

Cornwall and England: When is Regionalism Nationalism?

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Abstract

This paper examines the cases of Cornwall, Yorkshire, and the North-East of England to develop an understanding of what distinguishes a sub-state nationalist movement from a (non-nationalist) regionalist movement. Sub-state nationalists, I argue, base their claims to nationhood on a narrative of historical ethnic difference between residents of 'their' territory and those in the rest of the state, even if they place little or no emphasis on individuals' ethnicity in the present day. In the case of Cornwall, this narrative is supported by the existence of a resurrected 'national' language. The way in which history is remembered, I argue, is more important to these narratives than the actual facts of history.

Introduction

Cornwall is, administratively speaking, a county of England. Situated on Britain's south-west peninsular, it is bordered by the River Tamar and Devon to the east, and by the sea on all other sides. However, unlike most counties in England, it is home to a devolution movement that is generally considered, by itself and by observers, to be 'nationalist' (Deacon et al., 2003). In this essay, we will examine why this is the case, while devolution movements elsewhere in England, such as in the North-East and Yorkshire, are generally construed as regionalist but not nationalist.

The question of what nations are, and how they seemingly have such power in the modern world, is one that many scholars have struggled with; Anderson writes that one of the great paradoxes faced by theorists of nationalism is "[t]he 'political' power of nationalisms vs. their philosophical poverty and even incoherence" (2006, p.5). However, the existing literature on nationalism gives relatively little attention to the fact that some nationalists, including mainstream Cornish nationalists, do not seek full independence for their respective nations. Little theoretical attention has also been given to regionalist movements that make no claim at nationhood for the region they champion.

In this essay, I hope to show how nationalist movements can be distinguished from non-nationalist regionalist movements: not by their political aims (which are largely the same for Cornish nationalists and for non-nationalist regionalists within England) but by the narratives that they use to support these aims. As we will see, mainstream Cornish nationalism presents itself as a 'civic nationalism', placing little or no emphasis on individuals' race or ethnicity; however, the claim that Cornwall should be seen as a nation distinct from England is based on the perception that 'the Cornish'

and 'the English' are historically different groups. In the cases of the North-East and Yorkshire, a similar perception of historical ethnic difference is, broadly speaking, absent.

The Theoretical Debate

Before considering the specific cases of Cornwall and the English regions, we should examine the general concepts of nation, nationalism, and regionalism. Anderson famously argues that the nation is an imagined community, since “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (2006, p.6). The nation, in other words, exists in the minds of its members. This idea of nationhood, Anderson argues, is always based in an “immemorial past” (2006, p.11), though, crucially, the form that this past takes in the popular consciousness is not necessarily accurate (Anderson, 2006, pp.11-12, fn.4). The idea that actual historical facts are not as important as popular perception is a common one among scholars of nationalism; Connor suggests that, while members of a nation “feel that they are ancestrally related”, this “need not, and *in nearly all cases will not*, accord with factual history” (1993, p.202, emphasis in original). Hobsbawm (2012) goes so far as to argue that nations and the traditions associated with them are often merely “invented”. As we shall see, the idea of an imagined past is particularly relevant for discussions of Cornish nationalism.

However, I do not suggest that nations are *just* invented constructs. Smith argues that nations necessarily have an ethnic or cultural basis, “mainly because of the critical importance for a sense of national identity of subjective dimensions” (2009, p.21). Even if it is not entirely accurate, some justification must exist for a claim to nationhood, otherwise no-one, not even the members of the alleged ‘nation’, would be convinced of its legitimacy. If someone were to declare, for example, that the combined territory of Rutland, Northamptonshire, Cambridgeshire, and the part of Norfolk west of the A140 constituted a nation, the universal response would most likely

be: why? As we shall see in the following sections, an ethnic and cultural basis does underlie claims of Cornwall's nationhood, despite its questionable accuracy and the absence of ethnicity in mainstream nationalist narratives. In the case of non-nationalist regionalist demands, such a basis is generally absent.

