

Place, Community And Identity: South Australia's Cornish Mining Landscapes

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The copper-mining landscapes of South Australia – principally those of Burra Burra in the mid-North and Moonta and environs on northern Yorke Peninsula – are today striking reminders of the State's significant role in the mid-nineteenth century in the expansion of the international mining frontier and the attendant Cornish transnational identity. They are best understood against the background of the nineteenth-century Cornish diaspora (Payton: 2005).

The economic marginalisation that progressively overtook Cornwall as the nineteenth century wore on precipitated a widespread exodus, spurred on by the political discontent of the 'Reforming Thirties' and the near-starvation of the 'Hungry Forties', and complementing the strong demand that existed already for Cornish agriculturalists and (especially) skilled Cornish miners on the rapidly expanding frontiers of America, Australia and South Africa. This was the 'Great Emigration', a sustained movement of people (miners and others) that was to characterise the Cornish experience until the years before the outbreak of the Great War in 1914. A.C. Todd considered that it 'seems reasonable to suppose that Cornwall lost at least a third of its population' (Todd: 1967, 19) in the nineteenth century, while Dudley Baines offers some frightening statistics. Between 1861 and 1900, he says, Cornwall lost no less than 10.5 percent of its male population overseas and 7.0 percent to other counties (far and away the greatest percentage loss of any county), with a corresponding loss of 5.3 percent of the female population overseas and 7.1 percent to other counties. This amounted to some 118,500 people. Baines concludes that although this 'is not as high as from the famous regions of Italy . . . it must be remembered that mass emigration from Italy lasted not much more than twenty years. Cornwall was probably an emigration region comparable to any in Europe' (Baines: 1985, 157-9). More unnerving still are statistics that indicate that, between 1861 and 1900, 44.8 percent of the Cornish male population aged fifteen to twenty-four left for overseas, with a further 29.7 percent leaving for other counties. Over the same period and in the same age group, 26.2 percent of Cornish females went overseas while 35.5 percent went to other parts of Britain.

Of course, this picture was complicated considerably by the oft-repeated process of emigration, counter-emigration, and renewed emigration, where individuals (or even families) might spend their lives gravitating between Cornwall and a variety of overseas destinations. The pattern was made more complex still by the international mobility that emerged, with many Cornish folk (especially the miners) roaming within and between the

continents of the world, especially their mining districts. The most obvious impact within Cornwall itself was the very visible depopulation that occurred – the populace of Breage and Germoe fell by 27 percent between 1841 and 1851, that of Tywardreath by 29 percent between 1861 and 1871, and that of St Just-in-Penwith by 27 percent between 1871 and 1881. Perranzabuloe lost 22 percent of its population between 1871 and 1881, and St Cleer lost 25 percent during the same decade and a further 22 percent between 1891 and 1901 (Probert: 1971, 61).

Complementing the ‘push’ factors – those circumstances that encouraged individuals to leave Cornwall – were the corresponding ‘pull’ factors, the considerations that drew Cornish emigrants to a multiplicity of destinations across the globe. Even before the 1840s, by which time emigration had emerged as a significant feature of Cornish life, a range of potential destinations for Cornish emigrants had already appeared. Miners had been engaged to work in Latin America as early as the 1820s, and in the 1830s the lead deposits of Wisconsin were being opened up with the help of Cornish miners. Such was the demand for the skills of these miners, it is apparent that even if Cornwall’s industrial base had remained strong, there would still have been a significant outflow of emigrants – enticed by the high wages available to skilled labour on the mining frontiers of the New World. By 1850 there were perhaps as many as nine thousand Cornish folk at Mineral Point in Wisconsin. In the 1840s the Real del Monte silver mines in Mexico attracted a flurry of Cornish emigrants, as did the iron mines on the shores of Lake Huron in Canada. In 1843 and 1844 the ‘Copper Rush’ in the Keweenaw district of Upper Michigan drew Cornish miners and their families from both Wisconsin and Cornwall itself, this ‘Lakes’ region destined to remain a major focus of Cornish concentration in America for generations to come.

Five years later, gold was discovered in California, triggering an enthusiastic response from Cornwall where hundreds of miners (and others) clamoured to become ‘Forty-niners’. At first, individuals had easy pickings but soon quartz gold was discovered at depth – and this required the particular expertise of the Cornish miners. Consequently, as A. L. Rowse has noted, it ‘is probable that there are more Cornish people in California than in any other state in the Union’. (Rowse: 1969, 241). Grass Valley and Nevada City became predominantly Cornish towns, and the ‘Cousin Jacks’ – as the Cornish were known – found their way across America: from North Carolina in the 1850s and Utah in the 1860s, to New Mexico in the 1870s and Arizona in the 1880s. Colorado, where a significant element of the population of Gilpin County and the appropriately named Leadville was Cornish in the 1880s, was another

important focus, as were the copper mines of Butte, Montana, in the same decade. In each of these districts the Cornish were recognisable as a distinct ethnic group, the contemporary American journalist, Wells Drury, noting their ‘religious fervour . . . independence, thrift, geniality, excitability, contempt for familiar dangers . . . with what zest they can sing their fellowship song “One and All”, and their old patriotic ballad, “And Shall Trelawny Die”’ (Rowse: 1968, 295-6).

