



BISHOP
GROSSETESTE
UNIVERSITY

BG Research Online

Grigg, E. (2021) *The Cornish Bible of John Trevisa*. Bible Review journal, Fall 2.

This is an Accepted Manuscript published by the International Society of Bible Collectors in its final form on 2nd December 2021 at: <http://www.biblecollectors.org/>

This version may differ slightly from the final published version.

Copyright is retained by the author/s and/or other copyright holders.

End users generally may reproduce, display or distribute single copies of content held within BG Research Online, in any format or medium, for personal research & study or for educational or other not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- The full bibliographic details and a hyperlink to (or the URL of) the item's record in BG Research Online are clearly displayed;
- No part of the content or metadata is further copied, reproduced, distributed, displayed or published, in any format or medium;
- The content and/or metadata is not used for commercial purposes;
- The content is not altered or adapted without written permission from the rights owner/s, unless expressly permitted by licence.

For enquiries about BG Research Online email bgro@bishopg.ac.uk.

The Cornish Bible of John Trevisa¹

By Erik Grigg

In 2011 Nicholas Williams published a complete translation of the Bible in Cornish and although there had been Cornish translations of parts of the Bible (including whole New Testament translation) this was thought to be the first time the Bible had appeared in Cornish.² The language of Cornish, which is related to Welsh and Breton, evolved in the early medieval period and despite almost completely vanishing as a spoken tongue in the nineteenth century, has been growing since the early twentieth century with hundreds of speakers today. However, there has been suggestions since 1997 that a medieval Bible in Cornish had once existed, if true its discovery would be a major coup for any Biblical scholar.

An article by Charles Penglase in *Etudes Celtique* stimulated a debate in the pages of the journal *Cornish Studies* and the author himself contributed to the debate in 2008 offering new evidence as to the possible existence of an earlier Bible in Cornish.³ Why is this debate of such importance? Various commentators have argued that the failure to translate the Bible (and the Prayer Book) into Cornish accelerated the replacement of the language by English, in the process destroying the last vestiges of its status.⁴ When a language is utilised as a vehicle for the ‘Word of God’ it gains authority, something Cornish appeared to lack by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when the local gentry saw it as merely the tongue of the poor and the powerless.⁵ In the eighteenth-century, scholars trying to reinvigorate the language such as William Gwavas (1676-1741) and John Keigwin (1641-1710) advocated the production of a Bible in Cornish. Now as well as William’s version, another has appeared using a slightly different version of the revived language.⁶

The original article by Penglase on the subject of a possible medieval Cornish Bible suggested that Tregear’s Cornish translations of Bishop Edmund Bonner’s 1555 Homilies, written probably within a year of the original, contained duplicates of all the Biblical quotes in a much older form of Cornish because Tregear has utilised a medieval Cornish Bible to increase the work’s moral authority. Malte Tschirschky rebutted this idea, saying that Tregear had merely fabricated the archaic-sounding quotes and that calls for the translation of a Bible into Cornish during the Reformation proved that no such book already existed. Mathew Spriggs then unearthed further references to a medieval Cornish Bible, and rightly pointed out that there was no specific call for the Bible to be translated into Cornish during the various uprisings against the Tudor monarchy (merely calls for the right to use Cornish in services or rejections of the new English Prayer Book). Spriggs did conclude though that there were not enough literate medieval Cornish scholars to produce such a translation. In 2008, the present author then presented new evidence of the existence of such a Bible and suggested that the fourteenth century scholar John de Trevisa was sufficiently skilled to carry out such a work.

The King James Bible, published in 1611, heavily influenced English literature and phrases from it have entered the everyday language (like ‘a man after my own heart’ and many more) while the William Morgan Bible, published in 1620, had a similar effect on the Welsh language. In Cornish, the effects of a Cornish Bible may not have been limited to Tregear’s *Homilies*. In the late medieval period two pieces of Cornish literature were produced, that take Biblical themes and contain similar phrasing.⁷ The first was the fourteenth century *Pascon agan Arluth* (‘The Passion of our Lord’), a poem telling the story of the Resurrection, while the second is a large three-in-one mystery play called the *Ordinalia*, probably written in the fifteenth century it dramatizes the creation of the World from Genesis, the birth of Jesus and the Resurrection. The quotes below show the remarkable similarities in phrasing which are incredibly unlikely to have occurred if they were independently drawn from a Latin Bible (the differences in spelling is probably due to the time gap between when they were produced).

