

Making Moonta: The Invention of 'Australia's Little Cornwall'

By PHILIP PAYTON

Until recently, most historians of Australia were prepared to accept uncritically the belief that colonial Australia – and indeed Australian society up until the 1950s – was essentially ‘homogenous’. In contrast to contemporary ‘multicultural’ Australia, it was argued this earlier Australia consisted mainly of immigrants and the descendents of immigrants from Britain and Ireland, who together gave the country its ‘Anglo-Celtic’ homogeneity.¹ Where there were differences between groups of peoples, these were overshadowed by the shared experiences of emigration and settlement, difference giving way to uniformity.² This historiographical conventional wisdom mirrored orthodox belief in the United Kingdom, where the experience of industrialization had been thought to have had a similar homogenizing effect, one prominent scholar insisting in 1963 that ‘Britain is probably the most homogenous of all industrial countries’.³ By the 1980s, however, this view was being turned on its head, with observers in the UK now stressing the continuing diversity of the British State, with its territorial complexity and various constituent peoples.⁴ In Australia, by contrast, acceptance of a similar diversity was slower and resisted initially by much of the academic establishment. At Adelaide University, for example, a postgraduate study in the late-1970s on the Cornish in South Australia was greeted with surprise, even suspicion, by fellow students of history and politics.⁵

And yet, even as the proponents of Anglo-Celtic homogeneity defended their position, some of their more imaginative and individualistic colleagues were prepared to embrace – indeed, demand – new perspectives. As early as 1954, for example, Manning Clark had criticized the ‘middling’ assumptions of Australian historiography. Australian historians were in danger of drawing a picture of their country’s history as culturally drab, uninspiring and essentially uniform, he complained, while much of the evidence was to the contrary, pointing to a vibrant and sometimes pugnacious diversity, not least the divide between Catholic and Protestant: ‘[s]o let us drop the talk about middling standards, mediocrity, and sameness, and have a look at these differences’.⁶

Later, in 1985, Geoffrey Blainey added his voice. The current debate about multiculturalism, he observed, assumed that between 1788 and 1950 – because Australia ‘was populated largely by people from the British Isles’ – the country had exhibited ‘a cultural unity, a homogeneity which is the very antithesis of multiculturalism’. However, Blainey argued, ‘[i]n the true cultural sense ... Australia before 1950 was a multicultural society because the cultural difference between Irish Catholics and Scottish Presbyterians and Cornish Methodists and many other groupings was intensely felt, at times too intensely’. Moreover, ‘[t]hese differences permeated politics, culture, education, sport, business, the public service and every branch of national life’.⁷ A year later, Patrick O’Farrell offered a very similar analysis in his *The Irish in Australia*, criticizing the ‘lazy history’ that assumed homogeneity and arguing instead that colonial Australia had been decidedly pluralistic from the first, with the potential for religious and ideological conflict between groups from different backgrounds with different experiences, beliefs, values and aspirations. At last, it seemed, ‘difference’ was making itself heard in Australian historiography.⁸

Moonta: Exemplar and Exceptional

Indeed, it is this rehabilitation of ‘difference’ that makes this article possible. It shifts the context for the examination of northern Yorke Peninsula from that of quaint local history, with no particular comparative value, to that of an important case study in which Moonta and environs can be considered against the background of regional, cultural and ethnic diversity in Australia as a whole. But there is another context in which Moonta also needs to be considered: that of Cornwall’s ‘Great Emigration’, the century-long movement of Cornish people – mainly, but not exclusively, Cornish miners and their families – to new destinations the world over.⁹ Between the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 and the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, something like a quarter of a million people left Cornwall for overseas destinations, with perhaps almost as many more venturing to other parts of the British Isles. This was at a time when the overall population of Cornwall at no time even reached half a million. As Dudley Baines concluded, Cornwall was in this period one of the great emigration regions of Europe.¹⁰

There were many reasons for this ‘Great Emigration’. In the ‘Reforming Thirties’ Cornish Nonconformists found civil and religious freedom overseas, in the

'Hungry Forties' they sought relief from the hunger of the potato blight, and in the 1860s, 1870s and beyond they escaped the crash of the Cornish copper mining industry and the subsequent faltering of Cornish tin. But to these 'push' factors were added the 'pull': those attractions that lured the highly-skilled – or at least highly experienced – Cornish miners and engineers to the rapidly expanding international mining frontier after 1815. As the newly independent countries of Latin America, for example, attracted British capital to revitalize their mining industries, so the Cornish and their technology were much in demand in Peru, Mexico, Chile, Brazil and elsewhere. The same was true in Wisconsin and Illinois in the 1830s and the 'Lakes' area of Upper Michigan in the 1840s. The Cornish played important roles in the Californian and Victorian gold-rushes of 1849 and 1851, and in the second half of the nineteenth century were to be found in America and Australia wherever there was metal mining to be done – from Virginia City in Nevada and Leadville in Colorado to Peak Downs in Queensland, Broken Hill in New South Wales, and Kalgoorlie and Coolgardie in Western Australia. By the closing decades of the century the Cornish were likewise a significant element in the diamond and goldfields of South Africa.¹¹