The Cornish colluded in this ‘myth of Cousin Jack’, asserting an innate ability as hard-rock miners, affording them an unassailable superiority over potentially competing ethnic groups in the mining industry. Likewise, a corresponding ‘myth of Cousin Jenny’ insisted that Cornish women were uniquely suited for the rigours of the mining frontier, bringing domestic order where others might fail. These were myths that were deployed, often with considerable success, across the globe wherever the Cornish gathered in considerable numbers.

Cornish settlement in the United States and Latin America has been well documented (Todd: 1967; Rowse: 1969; Rowe: 1974; Todd: 1977; Schwartz: 2003). Australia has been equally significant in the story of the Cornish diaspora. South Australia, in particular, has drawn the attention of those engaged in the study of the emigrant Cornish. Ian Auhl, for example, in the 1970s almost single-handedly drew attention to the international significance of the Burra township and its distinctive Cornish landscape, leading to the latter’s eventual preservation by an enlightened and informed State government as a State Heritage centre. Ian Auhl was also responsible for an impressive string of books and articles, culminating in his definitive *The Story of the Monster Mine: The Burra Burra Mine and its Townships 1845-1877* (Auhl: 1986). A later period in South Australia’s Cornish mining history was sketched in Oswald Pryor’s delightful *Australia’s Little Cornwall* (Pryor: 1960), while the Cornish heritage of Yorke Peninsula’s ‘Copper Triangle’ has caught the attention of more recent writers (Payton: 2007). Greg Drew and Jack Connell have produced their important *Cornish Beam Engines in South Australian Mines*, which charts the parallel emigration of Cornish engines to the colony and the impact there of Cornish technology and mining methods (Drew and Connell: 1993).

South Australia occupies a special place in the vast panorama of the Cornish diaspora. Although there had been some limited transportation to the Penal Colonies from Cornwall, the first major movement of Cornish people to the Antipodes did not occur until the foundation of South Australia in 1836. The very first mineral discoveries in Australia were made at Glen Osmond, just outside the colonial capital of Adelaide, in February 1841 by two Cornish miners (Hutchins and Thomas), and by April of that year Australia’s first

metalliferous mine – Wheal Gawler – was in production. However, it was the discovery of copper – at Kapunda and at Burra Burra in the mid-1840s – that really put South Australia on the international mining map. Cornish miners flocked to both localities. At the former, the first mining engine in Australia (obtained second-hand from Cornwall) was put to work. The latter was so fabulously rich in copper that its chance discovery seemed to one observer to be surely the result of a miraculous intervention by the spirits of Madron holy well back in Cornwall:

And, oh, ye emerald Malachites!

Ye azure deeps of Madron!

A harvest of five million pounds

Was taken from those Burra mounds –

What luck! What chance! What fortune! (Cousin Sylvia: n.d.)

Be that as it may, the links between Cornwall and the Burra mine were certainly intimate. The technology, for example, was almost entirely Cornish. Thus in 1852 John Congdon, formerly of the Caradon mines, erected a mighty 80 inch Cornish pump engine which had been especially constructed for the Burra at the Perran Foundry. All manner of other materials was also brought out from Cornwall. Crucibles, essential pieces of kit in the assaying of ore samples, were purchased from the Calenick smelting works near Truro, while stamps and whim engines were ordered from Perran Foundry. The workforce was also largely Cornish. A visitor to the Burra in April 1848 reported that had he met a ‘Captain Tre-something and a Captain Pen-something’, (Payton: 1984, 35) for the mine’s General Superintendent, Captain Henry Roach (originally from the Tresavean mine, Redruth), was careful to appoint Cousin Jacks as his assistants – Matthew Bryant as second captain, Richard Goldsworthy (from Bodmin) as third, William Mitchell as fourth, Samuel Penglaze as grass (surface) captain, Samuel Osborne as chief ore-dresser, and Philip Santo (from Saltash) as clerk of the works. John Congdon was chief engineer, a Mr Boswarva was in charge of clerical work, and two Cornish masons – Ambrose Harris and Thomas Paynter – were engaged to oversee the construction of engine houses. The mines themselves were worked according to the time-honoured traditions of tribute and tutwork, where part of the entrepreneurial function was performed by the miners themselves.

Three of the Burra townships bore Cornish names – Redruth, Lostwithiel and Copperhouse – and the miners frequented the ‘Cornish Arms’, the ‘Ancient Briton’ and the ‘Redruth Arms’. At Redruth they lived in streets whose names read like a gazetteer from home: St Dye (reflecting the Cornish pronunciation of ‘Day’), Mevagissey, Tregony, Morvah, Sancreed, Crowan, Helston, Ludgvan, Illogan, Truro, Lelant, St Just. The various Methodist denominations were active at the Burra, not least the indefatigable Bible Christians who did much to transform the district from a rough and raw mining camp to a reasonably sober and more-or-less law-abiding community. Cornish wrestling was a popular pastime, the Duke of Cornwall’s birthday was observed as a general holiday, and Mid-Summer’s Day (though falling in winter in Australia) continued to be ‘a red-letter day in Cousin Jack’s calendar’ (*South Australian Register*, 27 June 1863), marked by bonfires and the explosion of powder-charges. In the early days, it seems, the miners also marked St Piran’s Day, honouring their patron saint.