Pascon Agan Arluth verse 17
Ihesus crist a leueris
y vos scryfys yn lyffrow
yn pub gwythres y coth thys
gorthye the thu hay hanow
Ke the ves omscumvnys
the thyveyth veth yn tewolgow
the vestry a vyth lethys
neffre war an enevow

Passio Christi (being the third part of the *Ordinalia*) lines 138-144
yma scryfys yn lyfryow
yn pup maner y coth thy's
gorthye the dev ha'y hanow
ke the ves ymskemenys
yn defyth yn tewolgow
the vestry a vyth leyhys
neffre war an enevow

They both translate as: “Jesus said it is written in scriptures you should in every way worship God and his name, depart from me into wilderness and darkness, your power over souls is forever destroyed”. This text ultimately comes from Mathew 4.10 which is in the Vulgate: *tunc dicit ei Iesus vade Satanas scriptum est Dominum Deum tuum adorabis et illi soli servies* “Jesus said to him, begone Satan, Scriptures say it is the Lord God alone that you should worship”. The extra detail about Satan losing power over souls must be because they are using the same Cornish language source (perhaps a Cornish Bible) or one is copying the other.

One significant piece of evidence came to light when the author was investigating how the 1504 manuscript of *Beunans Meriasek* (a play in Cornish) ended up in the library of the Welsh antiquarian Robert Vaughan (c.1592-1709). Vaughan’s library was the source for a large amount of Cornish and Welsh literature (including *The Book of Taliesin*, the medieval Welsh chronicle *Brut Y Tywysogion* and *The Black Book of Carmarthen*) as well as an early copy of Chaucer. *Bewnans Ke* (another Cornish play), which was mysteriously found in collection of the Welsh academic J.E. Caerwyn Williams after he passed away in 1999, possibly also came via Vaughan. Between 1616 and 1625 Vaughan kept a notebook listing the owners of various interesting manuscripts (mainly ones in Welsh); in this book he recorded a ‘Cornish Bible’ in a public library in Oxford (by which he probably meant the Bodleian).⁸ The Bodleian was founded in 1602 by Thomas Bodley, an Exeter gentleman who has a passion for languages and who represented St Germans, Cornwall in Parliament, this connection probably explains how Cornish literature came to Vaughan’s attention in Oxford. We know Vaughan never visited Cornwall, but he is recorded attending Oriel College, Oxford in 1612. Some 13 of the 43 texts mentioned in the notebook are now in the National Library of Wales because Vaughan’s collection was bequeathed to them by his descendants in 1909.

As the other manuscripts recorded by Vaughan are known works which have survived, it is unlikely that the ‘Cornish Bible’ was a figment of his imagination (though it may have not been what he thought). If it was merely a Latin or English Bible from Cornwall, it is unlikely to have captured Vaughan’s attention. As a Puritan he would have had no interest in a Catholic/Latin Bible and as every other book listed was in Welsh, an English language Bible would have been of little interest to him. Vaughan’s collection contained almost no illustrated manuscripts (most medieval Bibles were decorated) so if the language would not have

interested Vaughan, sumptuous illustrations in a Latin or English-language Bible would equally have not merited recording.⁹ A Welsh speaker like Vaughan may have mistaken a Breton language Bible for one in Welsh, but Vaughan's collection of Cornish manuscripts suggests that he differentiated between these related languages and there is no evidence a Breton Bible existed at this date. He might have mistaken the *Ordinalia* for a Cornish Bible (the plays start with material from Genesis and end with the resurrection of Christ and is as hefty as a Bible), though this supposes that Vaughan examined it so superficially that not only did he not notice it was in verse form he also missed that most of the books of the Bible were not there. Yet even if Vaughan did see a Cornish language Bible in an Oxford library, that does not prove he ever acquired it (while persuading a private collector to sell a book is possible, a public library is usually less keen to sell its treasures). It does not appear in later catalogues of his works (though his family was known to lock away the finest works when visitors perused the collection) and there is no record of it in any Bodleian catalogues.

The Vaughan reference to a Cornish Bible may seem unlikely as one of the reasons the language died out was the Tudor authorities replaced the Latin services not with one based on Cornish, but English ones much to the displeasure of many in Cornwall. In 1549 the Cornish rose in rebellion against the new English Prayer Book asking for it to be recalled: "We Cornyshe men (whereof certen of us understnade no Englysdhe) utterly refuse thys newe Englysche".¹⁰ The Welsh were allowed a translation, the famous William Morgan version. In 1560, the Bishop of Exeter and a separate ecclesiastical petition suggested that those Cornish children who could not speak English should learn the Catechism in Cornish.¹¹ There is other evidence that Cornish was used in Church services, though it is tantalising and inconclusive.¹² However, there was not Cornish request for the Act of Parliament necessary before undertaking an authorised translation of the Bible, perhaps because such a translation already existed?