We should also define the term 'nationalism' before proceeding. Anderson (2006, p.5) suggests that nationalism is not an ideology at all, but a term more similar to 'kinship' and 'religion'. Gellner, in contrast, claims that nationalism "is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent" (2006, p.1). Nationalists, according to Gellner, believe that all states should be nation-states, with no "ethnic divergence between rulers and ruled" (2006, p.128). Nationalism, in other words, *is* an ideology, and one which promotes national independence and sovereignty.

I take some issue with both of these viewpoints, particularly within the context of Cornwall. While it is certainly not a typical ideology, I do not agree with Anderson that 'nationalism' should be grouped with 'kinship'; nationalism, I believe, entails some sort of belief or set of goals, even if these goals are not universal between nationalisms (or even between nationalists of the same nation). On the other hand, I do not agree with Gellner that nationalists necessarily seek political independence. Indeed, Cornish nationalism is a clear counterexample of this; Cornish nationalists seek recognition and devolution but (at least in the case of mainstream nationalists) not full independence.

Guibernau, considering the nationalisms of 'nations without states', writes the following:

To define a specific community as a nation ... if the nation does not possess a state of its own ... implicitly acknowledges the nation's right to self-government involving some degree of political autonomy which may or may not lead to a claim for independence (2004, p.1251).

If we are to accept this, then we might say that Cornish nationalism is based simply upon the belief that Cornwall is a nation. It therefore follows, for those who agree with this claim, that the area has a right to self-government (though this need not necessarily take the form of full independence). The Cornish nation, according to this view, is an imagined community with a shared and distinctive history and culture, and perhaps even a common origin, as we shall discuss in the following section; however, the community is not necessarily imagined as fully sovereign, as it is in Anderson's concept of the nation (Anderson, 2006, p.7).

The desire for greater autonomy to be given to a certain territory within a state is not necessarily nationalist, however; specifically, it is not nationalist when those promoting it do not consider the territory in question to constitute a nation. This may seem like a trivial point, but, as Agnew argues, writers on autonomist and secessionist movements tend to downplay regional and territorial factors in favour of "ethnic and cultural" (i.e. nationalistic) factors (2001, p.103). To do this is to neglect the fact that regionalist movements (i.e. those which seek greater autonomy or independence for a certain region)¹ are not necessarily nationalist; as we shall see, there are factors that encourage regionalism that are not manifestations of nationalism, as in the cases of and Yorkshire and the North-East of England.

¹ In some literature, the 'region' of 'regionalism' can refer to a supranational territory (e.g. South-East Asia); for the purposes of this essay, it will refer only to sub-state units (e.g. the North-East of England).

Before examining the specific case of Cornish nationalism in more detail, we should discuss one further distinction: that of civic versus ethnic nationalism. Broadly speaking, civic nationalists hold the concept of nationality to be a form of voluntary citizenship with associated rights and duties, while ethnic nationalists believe that people are “born into a particular nationality” and cannot change it (Dictionary of Sociology, 2015). Civic nationalism is concerned primarily with a person’s legal status; ethnic nationalism is concerned with their heritage and ancestry.

Cornwall presents an interesting case study for these two paradigms of nationalism, as discussed at length by Willett (2013). Throughout the following section, I will argue that mainstream Cornish nationalism is an interesting combination of the two; an inclusive, civic nationalism which nevertheless owes its existence to a historical narrative focussed on ethnicity. Following this, we will consider how some English regions, such as the North-East and Yorkshire, have developed politicised regional identities which have nevertheless shown no signs of creating nationalist movements.

Cornish Nationalism

In the 2011 Census, 13.8% (73,220 people) of the population of Cornwall gave 'Cornish' as their national identity, with most of those (52,793) giving that as their only identity (as opposed to, for example, 'Cornish and English' identity) (ONS, 2011a). The Cornish nationalist party Mebyon Kernow (MK) does not advocate Cornish independence, nor has it had the same level of electoral success as Plaid Cymru in Wales or the SNP in Scotland, holding only four of Cornwall Council's 123 seats (Cornwall Council, 2019). However, it does argue that "Cornwall is a nation with its own identity, culture, traditions and history" (MK, c.2017, p.5); this claim was made in the party's 2000 Declaration for a Cornish Assembly, which, over a period of eighteen months, was signed by over 10% of the Cornish electorate (MK, c.2017, p.5), demonstrating that a significant number of people, at least within Cornwall, view the county as having a legitimate claim to nationhood.