Until the copper crash of 1866 at least, nineteenth-century Cornwall was considered at the forefront of technological advance in hard-rock mining and associated steam engineering. This industrial prowess underpinned a fierce Cornish identity. The Cornish thought themselves 'Ancient Britons', more 'British' than the neighbouring English and progenitors of Britain's imperial grandeur. On the world stage, as the international mining frontier developed apace, so a Cornish transnational identity emerged. This reflected the industrial prowess of home but it also mirrored the importance of the Cornish overseas. Arguing that the Cornish were somehow innately qualified above all others as hard-rock miners – not least when compared to competing ethnic groups on the international mining frontier – Cornish immigrants cultivated an exclusive superiority: the myth of 'Cousin Jack'. And the Cornish could have it both ways: at the very moment they stressed their separate identity, earning their 'clannish' reputation, so they could also emphasize their one-ness with the dominant norms of the largely English-speaking New World societies to which they had ventured. Unlike many other ethnic groups, the Cornish posed no threat to these embryonic polities and were at once prospective model citizens. No wonder they thrived.¹²

Across the globe, identifiable 'Cornish communities' arose, some soon acquiring international reputations – at least amongst the mining fraternity – for their apparent

‘Cornishness’. Grass Valley, a gold-mining town in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains in California, was one such place. Nearby Nevada City had its Cornish precincts, and so did Virginia City on the other side of the mountains. In South Africa, the Cornish influence was so pervasive that one wag could boast with half-plausible bravado that Johannesburg was ‘but a suburb a Cornwall’.¹³ Mineral Point in Wisconsin and Pachuca in Mexico were also ‘Cornish’ towns, it was said with conviction, noted for their Cornish pasties, Cornish wrestling, Cornish carols and much else, as were many other spots on the mining frontiers of the New World. Moonta featured in this transnational repertoire of ‘Cornish’ places, to be considered alongside Grass Valley or Mineral Point, a typical example of an overseas mining town where the Cornish had made their mark and stamped their culture. But just as Moonta was an exemplar, an archetypal Cornish settlement, so it was also exceptional: for Moonta claimed an identity, an exclusivity, that placed it above all these other international destinations, cultivating a mystique which insisted that Moonta was the epitome of the Cornish experience overseas.

The Copper Kingdom

If Moonta was exceptional, then so too were its South Australian roots.¹⁴ Payable copper deposits were discovered on northern Yorke Peninsula in 1859 – that at Moonta in 1861 – but for a decade and a half South Australia had already enjoyed an enviable reputation as the continent’s ‘Copper Kingdom’. The fabulously rich malachite and azurite of the Kapunda and Burra Burra copper deposits had already drawn Cornish people in their thousands to South Australia, as had discoveries in the Adelaide Hills and elsewhere in the Province. South Australia was also a ‘Paradise of Dissent’ – the first British territory to eschew the link between Church and State – a condition that so appealed to Cornish Nonconformists that in the first five years of the Province’s existence, some 14 per cent of all applications to the Colony were lodged in Cornwall. When copper was first discovered in the mid-1840s there were already Cornish miners in the colony, and they needed little persuasion – other than attractive remuneration in generous ‘tribute’ contracts – to resume their former occupation. Cornish beam engines were imported from Cornwall, along with all sorts of other equipment and material, and soon Cornish engine-houses dominated the mining landscape: just as they did in Cornwall itself. Cornish terminology and mining practices went hand in hand with Cornish technology, and a Cornwall and Devon Society emerged to advance the

interests of Cornish immigrants in South Australia and to advocate increased emigration from Cornwall and the adjacent mining districts of Devon.

All this was the 'Cornish' foundation in South Australia that Moonta was to inherit. Yet neither Burra Burra nor Kapunda was presented as homogeneously Cornish: either then or later, or indeed now. Rather, the emphasis from the beginning was on both mining communities being a kaleidoscopic multicultural mix. While the Cornish may well have provided the 'labour aristocracy' at both mines – the myth of Cousin Jack saw to that – there were representatives of other ethnic groups in a variety of occupations.

At Kapunda there was a strong Irish-Catholic element in the population, and when many of the mine's Cornish miners left to try their luck on the Victorian goldfields in the early 1850s, the Irish became correspondingly more important: so much so that when Michael Davitt – the Irish Land League agitator – visited the locality in the 1890s it felt as though 'Kapunda was somewhere in Connaught [Ireland] instead of being fourteen thousand miles away'.¹⁵ Much later, in the 1970s, Kapunda's population thought to celebrate its heritage by promoting an 'Irish and Colonial' Festival. A decade or so later they remembered the Cornish, in 1988 (Bicentenary year) erecting at Kapunda at considerable expense a giant statue of a Cornish miner. Revealingly, they avoided the obvious name 'Cousin Jack' – redolent as it was of Cornish exclusivity – and opted instead for 'Map Kernow', 'son of Cornwall' in the Cornish language. Although the language was never spoken traditionally in South Australia, the use of Cornish – a Celtic tongue, like Irish – somehow ameliorated the worst of nineteenth-century Cornish claims to superiority, as well as responding to the late twentieth-century multicultural *zeitgeist*. As the leaflet produced by the local council explained, Map Kernow was intended as a memorial 'to all the people who are part of Kapunda's story – Cornish, Irish, German and other nationalities'.¹⁶