Scattered across the expanse of South Australia was a multiplicity of mining sites where the Cornish had lent a hand – sometimes places with unmistakable Cornish names, as in Wheal Blinman, Wheal Prosper, and Wheal Friendship, though often with Aboriginal names that already seemed uncompromisingly Australian, such as Yudnamutana and Mattawarangala. But, after the Burra, the other major concentration of Cornish folk was on the northern Yorke Peninsula, the Copper Triangle of ‘Australia’s Little Cornwall’, comprising the townships of Moonta, Wallaroo and Kadina, where copper had been discovered in 1859-61. As at Kapunda and Burra Burra, Cornish technologies were applied, including the import of engines from Hayle Foundry and William West of St Blazey, and the purchase from Cornwall of all kinds of supplies from pump leather and whim ropes to rivets and Cornish shovels. Theodolites were purchased from W. Wilton of St Day. Under the watchful eye of Captain Henry Richard Hancock (actually born across the border at Horrabridge, making him a ‘Devon Dumpling’ in the eyes of his Cornish workforce), the twin concerns of Moonta Mines and Wallaroo Mines developed into the colony’s principal industrial producers. In 1873 Anthony Trollope, the novelist, wrote that ‘so many of the miners were Cornishmen as to give Moonta and Wallaroo the air of Cornish towns’ (Trollope: 1967, 684), while in 1876 another observant visitor described the area as ‘an Australian Cornwall’ (*Yorke’s Peninsula Advertiser*, 4 August 1876). In 1889 a further report explained that the locals ‘lived isolated from the rest of the colony, remaining more Cornish than Cornwall’ (Spence: 1909, 27), while a newcomer to Yorke Peninsula at the turn of the century recorded: ‘My first impressions of Moonta Mines

was – what had I let myself in for? It was soon made clear that I was a foreigner with habits and opinions to be viewed with suspicion’ (Raws: n.d).

As at the Burra, all kinds of cultural icons appeared to proclaim the district’s Cornishness. Cornish wrestling matches were especially popular, with contestants travelling literally hundreds of miles to participate: a memorable occasion was in 1868 when the legendary John H. ‘Dancing’ Bray of Moonta defeated the Ballarat champion with a superbly executed ‘flying mare’ throw. ‘Then followed a shout such as might have been heard when Sebastopol was captured’, exclaimed one eye-witness: ‘It was said that 20 captains who were there declared they had not seen anything equal to it in Cornwall’ (Cowling: n.d, 93-4.). The christening of a new engine was an excuse for a lavish public dinner, such as at the starting of the New Cornwall 80 inch engine at Kadina in 1866 when Captain East invited all the local captains to the festivities, for it ‘was a good old Cornish custom to meet together on occasions like the present, and show a friendly feeling, although engaged on different mines’ (*Wallaroo Times*, 31 March, 1866). The Methodists were also active on Yorke Peninsula, the Rev W.H. Hosken, a Bible Christian preacher from the neighbouring colony of Victoria, writing in 1875 that he was ‘persuaded that I have never met a finer field of endeavour anywhere in our Connexion’ (*Bible Christian Magazine*, 1876, p.13). Methodism, indeed, influenced every aspect of life on the Peninsula, including the trade union movement that grew up in the 1870s and the subsequent United Labor Party, which provided the State’s first majority Labor Premier – John Verran, a Moonta miner.

For those born and bred in Moonta and environs, Moonta was ‘the hub of the universe’. In wider Cornish lore, there was a well-known saying: ‘if you haven’t been to Moonta, you haven’t travelled’ (Pryor: 1962, 148). And yet, northern Yorke Peninsula was in many ways a forbidding place: isolated, arid and prone to water shortage, and with the scourge of ‘black measles’ that decimated the infant population when it struck in the 1870s. Something of a love-hate relationship is evident in the words of Thomas Burttt whose poem, ‘The Solemn Moonta Mines’, was written on his returning home after many years’ absence, the ‘dirge-like sound and muffled reverberations’ of the mines at night prompting an equivocal appreciation of that awesome place:

Hark! methinks I hear the echo!
Of those solemn Moonta Mines;
Sadly sounding distant far-off,
Over flow'rets, trees and vines.

Listen to the ceaseless throbbing,
Of those engines measured slow;
Telling many a weary spirit
How it shares a world of woe. (Burt: 1885, 2).

Eventually, in 1923, the mines of Moonta and Wallaroo were closed, victims of the slump in world copper prices, joining the Burra and other South Australian mines which had been abandoned long since. Although much of the plant was dismantled and sold for scrap, as it was at Burra, enough remained at surface – not least the distinctively Cornish engine-houses and chimney stacks – for South Australia's copper-mining landscapes to survive into the twenty-first century as defining icons of the erstwhile Cornish transnational identity, monuments of international significance.

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