In an effort to understand why this is the case, we will first consider economic factors. As of 2001, Cornwall had the lowest GDP, the lowest wages, and the highest level of bankruptcies in Britain, along with the highest level of unemployment in the South West by a considerable margin (Williams, 2003, p.56). Williams (2003) also notes that Cornwall's general post-war economic decline has been correlated with (though by no means necessarily caused by) high levels of in-migration to the county. More recently, the prevalence of second homes in Cornwall has been seen as a problem for local residents, with the people of St Ives voting in favour of a ban on them in the hope that it would tackle the decline in affordable housing for local people (BBC News, 2016). Both of these factors could help to contribute to a nationalist 'them and us' narrative, with 'them' being in-migrants and second-home-buyers from England who are to blame for the economic hardships faced by 'native' Cornish people.

However, while this may go some way to explaining the support for Cornish nationalism, it does not explain how the idea of Cornwall as a nation persists in the first place. Certainly, economic problems alone cannot be said to induce a sense of nationhood, and modern-day Cornish nationalism places little emphasis on the concept of 'native' Cornish people; the focus is instead on the region, its inhabitants and their identity. Willett found from interviews with Cornish nationalists "that Cornish identity is not founded in genealogy or kinship/racial ties, but that territorial and cultural bonds are an important part of individual identification" (2013, p.209). MK appears to have little or no ethnic or racial dimensions to its policies; indeed, it refers to "people living in Cornwall" (MK, 2019) rather than 'Cornish people', suggesting that it is current residence, rather than ethnic origin, that is important to the Cornish nationalist movement. Willett also quotes a Cornish politician arguing that "people can become Cornish, as an ethnicity [of] being Cornish is a fluid thing, it's ... cultural, it's a self identification" (Willett, 2013, p.209). Note that this still implies that 'Cornish' is an ethnicity, but one that can be acquired rather than one assigned at birth.

If not on racial or kinship grounds, on what, then, is Cornwall's claim to nationhood based? If the focus is simply on the area of Cornwall and its current inhabitants, what makes Cornish identity (at least for some people) a national identity rather than just a regional one? Undoubtedly, one important factor is the Cornish language. A Brittonic Celtic language, closely related to Welsh and exhibiting the initial consonant mutations typical of Celtic languages (Pool, 1979, p.7), Cornish had largely died out by the nineteenth century but was revived during the twentieth century (Celtic Life, 2019). It is now kept alive by groups such as Gorsedh Kernow, which fights to continue the Celtic cultural and linguistic traditions of Cornwall (Gorsedh Kernow, 2019). The existence of the Cornish language, despite its death and rebirth, is perhaps

the main thing that makes Cornwall more than 'just another English county'; outside of Wales and a few Gaelic-speaking areas in Scotland, nowhere else in mainland Britain has a pre-Saxon language survived for so long.

However, we should be careful not to overstate the importance of the Cornish language. Within Cornwall, the 2011 Census found that only 464 people (less than 0.1% of the county's population) gave Cornish as their main language (ONS, 2011b). Although the actual number of Cornish speakers may be somewhat higher than this (as some may consider English their main language but speak Cornish as a second language), it is in stark contrast to the 19% of Wales' population who report being able to speak Welsh (ONS, 2011c). What is perhaps now more significant than the language's number of speakers is that it is the source of so many Cornish place names, such as Penzance, which comes from *penn sans*, meaning 'holy headland' (Mills, 2011a). This distinctiveness is embodied in the historical rhyme "By Tre, Pol and Pen shall ye know all Cornishmen", which refers to the prevalence of these syllables at the start of many Cornish place names and surnames (Merrington, 2014). This suggests a continued influence of the area's original Celtic language beyond that found east of the Tamar, and also serves as a constant reminder to the people of Cornwall of the county's distinct heritage.