At Burra Burra a similar diversity was apparent. After all, this was 'Burra of the Five Towns', as it came to be known, a topographical straggle of several satellite settlements beyond the company township of Koorunga. Although many of the Cornish actually lived in dug-outs along the Burra creek, there was an ethnic identification of sorts with each of these settlements, so that Redruth (named after Redruth in Cornwall) was seen to be 'Cornish'. Llchwyr, where the Welsh smelters and their families dwelt, was correspondingly 'Welsh', while Hampton and Aberdeen mirrored the presence of English and Scottish workers in the district. As time went on, the ethnic identity of these

separate settlements was repeated with increasing certainty, local historians also noting the presence of a German minority and Chilean muleteers in the early days and pointing out Hebrew headstones in the cemetery. Ian Auhl, in his splendid succession of books on Burra Burra, privileged the Cornish but also went out of his way to stress the locality's multicultural credentials – a legacy that is apparent in the touristic promotion of the Burra today.¹⁷

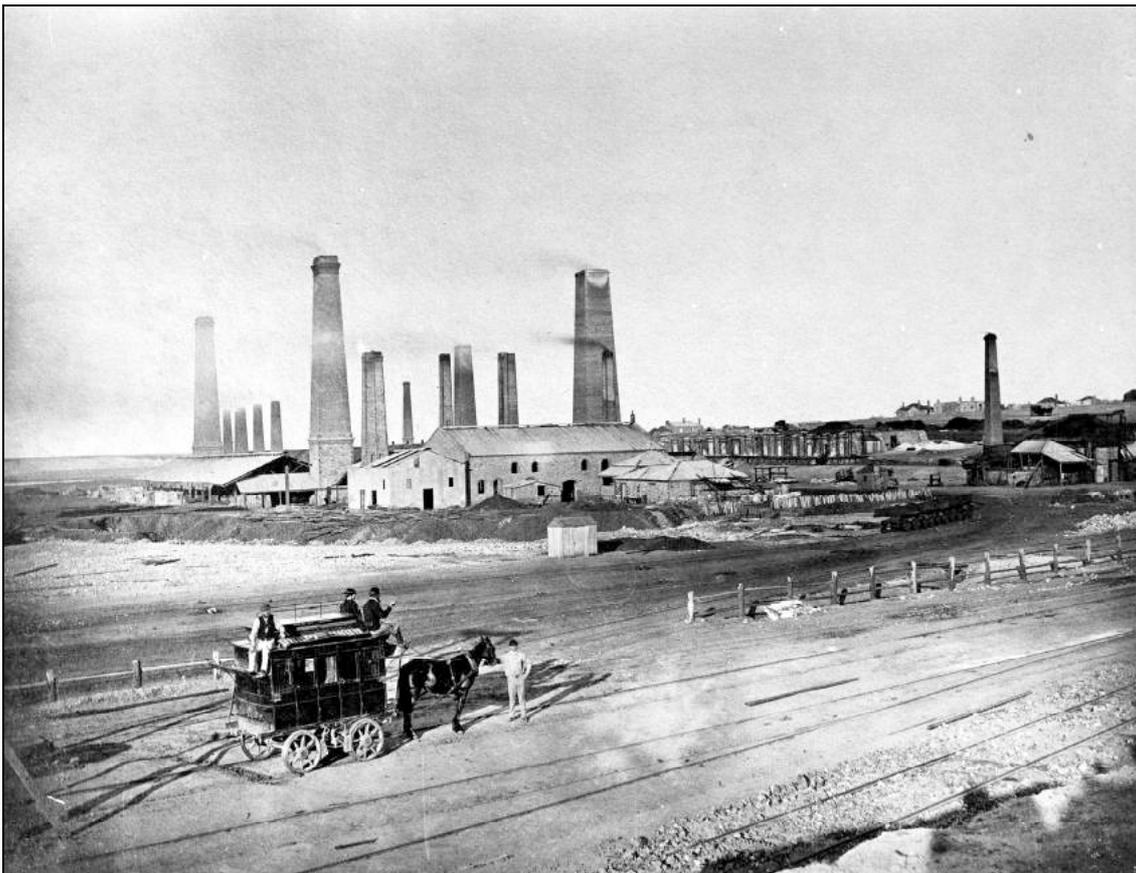
'Little Cornwall on Yorke Peninsula'

In contrast to both Kapunda and Burra Burra, however, Moonta has been presented as homogeneously 'Cornish' from the first, a trend that subsequent writers – notably Oswald Pryor in his inimitable Cousin Jack cartoons and in his 1962 local history *Australia's Little Cornwall* – have perpetuated, more or less uncritically.¹⁸ In 1873, little more than a decade after the mines were discovered, Anthony Trollope, the English novelist, wrote that 'so many of the miners were Cornishmen as to give Moonta and Wallaroo the air of Cornish towns'.¹⁹ More than thirty years later, May Vivienne in her *Sunny South Australia* could still insist that 'the majority of the miners in the district are Cornishmen ... the people living there have a very high opinion of themselves'.²⁰ Both Trollope and Vivienne hinted at something very like ethnic homogeneity and exclusivity: or at least an overwhelming cultural dominance in which the myth of Cousin Jack – or its South Australian derivative – had established its authority in the earliest days and held sway thereafter.

