionately about, and how does it affect everyday life?

Since returning from Ireland, since hearing that the European Commission see 'regional distinctiveness' as the key priority, since participating in the tortuous debates about culture (which culminated in the RDA announcing last year that the culture of Cornwall is its natural beauty, landscape and hedges) - I have been reflecting on the relationship between culture and economic regeneration.

I went to the Gaeltacht to meet a woman running a community arts facility where the only rule is that everything which happens is conducted in the Irish language - it was a creative, useful, committed and inspiring place. It was, actually, inspiringly ordinary, but the commitment to the fundamental principle that language is culture made it compellingly different. She sent back all correspondence from the Government written in English - whether a writ or a grant - demanding that it be written in Irish or it would not be read - or cashed!

She and her colleagues raided the local TV station, purloined equipment and broadcast Irish language TV from a tent. They won a TV station for the Gaeltacht. They then decided that the tokenism - the very poor standard of language delivery - was unacceptable. They raided again, broadcast again - result: better Irish on TV!

Look out Carlton-West country!

I have reached a point in my thinking where I think we might define three forms of culture that affect Objective 1:

Expressive, organisational, and anthropological

Expressive culture

This is the most commonly described aspect of culture - it forms products, it tells stories, invents symbols, stimulates creativity and inspires passion. The arts, sport, fun and games - all are expressive. Rituals, ceremonies, rites, mayor-making, funerals and weddings, 'obby 'oss, Furry Dance, Samhain, St Piran's Day, Trelawny, Nick Darke, Kneehigh, Jethro, Pol Hodge, gigs, Dean Shipton, marching, Kernewek, dialect, Peter Lanyon, Piran Alarms, Oggy Oggy Oggy, Fanny Moody, Mrs Rosewarne, Wheal Coates, Men an Tol! The expressive culture of the Cornish people, of the place of Cornwall is massive - almost beyond cataloguing, worldwide.

The expressive culture of Cornwall has been constantly renewed and reinvented down through generations from prehistoric stonemasons through Glasney monks to Carl Grose and John Angarrack. Part of our challenge is to take that legacy, to be our selves confidently and completely - and to carry forward on all fronts Cornish self-expression.

To do this requires that patrons and investors in expressive culture acknowledge the integrity and equal rights of the Cornish to have their identity and culture placed alongside all the other players on the British and European field of play by our government, by our quangos, by our peers. We only want to be ourselves and to compete fairly.

When we experience psychotic denial of the existence of our culture - or indeed of ourselves as a people, as a nation - amongst those who hold power in our own local authorities, who populate the corridors of schools and colleges, who apply equal opportunities as law abiding citizens in all but our case - then we have a difficult proposition, and need to win enlightened and influential support. Nothing speaks louder than facts. Roll on the census.

Organisational culture

The environment and geography of Cornwall have nurtured ages of human enterprise and endeavour. Much of this has been founded on unique organisational structures - in mining the 'cost book' company, in agriculture the 'three life lease' in fishing the 'share' system. In each of these there is an element of contract, of investment by the individual in the enterprise, with an expectation of return commensurate with effort made.

These corporate concepts have affected the class structure in Cornwall, and have also created a distinctive relationship between genders. The role of women in Cornish society has yet to be fully described or appreciated - too many Anglo-assumptions get in the way.

Equally, although mining has ceased, similar corporate arrangements survive in the china clay industry; three life leases still bond the remnants of the 'great' estates, and 'share' fishing may be reviving with the renewal of hand lining. The basic concept which bonds these systems - of commerce and industry being based on the equalities borne out of contracting - make Cornwall differ from England, where the dominant corporate arrangement is of employer and employee. It also offers a cultural explanation for the prevalence of self-employment, of the vital importance of networks of freelancers sharing projects and clustering - it is also reflected in the concept of the 'pool' of actors and technicians favoured by Kneehigh.

If we are to organise Cornish enterprise so that it responds to the culture of place and people, so that it can function effectively and competitively, and inspire productivity and commitment, then there is much to be learned from understanding Cornish forms of corporate organisation, of adapting them and developing modern versions which enable Cornish people to express themselves freely within structures which reflect their preference for consensus and equality - of gender and class.

Developing an organisational culture empathetic with place, environment and human culture is an essential element of achieving sustainable regeneration. Again, the element of education and the cracking of standard conceptual modelling must be high on the agenda if we are to succeed. How do we translate the 'cost book' into the media industries? Is there synergy between LETS schemes and the share boat?

Perhaps our necessary commitment to a sustainable environment might be best realised through the renewal of the three-life lease. Bound up in these concepts is a principle of belonging, of family, of community lying at the root of enterprise - the principle of 'onen hag oll' - one & all.

Anthropological culture.

There is always a sense of disbelief when pundits and bureaucrats pass Cornwall off as a 'rural area' - there is lots of 'rural', but there are urban bits, industrial bits, crowded bits and sparse bits - Cornwall, in fact, is a self-sustaining society; self-sustaining in the sense that it governs itself and fosters a culture of continuity - of changing and yet maturing, of regenerating and yet maintaining constancy. At the core of this lies a People, the Cornish - a group bonded by the behaviour patterns and customs applicable in an island-like place, as much by its Celtic origins as by the demands of economic life.