This brings us on to the final factor that contributes to Cornwall's claim to nationhood: history and how it is remembered. Willett (2013, p.209) quotes another interviewee as emphasising Cornwall's history as an independent country; being on the extreme tip of Britain's south-west peninsula, it was one of the last areas of Celtic Britain to fall to the Anglo-Saxons (hence the relative persistence of the Cornish language). It is also home to Tintagel, the alleged birthplace of the mythical Celtic King Arthur (Monmouth, 1999, pp.141-145), and there is even a legend that the Cornish are

descended from the Trojan Corineus, while the rest of Britain's inhabitants were historically descended from Brutus (Stoyle, 2002, pp.12-13). Within more reliably recorded history, the Tudor period saw the 1497 Cornish Rebellion, led by Michael Joseph 'An Gof' (Deacon et al., 2003, p.5), and the 1549 Prayer Book Rebellion (Celtic Life, 2019). Neither of these were driven by a demand for political independence, but both demonstrated a dissatisfaction with the English Crown's governance in Cornwall.

In the context of Cornish nationalism, I believe that the most important historical factor is the perception that, at least as late as around the eighteenth century, most people living in Cornwall were descended from the region's Celtic inhabitants, while 'English' people are perceived as descending from Anglo-Saxons. Whether or not this is entirely true is not important here; the crucial fact is that the Anglo-Saxon settlement of England is generally considered to have replaced the 'native' Brittonic Celts with Germanic peoples. The Norman Conquest, in contrast, replaced much of the ruling aristocracy and had a significant long-term impact on the English language, but it is not seen as fundamentally altering the population; most 'ordinary people' were still Anglo-Saxons. Cornwall's annexation by Wessex can be seen in similar terms to this; it changed Cornwall's political status but not its people. It is remembered as a conquest, not a repopulation (Deacon et al., 2003, p.7). The fact that the Cornish language survived as long as it did, and has persisted in so many place names, is a reminder of this.

This may seem to go against the earlier assertion that race and ethnic origin play little or no role in modern Cornish nationalism; no mainstream nationalist today would demand the expulsion of Saxon invaders nor insist that all true Cornishmen were descended from Corineus. Cornish nationalism is instead based around the idea of Cornwall as a distinctive place. However, what makes Cornwall a distinctive place

is the fact that it is considered the historical land of the Cornish people, and the Cornish people are, at least in the popular imagination, distinct from the historical Anglo-Saxon population of England. That, ultimately, is the ground for claims of Cornish nationhood. Thus, modern-day Cornish national identity is based largely on current residence and assigns little or no significance to race, but it owes its existence to the historical ethnic and linguistic difference between the Celtic people west of the Tamar who resisted the Anglo-Saxon repopulation of Britain, and their Germanic neighbours.

English Regionalism

There also exist a number of non-nationalist regionalist movements in England, most predominantly in the North. We will examine past and current attempts to politicise regional identities in the North-East and Yorkshire, considering what factors promote regionalism as well as what factors (or absence of factors) prevent the regionalist movement being a nationalist one. We will also consider the case of Cumbria, where, despite similarities to Cornwall, the emergence of a distinct national identity has been absent.

The North-East is, so far, the only English region to have held a referendum on devolving powers to a regional assembly. The vote was held in November 2004, and the proposal was rejected by 78% of voters (BBC News, 2004), signalling the end of New Labour's plans for devolution to the northern regions (Elcock, 2016, p.11). Willett and Giovannini (2013) suggest that this was partly due to the 'top-down' approach of the 'yes' campaign, which failed to harness grassroots support for regionalism. They cite the Campaign for a Northern Assembly (CNA)² as an example of a grassroots regionalist movement, writing that:

By drawing on such aspects as the industrial history of the region, its traditional left-wing political affiliation, the distinctive dialects and accents (almost a surrogate for a regional language) and the geographic, economic and cultural distance from London, the CNA attempted to restyle the otherwise administrative nature of the North-East into an imagined community (Anderson, 1983) able to gather and strengthen a regional sense of social and political place 'in becoming' (Willett and Giovannini, 2013, p.350).

² When the campaign was founded in the early 1990s, the region was called 'Northern' and included Cumbria (Willett and Giovannini, 2013, p.359, note 2).

With the addition of a regional political affiliation, this sounds much like a description of a nationalist movement such as MK; the focus on history, dialect/language, geography, economy, and culture is certainly reminiscent of Cornish nationalism, and the authors even refer to Anderson's conception of nationhood, suggesting an attempt at 'nation-building' by the CNA. This then begs the question: why was the CNA considered, by itself and others, to be a regionalist, rather than a nationalist, organisation?