But if the pronouncements of Trollope and Vivienne appear unequivocal, then there is beneath the surface a fluidity of identity that requires exploration and explanation. Trollope talked of 'Moonta' but implicit in his comments was the inclusion of Moonta Mines and the several other 'mineral lease' suburbs beyond the government township. It was in Moonta Mines and the other suburbs that the majority of the Cornish lived (though many also dwelt in the township itself), these 'mineral lease' areas being remarkably singular in character, the miners' 'Cornish' cottages built in *ad hoc* manner alongside the mines themselves. By 1870 the population of Moonta Mines was about 6,000, with a further 4,000 living in neighbouring Moonta township. The two settlements were contiguous, and their conflation as simply 'Moonta' was convenient: a precedent that was followed by later writers, including Oswald Pryor.

More complex, however, was 'Wallaroo'. Did Trollope mean Wallaroo township – or Port Wallaroo as it was known initially – or was he referring to Wallaroo Mines, the mineral lease settlement some miles inland and adjoining the township of Kadina? He may well have meant the latter, for it was here he went underground, Wallaroo Mines being an overwhelming Cornish settlement akin to the larger Moonta Mines. And yet, he might have meant Wallaroo itself, for in some respects the entire locality – or 'district' as Vivienne called it – was already acquiring something like a cultural unity in the eyes of external observers. Distinct and far removed from other centres of population in South Australia, northern Yorke Peninsula – with its combined population of 20-25,000 people in the mid-1870s – was almost a counterweight to the capital Adelaide. However, within the locality itself, territorial distinctions were still observed.

Figure 1: *Wallaroo Smelters 1870*



Source: Courtesy of the State Library of South Australia, reference B7860.

For some, Wallaroo was 'Welsh', because of the presence of Welsh families – including Welsh-speakers, with their Welsh chapel – associated with the port's large

smelting works. For others, Wallaroo posed something of a contrast to the supposedly pious, God-fearing character of the rest of the Peninsula, the port acquiring in some quarters at least the rather seedy reputation common to working harbours the world over. Local young women, it was said, colloquially known as ‘seagulls’, gathered anxiously at the wharfs to await the arrival of ships, and were so eager to share their favours with the mariners that they often forgot to charge for their services.²¹

Such fluidity of identity made for imprecision and perhaps confusion, and for a blurring of boundaries and loyalties: sometimes deliberately so. Oswald Pryor, for example, deployed a literary sleight of hand in his book *Australia’s Little Cornwall*. He was able – without apparent contradiction – to explain one moment that it was Moonta (or rather Moonta and Moonta Mines) that alone was ‘Little Cornwall’, while in the next insisting with equal certainty that the sobriquet applied to northern Yorke Peninsula as a whole. He had dedicated his book ‘To the Cousin Jacks and Cousin Jennys who made Moonta “Australia’s Little Cornwall”’. Yet a few pages later he could inform his readers that there was a ‘Little Cornwall on Yorke Peninsula, South Australia, made up of Wallaroo, Kadina and Moonta’.²²

Today, such sleights of hand persist. The ‘Kernewek Lowender’ Cornish festival, held every two years on the Peninsula, is careful to project the entire district as ‘Australia’s Little Cornwall’, ensuring a balance of activities and attractions between the three towns of Moonta, Wallaroo and Kadina. And yet the visitor approaching Moonta by road from the north, having left Kadina far behind, is confronted by the sign ‘Welcome to Australia’s Little Cornwall’ at the town’s edge: Moonta, it seems, has quietly re-asserted its exclusivity. Even the Cornish festival has discreetly acquiesced, for the ceremony of the Bards of the Cornish Gorsedd – arguably the most solemn and spiritually profound element of the Kernewek Lowender, celebrating the intimate cultural link with Cornwall – is always performed at Moonta: and at Moonta alone.

‘If you haven’t been to Moonta’

There is hint here that Moonta had always defined itself in *opposition* to elsewhere. Keith Bailey in his excellent book *James Boor’s Bonanza: A History of Wallaroo Mines*, published in 2002, sensed that this was so, writing with clear irritation that ‘[i]t concerns me that Wallaroo Mines has always been the poor second cousin to Moonta Mines’.²³ Indeed it has. A contemporary website, devoted to the promotion of Moonta

as a tourist destination, carries a short review of Phyllis Somerville's prize-winning novel *Not Only in Stone*, first published in 1942, the novel charting the lives on northern Yorke Peninsula of two fictional immigrants from Cornwall: Polly and Nathan Thomas. The website concludes that '[i]t's a good story of hope, tragedy and human endurance ... a novel based on a family who emigrated from Cornwall to Moonta Mines'.²⁴ The assessment is a fair one but there is a flaw: in the story the Thomas family settle at Wallaroo Mines, not Moonta Mines, a detail missed or ignored by the reviewer – such is the power of Moonta to eclipse, even co-opt other identities.