The physical attributes of this culture include our scattered settlement pattern and the intrinsic interplay between the elements, the seasons and socio-economic activity. We tend towards winning our living from a variety of intermingled skills and occupations - this is as true today as it was in medieval times, or in the 19th century - our skills and occupations are different today, but the pattern remains predominant. We also persist in community activity, although the catalysts have altered - schools, theatre, festivals,

feasts and sport having replaced to a large extent chapel and tea treat - the pattern remains.

Cornish culture, as with all other cultures, is founded upon the resolution of challenge - how do we define problems? How do we conclude what action to take? How do we organise ourselves to take action? How do we celebrate success, or absorb failure? When we examine our particular circumstances we find that we have evolved peculiarly Cornish ways of doing things that are successful. Our way of approaching problems and resolving them is so successful that we have exported its influence throughout the World - not simply the engineering solutions, but the process as well, the human exchange with ideas.

If we are to succeed in applying the unusual availability of cash offered by Objective 1 to really achieve a sustainable future for Cornwall, then it is vital that we develop within the parameters of our culture - that we grow and adapt as a People, as a community - creating institutions and mechanisms, generating expressions which portray our reality, and nurturing a society in Cornwall which provides an attractive, identifiable and distinct framework of ethics, compassion, respect and custom that will offer freedom within it for individuals to grow.

Conclusion

Returning from Ireland I felt that I was coming home from a society at peace with itself; a society that, having struggled, having confronted the pressures of uniformity and oppression, was now increasingly at peace with itself, confident of itself, emerging into collective and national adulthood - uninhibited, articulate and energised - coming home to a People, once shattered and demoralised by a 'moment of doubt' which, in the early 1950s led the Cornish to surrender self-determination and to call out for assistance - to send for the doctor! - A people now rebuilding our collective life.

The Cornish are ready again, after a crushing century of depopulation, in-migration, war and depression, peace and recession, Devon Wall and the southwest, West Country and Wales & West - of patronising colonisation by artists and second-homers. Since the War we have transformed Cornwall. The Cornish live in good housing, they live longer and more healthily, they are secure and cared-for - now is the time to recharge our culture, to lay hands once again upon community and economy, to bring Cornish aptitudes and aspirations, Cornish skills and ingenuity, Cornish ambition and style - to bring all these aspects to the fore and to create a new Cornwall - a place in which

Cornish society is acknowledged for its robust distinctiveness, for its openness and inclusiveness, for its absorbency and resilience

Cornish arts are celebrations and explorations of a society and psyche accepted for itself, exchanged with and encouraged, sought out and freely given

Cornish organizations are in tune with the environment and the character of community, and promote equality and accessibility - assert consensus as a process on which to develop action, and which renew themselves from within the resources of our society, educating, recruiting and rewarding the talents and skills which carry with them an innate and unquestioned commitment to Cornwall.

Cornish customs and rituals, our behaviour, is respected and nurtured, not disparaged and discriminated against.

In twenty five years time being Cornish should be the proud assignation of our young people as they turn-to with a will to maintain and develop their inheritance, feeling it to be theirs, and their task to be to pass it on - the rites of their passage should be strongly marked as much by the message of the stones as by the surprises of the future.

Being part of Europe is something different for the Cornish. For the Saxon it may taste of looking back towards places and environments long rejected and abandoned; of being small fry on a big and often fractious continent. For the Cornish - their culture derived from their Celtic backcloth, their sense of kinship aroused by contacts with other, similar cultures, their spirits provoked by interplay with peoples inspired by place, by elements, by expressions and experience rooted in the poetry of myth and the symbol of the journey - for the Cornish, Europe is a community of Peoples, of which we are one.

Objective 1 represents an opportunity to reach out, to renew ancient cords of commerce, community and culture - to share the thrill of building new relationships - Europe offers Cornwall a future in which our culture is simply accepted for what it is, and equally valued along with all other cultures, and in which the language of opportunity is based upon a broad appreciation of the depth and scope of human potential. Here, we can grow; inspire our young, build our communities.

The money is much less important than the intellectual process that its promise has instigated. The money can fuel the vision, but without the vision, without the coherence and purpose generated by confidence in our culture and identity - it will merely get spent, Cornwall will get further spoilt and nothing will materially or spiritually change.

These are thoughts inspired by visiting Ireland. They spring from a desire to be able to cease to feel I have to protest my position before I can make my pitch. Only the dignity of unreserved recognition - of my culture, of my belonging to a unique and valuable People, of my identification with my place and its destiny, its spirituality and challenge - can move me - move us - off the back-foot (an English cricketing expression). The goal of this investment - to create conditions in which we, the Cornish - all those who feel themselves to be Cornish - may be ourselves, may thrive expressively, organisationally, socially - and thereby prosper, each according to their own measure of wealth.

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Truro, Kernow

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Kernow bys Vykken