Firstly, as I mentioned in the previous section, economic disadvantage is not sufficient to create a sense of nationhood; it may stoke resentment and/or fuel existing nationalist sentiments, but it cannot create these sentiments from nothing. Similarly, distinctive geography can hardly be said to constitute nationhood, since almost all nations contain some range of different landscapes. Economic and geographic factors may be used in nationalist narratives, but they are not the *source* of nationalism.

In the case of Cornwall, I argued that history and the way it is remembered is the most important factor for explaining the county's claim to nationhood; in the case of the North-East, I believe it is the most important factor for explaining the region's lack of such a claim. The "industrial history" referred to by Willett and Giovannini (2013, p.350) is obviously far more recent than the medieval (or, in the case of Corineus, prehistoric) bases of Cornish national origin stories. On the one hand, a narrative focussed on more recent history may resonate more strongly with people, since they are arguably more likely to have experienced the direct effects of that history; on the other hand, from a nationalist point of view, it may be better to use a narrative with roots further back in history, in Anderson's "immemorial past" (2006, p.11). This could go some way to explaining how the CNA's focus on recent history has promoted regionalist, but not nationalist, sentiment.

However, a more important historical factor, I would argue, is the lack of a popular perception of historical ethnic differences between the people of the North-East and the rest of England. As discussed in the previous section, while modern Cornish nationalism places little importance on ethnicity, the idea that Cornwall is a nation rests on the popular perception (however accurate or otherwise) that the area was historically independent from *and ethnically distinct from* Anglo-Saxon England. The medieval Viking presence in the North-East is generally remembered, like the Saxon absorption of Cornwall and the Norman Conquest of England, as an invasion, and in this case one which was ultimately defeated. While there is some Viking legacy in place names such as Durham, with *-ham* derived from Old Scandinavian *holmr* (Mills, 2011b), and possibly in some dialectical phrases such as ‘gan yem’ (Richardson, 2013), this has proved far from sufficient to generate claims that the North-East of England is a ‘Norse nation’.

The dialects and accents of the North-East, which Willett and Giovannini describe as “almost a surrogate for a regional language” (2013, p.350)³ are also unlikely to create a sense of national identity. Barbour (2000a, pp.10-12) argues that, while distinct languages often correspond roughly to distinct nations, dialects generally develop *within* nations; thus, while a region with its own language may see itself as a nation, this is unlikely to happen in a region that merely has its own dialect. Consider the fact that Scots, a vernacular of disputed language/dialect status (Oxford Companion to the English Language, 2018; TNS-BMRB, 2010, p.2), has played only a minor role in the Scottish nationalist movement (Barbour, 2000b, p.32), despite being spoken by roughly 30% of the population of Scotland (Scotland’s Census, 2011). Undoubtedly, North-Eastern accents and dialects are more widespread in the North-

³ Giovannini describes Yorkshire dialect and accents in the same terms (2016, p.594).

East than the Cornish language is in Cornwall; however, like the region's recent industrial past, they do not carry the same historical weight and sense of difference as pre-Saxon Cornish.

It is also worth noting that the North-East of England does not really have a name, other than 'the North-East of England'. Unlike Cornwall, whose name means 'territory of the Britons or Welsh of the *Cornovii* tribe' (Mills, 2011c), the North-East is defined by its location within England. The region may *roughly* correspond with the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Bernicia (Hindley, 2015, xviii), but there does not appear to be any emphasis placed on this by regionalists, and even if there were, there is little reason to believe that this would develop regionalist sentiment into nationalist sentiment; the most prominent devolution movement based around a historical Anglo-Saxon kingdom (Wessex) describes itself as regionalist, not nationalist (Wessex Regionalists, no date).⁴

The situation regarding regional identity in Yorkshire is broadly similar, though by no means identical, to that in the North-East. Although the territory does have a one-word name, it is nevertheless a name derived from its status as a 'shire' ('district') of England (Mills, 2011d). As in the North-East, Viking invasions played an important role in Yorkshire's medieval history, with York serving as the capital of a *de facto* Viking 'kingdom' in the late ninth and early tenth centuries (Hindley, 2015, pp.198-202). Indeed, Yorkshire has the highest concentration of Viking place names in the country (York Archaeological Trust, no date). Although the region has never held a devolution referendum, organisations such as the Yorkshire Devolution Movement (YDM) and