Further afield, the process was more complex. Oswald Pryor did much to perpetuate the well-known saying, 'if you haven't been to Moonta, you haven't travelled'. According to Pryor, the phrase originated at Broken Hill in the 1880s, as Cousin Jacks from across the continent flocked to Australia's latest mineral bonanza.²⁵ Those from Moonta came up against Cornish miners from Bendigo in the Victorian goldfields, the two groups exchanging banter in which the Bendigo men laughed patronizingly at the sheltered lives and old-fashioned ways of the Moonta folk. Still 'knowing' only copper, as they had done in Cornwall, under the thumb of their captains (as they had been at home), and resistant to change, the Moonta men stood in marked contrast – it was alleged – to the worldly-wise and go-ahead ways of the Bendigo miners. But the Bendigo men had underestimated the self-confidence and superior sensibilities of their Moonta counterparts. The latter would stop the Bendigo men mid-sentence, enquiring if they had ever been to Moonta: negative replies, it is said, were met with a triumphant 'if you haven't been to Moonta ...'. A hundred years later Ruth Hopkins was penning her history of the Cornish in Bendigo, and she too felt irritated by Moonta's quiet assertion of superiority: 'too much emphasis has been placed by certain historians on the role played by South Australia in Cornish migration'.²⁶ Later, she found to her delight that only three mine managers in nineteenth-century Bendigo had come across from 'the mighty Moonta', as she remarked ironically, and one of those had left there when only five years old. 'Moonta is unlikely to have affected him', she concluded gleefully.²⁷

But if Bendigo still nurtured a century-long resentment, there were others only too ready to succumb to Moonta's self-publicized charms. Graham Jenkin, in his unashamedly sentimental *Calling Me Home: The Romance of South Australia in Story and Song*, published in 1989, waxed lyrical about Moonta. Forgetting for a moment the severe effects of water shortages in the long, hot, dry summers of the nineteenth

century, and overlooking the terrible outbreaks of ‘colonial measles’ (typhoid) that had decimated the infant population from time to time, and drawing a veil over the labour troubles that brought financial hardship and set workers against bosses as well as neighbour against neighbour, Jenkin recalled only the happy times:

the real glory of Moonta . . . was the *spirit* of the place pervading the city (*sic*) which made it such a wonderful place in which to live and which inspired such passionate devotion from its citizens. For here was an entire city at peace with itself: a city who cared for and co-operated with each; who never had to lock their doors; who worked and played and sang together with great gusto and in perfect harmony; who actually liked each other! Was there ever another city like it?²⁸

‘The hub of the universe’

Like others, Jenkin also privileged Moonta in its relationships with other settlements on the Peninsula, insisting that ‘[w]hether a person had migrated direct from Cornwall or was a third generation native of Kadina, he was likely to see Moonta as the centre of the world’.²⁹ That the Kadina-born were assumed to defer to Moonta’s superior credentials is interesting: so too was the suggestion that Moonta was ‘the centre of the world’. This echoed Pryor’s earlier revelation that Moonta was ‘the hub of the universe’. In 1962 Pryor had recounted the tale of Billy Bray, an Australian soldier in France during the First World War. According to the story, Billy was drinking in an *estaminet* with colleagues. Some drink had been spilled on the table, and Billy called the waitress over. He drew a circle on the table with his finger, which he had dipped in the liquid. He explained to the waitress that the circle represented the world. He then dabbed his finger in the middle of the circle, exclaiming: ‘this is where I come from – Moonta!’. As Pryor concluded: ‘To thousands of people like Billy Bray, Moonta *was* the hub of the universe’.³⁰

As Pryor was careful to note in his telling of the story, Billy Bray was a ‘cobber’. He might have had an overtly Cornish name – an earlier ‘Billy Bray’ was one of the heroes of Cornish Methodism – but he was unmistakably Australian. For many observers, Pryor among them, Australian national identity had been forged in the Great War: at Gallipoli and the Middle East but also on the Western Front. For all his possible ‘Cornishness’, Billy Bray was quintessentially Australian, and it was Moonta – not Cornwall – that was the centre of his world and the object of his affection. After all,

large-scale emigration from Cornwall to Yorke Peninsula had ceased as long ago as the 1880s, and Cornwall itself was no longer the centre of the international mining world, the myth of Cousin Jack increasingly hollow as Cornish industrial prowess had slipped away. Moonta folk were still Cousin Jacks, as Pryor and others made plain, but it was now Moonta and environs – rather than Cornwall itself – that was the focus of Cousin Jack loyalty and identity. Indeed, they had become ‘Moonta Jacks’, as one newspaper report had dubbed them,³¹ or more commonly ‘Moontaites’, as they were known in mining camps across Australia.

Figure 2: [Centre of the World!] *Moonta Mines looking south from Taylor's shaft, ca.1910*



Source: Courtesy of the State Library of South Australia, reference B27805.

That Billy Bray's pronouncement should have been made abroad in France (in contrast to earlier Moonta banter at Broken Hill) also served to emphasize the global scale of Moonta's pretensions, no longer restricted to rivalries within Australia but now writ large across the world. In fact, the 'if you haven't been to Moonta' jibe had been heard in Cornwall and North America before the 1880s, and was current in South Africa by the end of the century. Nonetheless, Pryor's re-invention of the sentiment as 'the hub

of the universe’ in war-torn France indicated the extent to which Moonta’s special identity had become truly internationalized by the early twentieth century.

