

The Story of the Cornish Language

In Cornwall today there are two languages – English, which is usually used, and Kernewek, the musical Cornish language which nearly died out 200 years ago. Cornish was spoken before the arrival of English, but its demise began with the Saxons pushing westward. Athelstan, King of Wessex defeated Hywel, the last Cornish king, in 936 A.D., and fixed the River Tamar as the boundary between his Saxon kingdom and ‘the west wealhas’ (Ellis *CLI* 26). Ellis suggests that there is a lack of literature from this time because Athelstone began to eradicate the Celtic culture as a reform, and so destroyed many early Cornish manuscripts (*SCL* 10).

In 1349 it was permissible to teach English in schools and English replaced Norman French at court. Cornish people who were bilingual began to drop the language which had no commercial value - their mother tongue. But perhaps the biggest blow to the Cornish language came from The Reformation. In 1547 *The English Book of Common Prayer* was introduced into Cornwall, and old Celtic customs adapted by the Catholic Church were to be eliminated. Ellis suggests that if the new prayer book and Bible had been translated into Cornish as they were into Welsh and Irish, the language would have lasted longer (*SCL* 15). During this time religious plays were still being written. The oldest surviving one is the *Ordinalia* from the 14th century and these kept the language alive.

Kent states that at the end of the eighteenth century some Cornish texts were being produced, but these receded in the face of the increasing dominance of English writing (*LC* 279). By the time of the Industrial Revolution Cornish identity was based on the Cornish dialect of English rather than Cornish itself (Kent *LC* 280). Jago (in Ellis *SCL* 22) stated that there were many Celtic Cornish words in the Cornish dialect, for example ‘bucca’ for ‘small’ and ‘flam’ for ‘frog’ (L James 2005). Some children’s games early in the twentieth century still used Cornish words (Ellis *CLL* 131). Some Cornish speakers could still be found in the late nineteenth century, so it could be argued that the language never died out, or at least, not for long. Scholarship certainly did not die out and the first Cornish dictionary was published in 1865.

The idea of Cornish becoming a living language again is accredited to Henry Jenner. His handbook of the Cornish language was published in 1904. A brilliant scholar, he believed simply that Cornish people should learn Cornish because they are Cornish, and formed the Cowethas Kelto-Kernuak – the Celtic Cornish Society – the first Cornish language movement (Ellis *SCL* 24). This revival of the Cornish language parallels with the Celtic Revival in Ireland and Scotland.

In 1951 the formation of the nationalistic political movement called Mebyon Kernow, Sons of Cornwall, took place. This movement aimed: ‘to maintain the character of Cornwall as a Celtic nation, to...promote the constitutional advance of Cornwall and its right to self government in domestic affairs. Also to foster Cornish studies and culture...’

(Ellis SCL 28). Language and national identity are linked here and as Ellis (SCL 28) points out, one cannot revive a language without reviving the idea of nationhood.

Robert Morton Nance became one of the most important leaders of the revivalists and produced a unified spelling system which facilitated the learning of Cornish (Ellis SCL 25). The language movement gained momentum with people worldwide wanting to learn Kernewek, so in 1967 the Cornish Language Board was set up to assume responsibility for all aspects of the study and revival of the language.

Kernewek was accepted as a Celtic Language by the European Charter of Lesser Languages in November 2002 and also by the British Government, but Lilian James states that introducing it into Cornish schools is taking too long as there are not the teachers to teach it. Another obstacle to the spread of Kernewek is the debate between four main different schools of thought on pronunciation and spelling. Even so, there were at least 200 to 300 fluent speakers and over 1000 with varying levels of fluency in 1987 (Edwards 70), and Lilian James suggests there are over 500 fluent speakers today. The BBC has regular news broadcasts in Cornish and there are a number of magazines solely in Cornish: *An Gannas*, *An Gowser* and *An Garrick*. Local newspapers, such as the *Western Morning News*, often have articles in Cornish, and such newspapers as *The Packet*, *The West Briton* and *The Cornishman* also support the language.

Works Cited

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