⁴ The only other such movement, to my knowledge, is the Acting Witan of Mercia, which advocates (and in fact has declared) Mercian independence (Acting Witan of Mercia, 2003); while both of these organisations are interesting in their own way, they are very small movements, and we will not discuss them further in this essay.

the Yorkshire Party (YP, formerly Yorkshire First) promote the establishment of a directly elected assembly for the region (YDM, no date; YP, no date).

There have in fact been some suggestions of historical ethnic differences between the people of Yorkshire and the rest of England, such as F. W. Moorman's theory of a Geatish migration into the North Riding around the fifth and sixth centuries (Battersby, 1916, pp.226-230). However, there is seemingly no focus on ethnicity in contemporary regionalist campaigns, with "[e]thnic and exclusionary identity markers ... overtly rejected, and 'Yorkshireness' ... conceived in civic, democratic and inclusive terms" (Giovannini, 2016, p.594). This is, of course, very similar to the approach of mainstream Cornish nationalism discussed above. Crucially, however, while Cornish nationalists describe Cornwall as a Celtic nation distinct from England (BBC News, 2014), there does not seem to be an indication that Yorkshire regionalists see a contradiction between Yorkshire and English identities; a survey conducted by Giovannini (2016, p.597) found that 57.9% of YP supporters identified as 'a lot' or 'quite' English and 65.8% as 'a lot' or 'quite' British, suggesting that support for regionalism is seen as compatible with a wider British and/or English national identity.

However, it is clear from the survey data that a number of respondents identify more strongly as 'Yorkshire' than as English or British,⁵ with 18.0% identifying as 'not at all' English and 11.2% as 'not at all' British (Giovannini, 2016, p.597). Furthermore, 45.7% of the YP supporters surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that Yorkshire should become independent (Giovannini, 2016, pp.596-597). It should be noted that YP

⁵ Giovannini writes that "89.3% of the respondents identified themselves distinctively and primarily as Yorkshire" (2016, p.597); this is exactly the same as the number of those identifying as 'a lot' or 'quite' Yorkshire, and it is unclear if Giovannini is referring to these people or if she is implying that this is also the percentage of respondents who gave Yorkshire as their strongest identity (i.e. above British, English, and Northern).

supporters make up only a small portion of Yorkshire's population, with the party securing only 3.94% of votes in Yorkshire and the Humber in the 2019 European Elections (ITV News, 2019); however, the facts that some of these supporters identify more strongly with the region than with England or Britain, and that some support full independence for the region, may make us wonder if there is perhaps a small section of the population that could accurately be described as 'Yorkshire nationalists'. I am unaware, however, of any self-proclaimed 'Yorkshire nationalist' movement, and, for the purposes of this essay, I shall continue on the basis that there is no such movement.

Before concluding, we will consider the case of Cumbria. Like Cornwall, Cumbria is now a county of England but has a strong Celtic heritage, having been part of the Kingdom of Strathclyde from around the 8th century until it was ceded to England in 1092 (Sandford, 2016, p.37). Celtic and Scandinavian influences can be found in traditional Cumbrian dialects (Sandford, 2016, p.37), and there is even an ancient Cumbric language, closely related to Cornish, Welsh, and Breton, which lives on in place names such as Penrith (Omniglot, no date). Indeed, the word 'Cumbria' derives from the same Celtic root as *Cymru*, the Welsh name for Wales (Morris, 2013, p.126). And yet, there does not appear to be any nationalist – or even regionalist – movement advocating Cumbrian devolution.⁶ This difference, I would suggest, is probably due to Cumbric's extinction in around the twelfth or thirteenth century (Omniglot, no date), far earlier than that of Cornish. The lack of any known Cumbric texts has hindered attempts at reviving the language and, I would argue, made it harder to promote in Cumbria the concept of historical difference from England that is observed in Cornwall.

⁶ The limited discussion of Cumbrian devolution generally comes from a top-down, England-wide approach, rather than from popular regionalist pressure; see, for example, Connell (2020).