‘the manager of the Moonta is a Devon Dumpling’

Moonta’s identity had also become firmly institutionalized well before the turn of the century, enshrined in civic and religious and economic life. Cultural artifacts and activities – from Cornish wrestling and Cornish carols to midsummer bonfires (held in midwinter), brass bands, pasties, saffron cake and clotted cream – were practical evidence of an identity transplanted. But institutional life showed how attitudes and behaviour, part of that transplantation, had been adapted and moulded to suit their new environment, producing an identity that was distinctly ‘Moonta’ and yet bore all the hallmarks of the Cornish inheritance. Local commentators and opinion formers, often the institutional voices of Moonta, reached routinely for Cornish metaphors that drew upon or expressed that identity, deploying them in pursuit of – and sometimes against – institutional agendas. Some reached for ‘Trelawny’ – the ‘Song of the Western Men’, the unofficial Cornish national anthem – and its memorable refrain:

And Shall Trelawny live?
Or shall Trelawny die?
Here’s twenty-thousand Cornishmen
Will know the reason why!³²

Paraphrased versions appeared in the Peninsula press to express opinions on local civic issues, such as the suggestion in 1875 that Public Health Inspectors be given powers to inspect water tanks attached to cottages on the mineral leases. Although it was the miners and their families who suffered most from the effects of unwholesome water, they nonetheless did not take kindly to officious busybodies – as they saw them – snooping around their homes. As one versifier put it:

And shall th’ Inspector dare
And will the Inspector care
To brave a thousand Cornishmen
As good as anywhere?

And shall he touch our tanks
Despite our serried ranks?
Then all the rowdy Cornish boys
Will give him backhand thanks!³³

Figure 3: *Moonta Mines looking NE from Hamley Hill*



Source: Courtesy Primary Industries and Resources South Australia, Ref. No. 11239

In the mines themselves, separate identity was institutionalized – as it had been elsewhere in South Australia – through the adoption of Cornish technology, terminology and mining practices. Beam engines and other machinery and materials were imported from Cornwall: from firms such as Harvey’s of Hayle, William West of St Blazey, W. Wilton of St Day, the Calenick Smelting Works at Truro, and Nicholls Williams’ Bedford Foundry at Tavistock (in neighbouring Devon). Tribute and tutwork contracting, the Cornish system in which the miner was paid according to the value of ore won or the amount of ground mined, was instituted on the Peninsula. And an array of agents – or ‘captains’ – was appointed, as in Cornwall, to oversee the running of the contract system and the general management of the mine. Many of the Moonta managers had been captains in Cornwall – or were Cornishmen who had risen to that rank in mines across America or Australia – and most were in the Cornish tradition of upward mobility, having worked their way up from ore pickey boys to tutworkmen and tributers and, eventually, to the dizzy heights of captaincy. As in the larger mines in Cornwall, there were captains for different functions: ‘grass’ captains to manage surface

operations, ‘underground’ captains to supervise work below ground, ‘tribute and tutwork’ captains to value sections or ‘pitches’ of the mines and to negotiate their contract prices. There was also a pecking order within this cadre of captains, again as in Cornwall, a chain of authority which at Moonta led to the Chief Captain: Henry Richard Hancock.³⁴

The ‘reign’ of Captain Hancock (‘H.R.H’) at Moonta and Wallaroo was legendary, and indeed Hancock was a legend in his own lifetime – with an international reputation in mining circles that encompassed Australia, America, South Africa and Cornwall itself. He was Chief Captain of the Moonta Mines from 1864 until his retirement in 1898, also becoming Chief Captain of the Wallaroo Mines on the removal of Captain Higgs in 1877. He modelled himself on the great mining dynasties of Cornwall – such as the Thomas family, managers of Dolcoath mine at Camborne over several generations³⁵ – and his word was law, as was that of his son and successor: H. Lipson Hancock. His style was autocratic, firm but fair, and perhaps nowhere else in Australia was the managerial regime at a major metal mine so demonstrably ‘Cornish’. Hancock cultivated his own mystique, and part of this mystique rubbed off on Moonta – the Hancock and Moonta legends were inextricably entwined, the one feeding off the other.

But there was a twist in the tale of the Hancock story, for ‘H.R.H’ had been born in Devon and was not, therefore, a Cornishman. Although he sprang from local yeoman farming stock, as Devonian as can be, he had been bred at Horrbridge in the western fringe of Devon that was effectively a ‘greater Cornwall’ beyond the Tamar, a mining area with mines worked by Cornish hands according to Cornish methods. So although not strictly a Cousin Jack, the Cornishmen who worked for him at Moonta conceded that he was ‘near enough to one’.³⁶ However, this generous mood did not always prevail, and when there was tension between management and men – as there was in the ‘Great Strike of 1874, for example – the Cornish were apt to remember that ‘the manager of the Moonta is a Devon Dumpling’.³⁷ There was a whiff of ethno-territorial hostility here, a re-assertion of the exclusivity of Cousin Jack. At one strike meeting in 1874, for example, one of the Cornish miners ventured to opine that ‘[s]ometime since in a parish of Devonshire there was an old cripple’.³⁸ Hancock was not mentioned by name but everyone present understood the allusion, the meeting collapsing into roars of laughter and great cheering.

'Cornwall was never conquered yet'

Paradoxically, the miners' trade union that emerged at Moonta, although aiming its vitriol so often at Captain Hancock and his regime, also did much to institutionalize and enhance Moonta's mystique. Paradoxically, too, although trade unions had been slow to develop among the Cornish miners at home in Cornwall, at Moonta the miners' union was seen as quintessentially Cornish, an explicit vehicle for the assertion of 'Cornishness', which was itself a powerful tool in the hands of the union's leaders. When, in 1872, the formation of a Moonta Miners' Association was first mooted, a budding would-be trade unionist leapt into print in the local press, deploying Cornish symbolism as means of winning over his fellow countrymen:

We invite the young and old
To join our miners' band;
Come and have your name enrolled
And join us heart and hand.

