LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Gemma Goodman (2024) *Alternative Cornwalls: Literature and the Invention of Place.* Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 244 pp., £80, ISBN: 978-1804130636

Cornwall forms the tip of the south-west peninsula of the United Kingdom and is often regarded as being on the 'periphery of the periphery'. It has been associated with writers such as Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, David Cornwell (John le Carré), William Golding, Daphne Du Maurier, Kenneth Grahame, and Rosamunde Pilcher and it has been deployed as a setting by many others. In this monograph from the University of Exeter Press, Gemma Goodman identifies multiple literary constructions of her native region, some familiar and others little known.

Cornwall was known as the West Barbary from 1820 because of reports of wrecking, smuggling and looting reaching the rest of England. These early stories presumably contributed to its reputation for mystery and alterity. Now promoted as a 'sun, sea and sand' location, Cornwall also offers a variety of literary tourism experiences relating to Daphne Du Maurier in and around the town of Fowey.

The region embraced industrialisation early, with an extractive history of mining, which remains a source of pride for some locals. Cornish people often regard its story of industrialisation as unique and a central plank of Cornish identity. There's a common misunderstanding that when mining collapsed from the end of 1860s onwards, tourism promptly filled that void but in fact the lived reality was far messier. Goodman argues that mining's eventual replacement by tourism actually gave impetus to different ways of representing Cornwall in literature and other mediums – indeed, there has been a proliferation of representations, too many to cover fully in this volume. Upon mining's failure, Celtic revivalists took the opportunity to consciously reconstruct Cornish culture - emphasising aspects of the Celtic, Catholic (pre-Reformation) era - from the early twentieth century onwards (17). Texts generated about Cornwall tend to exploit its simultaneous differences from and proximity to England – its uncanny 'not-Englishness' (59).

Goodman makes the case that discourses of Cornwall 'actively constitute the world'. In turn, prevailing power dynamics determine which discourses dominate. Similarly, literary versions of place influence how actual places are experienced, and popular (widely read). It was designated as 'Off Wessex' in Thomas Hardy's fiction, echoing the 'ambiguous relationship of Cornwall to the nation' (105). In most of the maps of Hardy's imagined region, Cornwall is present but not connected to Wessex itself.

Goodman seeks to understand the relationship between multiple versions of place – she contends that different Cornwalls are in fact different worlds. Mining and tourism are the two main cultural contexts that have been repeatedly emphasised by writers and commentators. Wilkie Collins' *Rambles Beyond Railways* (1851), a journey around Cornwell, anticipates the primacy of mining in the public imagination. Despite its other striking features, the region's mining era has been given a privileged place in Cornish history. Cornwall's 'industrial prowess identity' that Goodman observes was wholly masculine and reliant on a buoyant industry which did not last. The presence of 'balmaidens' or 'mine-girls' who have often been depicted in literary works as jolly, always singing and wearing gaudy feminine clothes to work, played out Victorian tropes of licentiousness amongst working women. Balmaidens tend to be visible while working in the mines then they disappear into the confines of domesticity when they marry (42-43). By contrast Salome Hocking's *Norah Lang: The Mine Girl* (1886) offers a vanishingly rare woman's eye view of gritty aspects of Cornish mining life including an accident and its aftermath. While disabled from a farming mishap, Hocking consistently produced popular works of fiction with mining, farming and seafaring settings in later part of the nineteenth century.

Divergent narrative constructions of Cornwall have emerged in the last hundred years, predominantly via popular genres. In 'Beyond England' Goodman looks at the genre titles produced by and/or about Cornwall – romance novels set in Cornwall that emphasise the theme of escape, crime fictions which leverage Cornwall's 'dangerous potential' (59), and mysteries that draw on a sense of 'remoteness' (62). A 'locked-room' mystery *The Lamplighters* (2021) by Emma Stonex, features the disappearance of three lighthouse keepers from the Maiden Rock Lighthouse, a tower built out of a rock off Land's End.

An original section titled 'The Emotional Edge' makes a case for the close relationship between the inner, psychic, and emotional worlds of literary characters, and the exterior location of the Cornish littoral. Goodman focusses on characters who are suffering from mental health conditions, grieving and/or physically unwell to build a case for the emotional geography of Cornwall, arguing that the Cornish cliff edge or beach space is a perfect setting for psychic breakdown. Raynor Winn's *The Salt Path* (2018), for example, recounts a time of personal crisis during which she set out to walk from Somerset, through Dorset and Devon and around Cornwall with her husband Moth, who had been diagnosed with a progressive neurological disorder. This non-fiction memoir is an outlier in Goodman's monograph, which centres on fiction, but it allows for discussion of the invisible homeless people who exist outside of the established stories of Cornwell. The social peripherality of Winn and Moth is mirrored by the narrow stretch of coast along which they walk – a journey punctured by humiliation, suffering and ultimately regeneration. The *Salt Path* has recently been made into a feature film of the same name, directed by Marianne Elliott, starring Jason Issacs and Gillian Anderson.

One of the achievements of this book is Goodman's demonstration of how nineteenth-century versions of Cornish place are thoroughly enmeshed with present day ones. (17) There are tourist-friendly Cornwalls – Celtic, exotic, or Arthurian. Stereotypes have become entrenched and enfolded into the cultural make-up of Cornwall, accepted and internalised by

cultural consumers (notably tourists) and are rarely critiqued or deconstructed. She notes how Cornwall featured in 'comfort television' during the pandemic as a temporarily inaccessible yet familiar location, providing escape through the screen.

Throughout Goodman emphasises the internal diversity of the region which contains innumerable Cornish literary worlds, that strain against the generalisations of earlier commentators. She convincingly demonstrates that the region's seeming remoteness, along with its unique history, makes it fertile ground for literary imaginaries.

The book closes with the image of the engine house, which the poet John Wedgwood Clarke describes as 'a ruined memory palace whose granite walls are weirs of ivy' (188). The persistence of the engine house which used to pump water out of the ground, reminds us of Cornwall's mining past, but as this book testifies, the region has been thoroughly reimagined in literature since then – and will continue to evolve into the future.

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