Nevertheless, the many similarities between the two counties (independence from England in the Early Middle Ages; a historical Celtic language that has had an influence on place names; distinctive landscapes; high levels of tourism; being on the geographic periphery of the English state) may make us wonder why nothing resembling the Cornish nationalist movement appears to have arisen in Cumbria. There may be potential for further comparative study into these two counties and the identities of their residents.

Conclusion

On 2 September 1826, a poem appeared in the *Royal Devonport Telegraph and Plymouth Chronicle*, headed:

“BALLAD

written at the time one of the Trelawny family was committed to the Tower, in the reign of James II. The circumstances described in it are historically true” (Byles, 1906, p.24).

The Trelawny Ballad, also called The Song of the Western Men, tells the stirring tale of “twenty thousand Cornishmen” marching across the Tamar and all the way to London to demand that King James release their fellow countyman Trelawny (Williams, 2011). The ballad was praised by many public figures and appeared as a historical song in *Household Words*, a magazine edited by Charles Dickens (Byles, 1906, pp.23-27); it is now often used as an unofficial anthem of Cornwall (Williams, 2011).

However, the poem was in fact written by Robert Stephen Harker, an Anglican priest, less than two years before its anonymous publication; only the refrain (“And shall Trelawny die? / Here’s twenty thousand Cornishmen / Will know the reason why!”) appears as a historical phrase (Byles, 1906, p.23-31). While it has now long been known that Harker was the author of the song, what is perhaps more noteworthy is the fact that, contrary the *Telegraph and Chronicle’s* declaration, the historical accuracy of the song is somewhat questionable. It is unclear whether the original phrase arose during the imprisonment of Bishop Trelawny by James II (as Harker believed) or during that of John Trelawny (grandfather of the bishop) by Charles I (Byles, 1906, p.30); in both of these cases, however, there appears to be no evidence

that the people of Cornwall marched to London to demand that the Trelawny in question be released. The Song of the Western Men, it seems, tells a confused and almost entirely fictional story.

I do not wish to use this example to suggest that Cornish nationalism is built entirely on myth, fiction, and misremembered history; however, I do believe that it illustrates a key point that has underlain my central argument throughout this essay: how history is remembered, more so than history itself, lies at the root of nationalism. Cornwall was once inhabited by Celtic people – as was all of England; Cornwall was eventually brought under Anglo-Norman control – as was all of England; the genetic make-up of modern-day Cornwall's population is, I strongly suspect, virtually indistinguishable from that of England. And yet, the idea of Cornwall as distinct from England persists in the minds of many.

This is largely due to the Cornish language. Despite its small number of modern-day speakers, the language's continuous survival for some thousand years after the Anglo-Saxon settlement of Britain began, along with its 'artificial' revival and its 'natural' legacy in place and family names, has helped to promote a sense of difference found in no English county east of the Tamar. Certainly, the idea of Cornwall as politically and ethnically separate from England has some basis in historical fact; mainstream Cornish nationalism, however, places little to no importance on ethnicity in the present day, embodying itself as a civic nationalist movement that bases its claim to nationhood on a narrative of *historical* ethnic difference.

Considering the examples discussed in this essay, I would propose the following paradigm for understanding regionalism and sub-state nationalism: a *regionalist* favours independence or greater autonomy for a certain geographic area;

a *nationalist regionalist* supports this view with a narrative of historical ethnic difference between the inhabitants of the area in question and those of neighbouring areas. Thus, MK can be seen as both a regionalist (as Cox and Giovannini (2015, p.54) argue) and a nationalist (as most observers describe it) organisation; YP, on the other hand, is a regionalist organisation but not a nationalist one, since even those of its supporters who advocate independence do not, it seems, support this with reference to a distinct current or historical 'Yorkshire ethnicity'.

Of course, this is not to say that all nationalisms are also regionalisms; the nationalism of a fully independent nation-state could hardly be construed as a demand for greater autonomy. However, all *sub-state* nationalism is, I would argue, a form of regionalism, distinguished from non-nationalist regionalism not by its aims but by the narrative used to support those aims. I hope that this approach can be useful for the study of nationalist and regionalist movements, not only in Britain, but across the world.

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