Cornwall was never conquered yet
By men of mighty powers;
And shall we in silence sit
And show ourselves like cowards?

We have this motto 'one and all';
This coat of arms is ours;
Then let us rise both great and small
To carry out our endeavours.³⁹

The notion that 'Cornwall was never conquered yet' was an ancient one, a conviction that the Cornish had resisted intrusion by Romans, Anglo-Saxons and others, preserving their independence in the face of all-comers. The phrase had been heard in the Civil War, where the victorious Parliamentarians had been warned that Cornwall would not take kindly to subjugation, and it survived in Cornish patriotic sentiment into the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth, the notion was part of the cultural baggage the Cornish brought to South Australia, and the phrase appears to have been taken to heart by the Moonta trade unionists, an important part of their armoury of defiant Cornishness. Oswald Pryor also noted its incidence on the Peninsula, reminding readers of the phrase in the Moonta *People's Weekly* in July 1954.⁴⁰

The Moonta trade unionists also made much of the Cornish motto 'One and All', again co-opting it as part of their iconography. Striking miners were urged to be united 'in the grand old Cornish motto "One and All" '⁴¹:

Tell me not, ye horrid grumblers,
That unity's an ideal dream;
If we firmly stand united,
We are stronger than we seem.

Let us all, then, be united
Be our motto – ONE & ALL
Firm as rocks when bound together
But divided down we fall.⁴²

Entwined with this Cornish sentiment was Methodism, an important element of the Moonta trade union's moral code – with its emphasis on the equality of men before God – and integral to the everyday social and cultural life of Peninsula folk.⁴³ In several respects, Methodism was the institutional bedrock of Moonta's identity. As in Cornwall, Methodism existed in its several denominational forms – Wesleyan, Bible Christian, Primitive Methodist, and so on – and its class-leaders and local preachers, the natural leaders of men and women, were also the union leaders. The Bible Christians, a sect rooted in Cornwall and north Devon, spawned the ringleaders of the 1874 strike at Moonta: Reuben Gill, John Visick and John Prisk. Here, according to the politico-religious rhetoric of one press report, was '[t]he Holy Land of Moonta, under the leadership of its modern Gideon, Mr John Prisk'.⁴⁴ When a United Labor Party was formed in South Australia, the trade unionists at Moonta and environs were swift to affiliate with new movement, soon electing their own Labor members to the Adelaide Parliament. John Verran – Cornishman, Moonta miner, Primitive Methodist local preacher, and trade union activist – represented the apogee of the Labor movement on Yorke Peninsula, leading the United Labor Party and serving as Premier of South Australia from 1910-1912.⁴⁵

'Are those people really Cousin Jacks?'

By the time of Verran's Premiership, the First World War was but a few years away. Profound change was on the horizon but in many ways Moonta had already experienced – and weathered – considerable change of its own. During the economic doldrums of the 1880s, as we have seen, many Moonta miners left for Broken Hill, while in the 1890s a great many were drawn to the new goldfields of Western Australia. Yet this had the effect, as we have also seen, of further disseminating Moonta's mystique, and these 'Moontaites' seemed every bit as adept as the earlier generation of Cousin Jacks in convincing potential new employers of their especial worth. When Henry Richard

Hancock made a tour of the mining districts of Australia in 1901, he reported that '[h]e had heard a great deal about them ... but in no single instance had he heard one word against them as miners ... in Kalgoorlie and other places in the West they were in the front rank as miners'.⁴⁶

In South Australia, Moonta remained a place apart in the eyes of the rest of the populace. When, in the 1890s, scores of Cornish miners and their families made their way down to Adelaide to join steamers bound for the golden West, their arrival in the capital caused quite a stir, with crowds of onlookers gathering at the railway station to catch a glimpse of these strange people. According to one report, one young lady was moved to exclaim: '[a]re those people really Cousin Jacks? I thought they had long tails'.⁴⁷ At the turn of the century, one such outsider sought employment on the Peninsula. He recorded: 'My first impression of Moonta Mines was – what had I let myself in for. It was soon made clear that I was a foreigner with habits and opinions to be viewed with suspicion'.⁴⁸

Paradoxically, by the early years of the twentieth century, much had changed at the mines themselves. Under the guidance of H. Lipson Hancock, much of the energy and investment had shifted from Moonta Mines to Wallaroo Mines, while the old Cornish beam engines were progressively replaced by more modern plant, altering the physical appearance of the mines and making them visibly 'less Cornish'. Yet Moonta's mystique survived these shifts, as Moonta affirmed its status as the 'hub of the universe'.⁴⁹ After the Great War, there were yet further changes, the most catastrophic being the closure and rapid dismantling of both Moonta and Wallaroo mines in 1923. Many families moved away, leaving a high proportion of the 'aged and infirm'⁵⁰ on the old mineral leases. And yet, Moonta survived. In 1927, in one of its periodic outbursts of local patriotism, timed on this occasion to coincide with 'Back to Moonta' celebrations, in which 'Moontaites' scattered elsewhere in Australia were invited to revisit their hometown, the *People's Weekly* reminded its readers that '[t]he Celtic spirit is deep set in folk that hail from Moonta ... and Moonta people are mostly Cornish'.⁵¹ Similarly, in 1933 the same newspaper could insist that '[o]ur community has been in every sense a bit of old Cornwall ... Moonta, in its proximity to the sea, is able to carry the role of an outpost of the delectable duchy'.⁵²

