

# In Search of Cornish Identity

## Revival and Creation of Folk Music and Folk Dance in Cornwall from 1970-2010

Lea Hagmann, University of Bern

### Summary

Contrary to the well-known folk music and folk dance of major Celtic nations like Ireland, Scotland, Wales and Brittany, the folklore of Cornwall, a partly autonomous region located in the far southwest of England, has to date not received much international academic attention. Even in the major scientific works on Celtic music (Sawyers 2000; Stokes and Bohlman 2003), Cornwall is usually not mentioned at all, even though it was recognized as one of the six Celtic nations as early as 1904 (Jenner 1905). Until now, only one PhD thesis (Davey 2011), an MA thesis (Toms 2010) and a BA thesis (Trethewey 2011) have been written on Cornish folk music, while Cornish folk dance has only been investigated in a single chapter of Davey's thesis.

This lack of scientific interest in the region's folklore seems somewhat surprising, however, given that there is indeed a rather lively folk music and folk dance scene observable in the Duchy at present. This movement has its roots in the late 1970s, when local musicians initiated the Cornish Music and Dance Revival – not least because they wanted to give emphasis to their Celtic heritage and celebrate their otherness to English people. In the year 2000, some young musicians and dancers started a new folk movement called *Nos Lowen*, in search of more modern ways of expressing Cornish identity. However, the different visions of what Cornish folk music and folk dance should be and how it ought to be interpreted have led to a huge and highly emotional, if not adversarial, controversy between the early revivalists and the initiators of *Nos Lowen*.

By exploring and examining the Cornish Folk Music and Dance Revival as well as the *Nos Lowen* movement, the present PhD thesis aims at filling a significant gap in the scientific field of Celtic Folklore Studies as well as the Anglo-American folk music research in general, and at raising international awareness of it. It also aims at addressing important questions concerning the identity/identities of Cornish folk music and folk dance, how the terms "authenticity" and "tradition" may be interpreted and expanded in the Cornish context, and how new and especially young people are attracted to the Revival scene. This also relates back to general issues regarding questions on identity in a modern and global context, which is not only an important aspect in Cornwall but also in many other parts of the world.



Traditional Gig



Nos Lowen

### State of Scientific Research and Personal Focus on the Topic

Merv Davey, musician, collector and co-founder of the Cornish Music and Dance Revival, was the first and only person so far to complete a PhD thesis (2011) on Cornish folklore. In his dissertation, he traces Cornwall's traditions in the past, such as the Guising Traditions and Furry Dances, whereby he seems mainly concerned with the authenticity of Cornish customs, not least because he wants to justify the Cornish Music and Dance Revival. However, the *Nos Lowen* movement, which was co-founded by Davey's youngest brother Neil Davey and which is looking for more modern ways in which to interpret Cornish music and dance, is hardly mentioned as a term and not further discussed.

A similar approach was taken by musician and storyteller Mike O'Connor, who started to write his PhD thesis on the history of Cornish music about six years ago but later abandoned the project and produced a smaller book on a similar topic, *Illow Kernow*, instead.

Musician and post-graduate Frances Bennett, who was herself actively involved in the foundation of the *Nos Lowen* movement in 2000, also started to write her PhD thesis on Cornish folk music, focusing on the contemporary developments rather than the historical aspects of the movement. But due to a change in her family circumstances, she too gave up her studies.

Recently, two academic works have been written on topics concerning Cornish folk music, namely Jamie Toms' Master thesis, *Cornishness: A study into the ways in which a regional identity is reflected within the Cornish folk community* (2010), and Richard Trethewey's Bachelor thesis, *The Significance of Absence. A comparative study of mining's musical culture in Cornwall and the North-east of England* (2011).

In contrast to the works by O'Connor (2007) and Davey (2011), which have focused more on the history of Cornish music and traditions in line with their intention to justify the Revival, my dissertation project will focus on the Revival itself and its more recent developments from the 1970s to the 2010s, looking at it from an etic perspective. I am interested in the contemporary identity of Cornish folk music and folk dance, and the ways Cornish people create, promote and expand their folklore.



