

## Introduction

This thesis examines the evolution of oral folk tradition in Cornwall and its relationship with Cornish identity. It seeks to show that oral folk tradition is a dynamic process, driven in the first place by a sense of continuity and identity but also fuelled by contemporary experience and the prevailing social climate. Although there is a long history of descriptive recording and collection of music, dance and associated customs from oral tradition, there was little critical debate about its origins and meaning as a social phenomenon until the latter half of the twentieth century. There is certainly a limited historiography of critical study relating to oral folk tradition in Cornwall although there is a wealth of antiquarian commentary.

Identity can also be understood as a dynamic process and it is argued in this thesis that it has a reciprocal relationship with oral folk tradition. Not only does identity use oral folk tradition as a vehicle for expression it also contributes to the creative process of change. This approach to oral folk tradition and identity as dynamic and contemporary processes locates this thesis firmly within *New Cornish Studies*, which focuses attention on the humanities and is concerned with issues around difference and diversity in modern Cornwall.

Apart from providing the opportunity to explore uncharted territory, the attraction of folk tradition as a topic within Cornish studies is that it forms a significant part of the cultural backdrop for Cornwall. The heritage and tourism industries promote it through use of icons such as Helston's Furry Dance and Padstow's Obby Oss. The Brass Band movement may have a distinct and sophisticated musical culture of its own but when leading a carnival or Furry dance the bands returns to their roots in the tradition of Tea Treats (a Tea Treat is a village party, see glossary). Male voice choirs are an integral part of Cornwall's more formal musical community, but have a symbiotic relationship with informal, community singing sessions from which they draw members and into which they feed material. Weddings are a bastion of traditional customs in most cultures and families wishing to express their Cornishness provide steady employment for musicians and dance bands with a repertoire of Cornish material. Communities seeking to stage a local event or festival are as likely to quarry Cornish folk tradition for inspiration, as they are to draw down from popular global culture. Festivals like Golowan in Penzance and the Polperro Festival, for example, incorporate revived local traditions with entertainment from the world stage. Most people living in Cornwall will

### Introduction

have some contact with, or exposure to, folk tradition in one form or another even if it is not something with which they have a particular interest.

The charm and universality of folk tradition does bring challenges to research methodology, however. Simply to observe an event or custom is to participate as audience and any record made will be subject to the observer's experiences, interests and mindset. A problem compounded still further if the observer actively participates in the event. This has been a particular challenge for the author who has a family background immersed in folk tradition and has continued in an active role as performer, practitioner and protagonist throughout the course of this research. This study shows that the methodology of participatory action research addresses these issues and turns the very act of participation into an effective research tool and a means of critical reflection. Action research goes further than this, however, and supports the role of researcher as a protagonist actively involved with the subject and seeking outcomes that will be positive and empowering.

The phrase "As is the manner and the custom" is apt and self sufficient as a title for a study that considers the customs that people engage in and what they understand by these customs. The origin and context of this phrase is symbolic, however, and introduces the themes that underpin this study. It is the last line of the last recorded mystery play in the Cornish language, *Gwreans An Bys – The Creation Of The World*. William Jordan transcribed it in 1611 and the complete verse inspires an image reminiscent of Brueghel's paintings of medieval peasantry:

Minstrels growgh theny peba

May hallan warbarthe downssya

Del ew an vaner han geys

Minstrels, pipe for us

That we may together dance

*As is the manner and the custom*

(Whitley Stokes, *The Creation of the World*, London, Williams and Norgate, 1864, line 2548)

This play and these words draw a final line under the Celtic speaking world of medieval Cornwall at the same time they are a portent of the Cornwalls to come and the themes for this thesis. For the Cornwall of the nineteenth century romantic folklorists such as Bottrell, these plays represented the rural idyll lost in the tide of industrialisation. A lost Cornwall re-introduced to a wider audience through the folk tales and customs he and his contemporaries recorded. The mystery plays also

### *Introduction*

provided the classical texts that drove the language revival of the early twentieth century that in turn underpins the identity of a Cornwall other than English.

It is the very last word, however, that provides a thread of continuity through to the present day. “Geys”, conventionally translated as “custom” also means a jest, a “geysor” being a jester, joker or fool (see glossary). It is not difficult to see a connection between the Guize dance character of the “gaukum” who plays the part of a fool and the medieval jester. This study makes the case that Guizing and the customs associated were, and continue to be, an important vehicle for transmitting music and dance traditions across the generations. It will be shown that customs such as Helston’s Hal An Tow, the Polperro Mock Mayor, the Bodmin Wassailers, and the Padstow Mummers to name but a few, can all be seen as part of a continuing Guizing tradition in Cornwall.

This study is divided into three sections. The first considers the origins of the term “folk” and the meanings that have been and are associated with it. It considers the development of Cornish identity and the multiple identities of modern Cornwall. A model of enquiry is then established which takes advantage of some of the tools offered by the paradigms of memory, discursivity and oral history. Here, it is argued that participatory action research is a method that can incorporate these tools and also address some of the challenges for this study such as the potentially subjective nature of participant observation. The methodology described in this section defines the structure of the appendices, which provide an overview of the material collected, the research methods and a selection of case examples. A glossary is also included which serves to provide an explanation of some of the dialect and folk terms used in this thesis. It also serves to contrast the language of folk tradition in Cornwall to that elsewhere.

The next section focuses on the collectors and recorders of folk tradition in Cornwall from the early nineteenth century through to the present. It shows that these can be understood as three groups of stakeholders. The nineteenth century antiquarians and folklorist who explored folk traditions with a mixture of nostalgia and romanticism represent the first group. The second group of stakeholders were the classic folk song collectors ranging from Baring Gould to Peter Kennedy. This group of people may have been equally romantic but unlike their predecessors, they were driven by the desire to preserve or revive the material they found as a living tradition. The last

### *Introduction*

group were on a mission parallel to but perhaps at ideological odds with the folk song collectors such as Sharp and his rural English idyll. They were the Celto-Cornish revivalists who saw in folk tradition an opportunity to express their Cornishness, often in opposition to Englishness. This section argues that the tension that arose out of this might be understood in terms of “speech communities” who interpret the same material in quite different ways depending upon their discursivity.

The last section examines folk tradition in contemporary locations and in doing so reinforces the model of folk tradition as a dynamic process adopted in this study. It will show that not only does oral folk tradition thrive in a modern environment but that the increased interest in and recognition of Cornish identity is also reflected in the way traditions are interpreted and presented. This section recognises and provides examples of folk tradition in two “existences”. The first in an original location that has continuity in time, place and community and a second in a setting that is more self conscious and reflective but nevertheless subject to the processes of oral folk tradition. The effect of new technologies and the network society are also explored here and shown to have been assimilated into the folk process rather than representing a threat to it. This opens the opportunity for engagement with Cornish folk traditions to a much wider group of people and in turn leads to a positive vision of the future.

*Introduction*