Translating the Bible is a large undertaking, but we do know that in late medieval England the heretical group The Lollards advocated translating the word of God into the vernacular language and, despite being banned, over a hundred copies of English language versions were produced by John Wycliffe, John Purvey and Nicholas of Hereford. Interestingly one Lollard scholar who studied at Oxford was John de Trevisa (c.1342-1402) a Cornish clergyman who had translated into English various books of knowledge including the 'Polychronicon' (a general world history).¹³ In the front of the 1611 King James version of The Bible it says Trevisa translated the scriptures and in 1482 William Caxton, the father of modern printing, said Trevisa translated the Bible. While scholars can identify Wycliffe's work and Purvey's, Trevisa's translation has never been identified (he wrote with in a distinct southwest dialect). He initially went to Exeter College (set up in 1314 for scholars from Devon and Cornwall), but later moved to Queens where Wycliff and some of his followers had also decamped. In 1378 Trevisa and a group of his fellows fell out with the authorities and ran off with a Bible, a Latin grammar and various Biblical commentaries (all he would need for a Biblical translation).¹⁴ They returned the books in 1380 and Trevisa again resumed his career in the Church. We know he translated part of the Bible into French as it appears painted on the ceiling of the chapel of his patron Lord Berkeley, so if it was common knowledge that he translated the Bible and no English-language version exists, the possibility remains that he made a Cornish Bible. By Trevisa's day a Bible existed in Czech and Catalan, so a Cornish Bible is perhaps not that farfetched. As a Lollard-influenced Cornishman, he would have wanted to make the word of God understood by all and that would mean his fellow Cornishmen in their own tongue. It would explain Vaughan's reference to a Cornish Bible in Oxford (where Trevisa and many leading Lollards studied). It would explain how the author of the *Ordinalia* could produce a Cornish language play based on Biblical scenes.

David Fowler, Trevisa's biographer, stumbled upon a possible reference to the Lollard scholar producing a Cornish language Bible but in a footnote dismissed the idea as 'curious'.¹⁵ The reference refers to an 1875 article that sceptically described hearing that a

Bible translated into Cornish by John de Trevisa was in the manuscript collection at Castle Horneck some time between 1720 and 1772.¹⁶ This collection was owned by Dr William Borlase (1695-1772), the Cornish antiquarian whose works are a goldmine of information about Cornish customs, the language and monuments. If anyone was likely to find and want to acquire such a book, it was Borlase and Professor Mathew Spriggs has found two documents (dated 1740 and 1753) that mention acquaintances who promised to supply a Cornish Bible by John de Trevisa to Borlase.¹⁷ Like Trevisa, Borlase also attended Exeter College in Oxford, so perhaps acquired a Cornish Bible there if his acquaintances did not obtain it from elsewhere, it might even have been the copy that Vaughan had seen. However, neither Borlase nor the other Cornish antiquaries he corresponds with make any other reference to a Cornish Bible nor does any such book appear in the sale catalogue when collection was sold after his death. While he may have been promised such a book, there is no evidence he managed to obtain one. The great Celtic scholar Edward Lhuyd (1660-1709), who visited Cornwall investigating the remains of the language, was educated in Oxford and keeper of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford; he is equally silent on the matter though he searched the Bodleian for Celtic language manuscripts. None of this is conclusive, but great works that we know existed in Vaughan's library have vanished from contemporary catalogues.¹⁸

There are some other possible references to a Cornish Bible. In 1727 the Exeter-based 'Brice's Weekly Journal' stated: "I hear of a gentleman in Cornwall...who has taken noble mighty pains in translating the Bible into Cornish".¹⁹ If a Cornish Bible existed that the gentleman would have had no reason to carry out such a task, though perhaps the witness was mistaken and the gentleman was merely transcribing an older Cornish Bible and this was the Bible that was in the Horneck library. It is obvious that none of the eighteenth-century Cornish scholars (John Keigwin, William Gwavas, Thomas Tonkin, John Bosun and Borlase) had sufficient skill in the language to make a full Biblical translation. Oddly there is a 1691/2 letter from John Aubrey to the Llhuyd, in which Aubrey recounts meeting a Cornish gentlemen in a London coffee house who claimed Keigwin had a Cornish Bible.²⁰ This seems unlikely as Keigwin and Bosun advocated producing a Cornish Bible and translated the opening lines of Genesis themselves (an unnecessary task if these scholars had access to a full Cornish Bible).

To conclude, there some evidence that a Cornish Bible existed: Robert Vaughan, a reliable witness, noted a 'Cornish Bible' in an Oxford library whilst witnesses (like John Aubrey and the Quarterly Review article) have said such a Bible existed in other collections. If a name is attached to these claims as the author of this Cornish Bible is it John de Trevisa, a scholar who also attended the same college in Oxford as many of the later witnesses and who we know had the ability, tools, motive and opportunity to carry out such a task. This seems rather too coincidental. There are textual similarities between late medieval Cornish texts that are based on Biblical stories that have caused scholars to question whether they were influenced by a Cornish language Bible. Unfortunately, until we find a copy, we can know if the evidence is anything more than an incredibly unlikely set of coincidences. The finding of a Cornish Bible would be a hugely significant discovery even if Trevisa only translated the New Testament and scholars such as Professor Mathew Spriggs who are unconvinced that such a Bible ever existed, hope that they are wrong.²¹ Almost all surviving medieval Cornish literature is written in verse and what little prose exists from the early modern scholars was written by people whose mother tongue was English. The grammar and new vocabulary found in a medieval Cornish Bible would force us to rewrite all our dictionaries. The discovery of the Cornish play *Bewnans Ke* in 1999 as well as other recent finds of lost Cornish manuscripts²² gives us a little hope that one day it might be found.