Hevva

Pentorr

Kekezza

### Aims

The aims of the present thesis are:

1. to find out for what reasons and in what ways the Cornish Music and Dance Revival was called into life in the 1970s, how it has developed to the present day, and whether nowadays Cornish folk music and Cornish folk dance really have an identity of their own, i.e. one that distinguishes them from both other Celtic music and dance styles as well as from English folklore;
2. to explore how Cornish music and folk dance are viewed by other Celtic nations (e.g. Brittany and Ireland);
3. to find out for what reasons young people in Cornwall become interested in Cornish folk music and dance, and how they use it to express their Cornish identity; and
4. to draw a comparison between the situation of Cornish folk music and folk dance with its more conservative musicians on the one side and its more innovative *Nos Lowen*-people on the other side to the ethnomusicological situation in Switzerland. In this respect the focus shall lie on the question of how both cultures deal with musical innovation.



Padstow Mayday



Breizh-Kernow-Festival

### Method

As a basis I will follow guidelines of the Grounded Theory Methods (Glaser & Strauss 2005), which are based on:

1. Collection of qualitative data (interviews, ethnographics, participant-observation etc.)
2. Sampling (transcription of data, generating of categories)
3. Coding (analysis of the data)
4. Generation of the new theory

The participant-observations, which I will carry out in Cornwall (at concerts, gigs, festivals, school-projects, workshops, etc.), as well as at inter-Celtic festivals, (the *Manx Music Festival*, the *Breizh-Kernow Festival*, the *Aberfest*, the *Festival Interceltique Lorient*, the *Lowender Peran Festival*, etc.), will be based on the guidelines of Emerson, Fretz and Shaw's *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (1995), which contain excellent working tools for ethnomusicological fieldwork.

The interviews (approximately 20 main interviews with Cornish music or dance experts and 6-8 shorter interviews with other Celtic musicians) will be semi-structured and, once transcribed, analysed using the Grounded Theory Method (Glaser and Strauss 2005; Charmaz 2006).

For a further interpretation of the transcriptions, the text-based Critical Discourse Analysis ("Kritische Diskursanalyse") will be applied (Jäger 1993). Such an approach seems to be very well suited for the present dissertation, especially since questions on identity and artistic expression are of such personal matter that their essence is extremely difficult to capture using quantitative methods.



St Piran's Day



Troyl at the City Inn

### Bibliography (selected)

- Bennett, Frances. 2008. *Noze Looan 1998-2008: New Kernow Music and Dance? Unpublished.*
- Davey, Merv. 2011. *As is the Manner and the Custom: Folk Tradition and Identity in Cornwall.* PhD thesis, University of Exeter.
- Davey, Merv, Alison Davey and Jowdy Davey. 2009. *Scot Dances, Troyls, Furrys and Tea Treats: The Cornish Dance Tradition.* London: Francis and Taylor Publishers.
- Davey, Merv. 2008. *Folk Tradition, Families, and Cross Generational Perspectives.* CAVA Conference: Narratives of the Family. Perranport: 16th of August 2008.7
- Davey, Merv. 1983. *Hengan: Traditional Folk Songs, Dances and Broadside Ballads Collected in Cornwall.* Redruth: Dyllansow Truran.
- Davey, Neil. 2004. "Kicking Up Our Boots, Getting Back To Our Roots: A Personal Account of the Remarkable Revival of Cornish Music and Dance, and Why it Matters." *Cornish World*. Iss. 38: 26-33.
- Davey, Neil. 2002. *Fooch! Favorite Cornish Session and Dance Tunes.* Wadebridge: Lyngham House.
- Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz and Linda L. Shaw. 1995. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes.* Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Glaser, Barney G. and Anselm Strauss. 2005. *Grounded Theory. Strategien qualitativer Forschung.* Bern: Huber.
- Sawyers, June Skinner. 2000. *The Complete Guide to Celtic Music: From the Highland Bagpipe and Riverdance to U2 and Enya.* London: Aurum Press.
- Stokes, Martin and Philip V. Bohlman (eds.). 2003. *Celtic Modern: Music at the Global Fringe.* Lanham, Maryland and Oxford: The Scarecrow Press.
- Sweers, Britta. 2005. *Electric Folk in England: The Changing Face of English Traditional Music.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Toms, Jamie. 2010. *Cornishness: A Study into the Ways in which a Regional Identity is reflected within the Cornish Folk Community.* MA Thesis, University of Sheffield.
- Trethewey, Richard. 2011. *The Significance of Absence: A Comparative Study of Mining's Musical Culture in Cornwall and the North-east of England.* BA Thesis, Newcastle University.
- Wolley, Chloë. 2003. *The Revival of Manx Traditional Music: From the 1970s to the Present Day.* PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh.