

The Royal Cornwall Museum, Cornwall and Cornish identities: preliminary reflections

What is the Royal Cornwall Museum for? The original aims of the Royal Institution of Cornwall were 'to encourage and promote the study of literature, natural science, geography, archaeology, history, ethnology and fine and applied arts, with special reference to Cornwall'. Yet how does the Museum view that 'special relationship' now, almost 200 years later? What is the relationship between the Museum and Cornwall, the territory that it presumably seeks to present and represent? Is it a Cornish museum or merely a museum in Cornwall? Underlying these questions another revolves around asking what the purposes of museums are in general and what type of museum the Royal Cornwall Museum might potentially strive to become. These questions are given greater urgency by the scale and speed of social change in Cornwall since the 1960s. As Cornwall changes does the museal gaze on and from Cornwall change accordingly?

Museums have been described as spaces for ordering, understanding and mediating the world (Prosler 1996: 22). However, there is no privileged or 'correct' standpoint from which this occurs. Collecting and exhibiting artefacts involves a process of selection, inclusion and, inevitably, exclusion. Museums can also be created, used or captured by specific interests or social groups. National or regional museums can be mobilised to secure recognition of national, regional, civic or ethnic difference or deny or suppress such difference. Mirroring the academic turn towards greater reflexivity, museums are now more reflexive about their role and, pressured by government agendas around multiculturalism and diversity, more sensitive about relations with their audiences. The doctrinaire certainty and civic pride of the Victorian male bourgeoisie who were in the vanguard of the museum movement in the UK has dissipated, along with the confidently imperialist and industrial ethos within which those pioneers operated.

Museums have four principal roles, which might be summed up as representational presentational, comparative and civic. The representational role is to represent the world and in doing so educate the people of, in our case, Cornwall. This is the classic purpose of the nineteenth century museum, adopting the universal survey approach and proudly displaying a range of objects plundered (often literally) from the four corners of the globe. The second role, the presentational, in contrast would present Cornwall to the world. This could include the presentation of origins stories (Mediterranean origins, Celtic roots, ancient Britons and the like) or ethnographic accounts of life in Cornwall in the past.

The third role potentially overlaps with the presentational, comparing Cornwall with other places. This might entail the suppression or the recognition and validation of difference, offering a challenge to dominant views of Cornwall. Comparison might be at a macro-level, comparing Cornwall with other places, or at a micro-level, contrasting different Cornwalls, in terms of both time and space. It appears that in more recent times museums have striven to recognise difference, attempting to be

more inclusive and pluralist and being deliberately polyvocal in their exhibiting strategies (for an example see the National Waterfront Museum, Swansea). In this way, the problematization of the relationship between territory, people and culture can be linked to dominant ideological projects that aim (in theory at least) to promote multiculturalism and diversity. Although there is a clear tension here between the role of a museum in marking out a sense of cultural distinctiveness and a common heritage in a bounded territory (its presentation role) and promoting a sense of multiple past experiences reflecting current diversity.

However, in questioning taken for granted issues and in engaging with such themes, by no means an easy or straightforward task, museums also become sites of public identity discourse, 'contact zones' (Clifford 1997) between heritage and history on the one hand and those it seeks to cater for on the other. This fourth role of museums, as places where a public conversation takes place about the nature of identity and society in the past, present and future, would appear to be particularly salient in Cornwall. Here, unlike in Scotland or Wales, we possess no endogenous civic culture (media/institutions) that can easily act as a forum for debate and for the questioning of public discourses about history, culture and identity. In its absence, the Royal Cornwall Museum has an opportunity, perhaps even a duty, to act as a sounding board, to enable a much-needed public conversation to take place, where claims about the meaning of Cornwall and Cornishness can be publicly aired, debated and contested.

Cornwall is unique within the British Isles in that it has been regarded as a county, a nation and more recently a region, and sometimes all three at the same time (see Deacon 2007). The hybridity of its contemporary identity mirrors these competing and sometimes conflicting identity claims. For some Cornwall is a mere county; for others its people comprise a submerged or invisible nation. For the latter the notion of postcolonialism has a particular appeal. Most strikingly seen in places like South Africa, struggles for cultural decolonization have been applied to the stateless nations of western Europe, where it has been suggested that heritage becomes more critical as a means of asserting difference. This has also led to a theory of 'deformed culture' (see McCrone 2001). Here, lack of political autonomy leads to a lack of cultural autonomy and to a compromised self-representation where the self-image of a stateless or submerged nation is defused by and subservient to the political power dominating it. This in turn has psychological consequences, leading to a 'schizophrenic split within the national psyche producing paranoia, self-loathing, or a lack of self-worth' and an over-identification with the culture of the coloniser (Mason 2007: 14).

Postcolonialism and the theory of 'deformed culture' have been on the whole rejected in the context of Scotland and Wales because of significant historical limitations. It fails to recognise the survival of distinct Scottish institutions for example after 1707 or the legal recognition of Welsh identity (as in the University of Wales and the disestablishment of the Church of Wales or the more recent creation of a Welsh Office, a Welsh Development Agency and an Arts Council for Wales from the 1960s to the

1990s – a process that arguably inevitably led to political devolution). In contrast, despite a narrative of ‘nation’ since the eighteenth century at least, Cornwall has no similar distinct institutions and no devolved agencies that operate on the basis its historic territory. Indeed, the re-centralization that accompanied regionalization during the 1990s places Cornwall firmly within the orbit of policy networks that have their centres at Exeter, Taunton or Bristol. In such a context the postcolonial analogy might well be a more tempting model than in the other stateless nations of the UK.

Whether this is accepted or not, the major changes in Cornwall since the 1960s - mass in-migration, suburbanisation and the post-millennial changes associated with the ‘Quality Cornwall’ or ‘lifestyle Cornwall’ marketing of the current project class - make the need for public debate even more pressing.

Museums were established in the nineteenth century in a close symbiotic relationship first, with civic and provincial pride, reflecting the confident urban elite culture of Victorian Britain and then with nationalism, national museums becoming the instruments of the nation state, supporting and promoting a dominant and hegemonic culture (Mason 2007: 107-08). But ideas about what a nation is and how it understands its past, present and future have immeasurably changed since the Edwardian period. The museal gaze changes with it. In a similar way, the Royal Cornwall Museum will have to ponder how its gaze needs adjusting to give voice to the new Cornwall that is emerging, one that has a very different relationship to its past than the Cornwall of even the 1960s let alone 1919 when the RIC moved its museum to its current building.

In this re-adjustment a number of questions will need to be addressed, such as

- How are the relationships between people and places represented?
- What counts as Cornish culture? How is Cornwall contested?
- What is the relationship between Cornish history and the museum’s collections?
- What role does the RCM seek to play in the public sphere?
- What is its relationship with other museums and galleries in Cornwall, particularly those that are part of the National Museums Directors Conference, such as the National Maritime Museum and the Tate?
- Finally, how are Cornish identities defined? Is the museum’s role to be emblematic of Cornish heritage and celebrate its distinctiveness or should it seek to de-essentialize and reconstruct the Cornish identity in civic rather than ethnic terms?

Whatever answers emerge during this process of self-reflection there remain the practical difficulties of mapping contemporary representational demands and expectations onto museum collections that were brought together in a very different era. Nonetheless, the real constraints that this provides cannot be allowed to deflect a much-needed public conversation in Cornwall about the role of the RCM, the one body that has the potential

to act as a museum for Cornwall rather than for a locality within Cornwall or as an outpost of a (British) national collection.

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