¹ A version of this piece appeared in *Cornish Studies*, Volume 16, (2008), pp. 19-25.

-
- ² N. Williams, (2008), *An Beybel Sans*.
- ³ C. Penglase, (1997) 'La Bible en moyen-conrique', *Etudes Celtique*, 33, pp. 233-43, M. Tschirschky, (2003), 'The Medieval Cornish Bible', *Cornish Studies*, 11, pp. 308-16, M. Spriggs, (2006), 'Additional thoughts on the Medieval "Cornish Bible"', *Cornish Studies*, 14, pp. 44-55 and E. Grigg, (2008), 'The Medieval Cornish Bible; More evidence', *Cornish Studies*, pp. 19-25.
- ⁴ A.D.S. Smith, (1969), *The story of the Cornish Language*, p.9 and P.B. Ellis, (1998 edition), *The story of the Cornish Language*, p. 13.
- ⁵ Ellis, *The story of the Cornish language*, p. 17.
- ⁶ Ellis, *The story of the Cornish language*, pp. 15-16, P.B. Ellis (1974), *The Cornish language and literature*, p. 113 and P.A.S. Pool, (1975), *The Death of Cornish*, p. 17. The 2017 version, *An Bible Kernewek*, can be found at: <https://www.bible.com/versions/1079-abk-an-bibel-kernevek-2017>
- ⁷ Smith, *The story of the Cornish Language*, p.4, J.A. Bakere, *The Cornish Ordinalia: A critical study* (Cardiff, 1980), pp.103-8, C. Fudge, (1982), *The Life of Cornish*, pp.19-20 and Ellis, *The story of the Cornish language*, p.11,
- ⁸ Vaughan's notebook is now in the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth. It was reprinted in D. Huws, (2000), *Medieval Welsh Manuscripts*, pp. 299-302.
- ⁹ Huws, *Medieval Welsh Manuscripts*, p. 295.
- ¹⁰ M. Stoye (1999) 'The dissidence of despair: Rebellion and identity in early modern Cornwall' *The Journal of British Studies* 38.4 pp. 423-44, in particular p. 438.
- ¹¹ Ellis, *The story of the Cornish language*, p. 13.
- ¹² Smith, *The story of the Cornish language*, p. 10, J. Youings, (1979), 'The South-Western Rebellion of 1549', *Southern History*, 1, pp. 99-122, in particular p. 109 and p. 114 and Ellis, *The story of the Cornish language*, pp. 8-9.
- ¹³ D.C. Fowler, (1993), *John Trevisa*.
- ¹⁴ Fowler, *John Trevisa*, pp. 14-17.
- ¹⁵ D.C. Fowler (1960) 'John Trevisa and the English Bible' in *Modern Philology* 58.2 pp. 81-98 in particular p. 86.
- ¹⁶ Anon. (1875) 'M.S. Collections at Castle Horneck, 1720-1772' in *Quarterly Review*. 139, pp. 367-95. "And (which is perhaps more interesting than all) we hear in this collection of a *Cornish Bible*, translated (as it seems from the context) into *that language* by John de Trevisa, Fellow at Queen's College, Oxford, at the close of the 14th and commencement of the 15th century. Here is a subject for inquiry indeed; apart from its bibliographical value, this volume, if it exists, would restore to the philologists the entire Cornish language" p. 393.
- ¹⁷ Spriggs, *Additional Thoughts*, pp. 46-47.
- ¹⁸ Huws, *Medieval Welsh Manuscripts*, pp. 294-5.
- ¹⁹ Ellis, *The story of the Cornish language*, p. 16.
- ²⁰ Spriggs, *Additional Thoughts*, pp. 46-47.
- ²¹ Spriggs in a recent private correspondence with the author stated that he still thought such a Bible was beyond the ability of medieval Cornish scholars, but hoped he was mistaken and promised that he would buy me a bottle of my favourite drink if I tracked such a Bible down!
- ²² Professor Mathew Spriggs kindly pointed in an email out a few other Cornish language manuscripts that have reappeared recently: "Lhadymer ay Kernow [by William Hals] disappeared for about 180 years ... turning up in Jarndyce's bookstore and ... History of Arch. Cornu-Britannica of Tonkin ... turned up (in part) on a Totnes market stall in the 1990s."