But this was language that contrasted with the no-nonsense, self-confident Moonta-centric perspectives of the apocryphal Billy Bray only a decade or so before, an indication that further change was afoot. Increasingly retrospective and nostalgic, here

was a romantic strain that borrowed heavily from the twentieth-century ‘Celtic Revival’ movement in Cornwall, easing the trauma of rapid de-industrialization – in Moonta as it had in Cornwall – by appealing to a timeless, primordial ‘Cornishness’ located in a dim and distant Celtic past. Yet this did not prevent Oswald Pryor and others from fretting that the ‘real’ Moonta, with its more recent traditions, was in danger of slipping away. His book *Australia’s Little Cornwall*, published in 1962, was the culmination of a lifetime’s journalism in which he had attempted to keep his vision of Moonta alive. It was an act of remembrance that strongly evoked the life and times of Moonta in its mining hey-day. But it was also a manifesto for the future, perpetuating Moonta as ‘the hub of the universe’ and reminding those who cared to read his book that ‘if you haven’t been to Moonta, you haven’t travelled’.

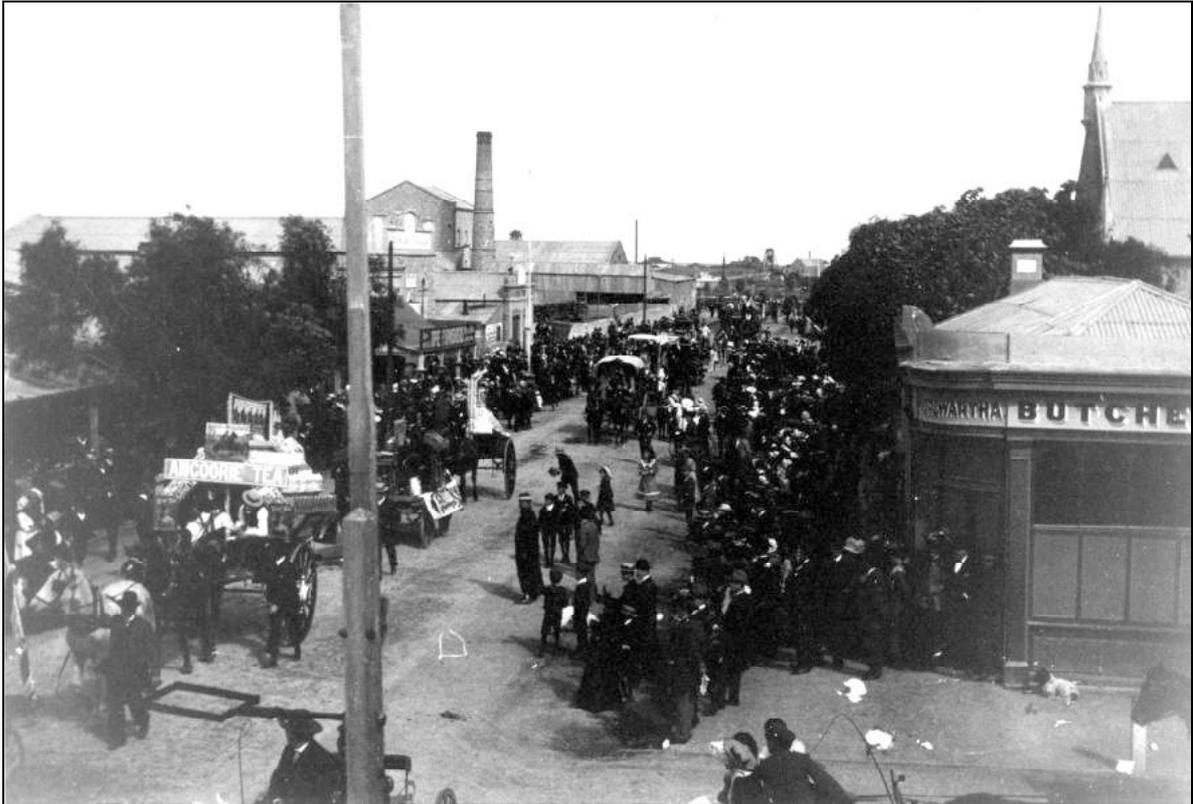
Conclusion: ‘the world’s largest Cornish festival’

The impact was extraordinary. Writers, both academic and popular, found Pryor’s seductive prose utterly persuasive, and Moonta’s identity was reinvigorated anew. Geoffrey Blainey, already alive to ‘difference’ in Australian history and by now the foremost authority on Australia’s mining past, was enthused by the ‘New Cornwalls’ of northern Yorke Peninsula, devoting a chapter to them in his milestone volume *The Rush that Never Ended: A History of Australian Mining*. Moonta and environs had been ‘possibly the largest Cornish communities beyond Land’s End’, he said: ‘By the 1870s South Australia had replaced Cornwall as the largest copper region of the British Empire’.⁵³ John Reynolds in his *Men and Mines*, published in 1974, marvelled at ‘the singular culture’ and ‘unusual stability’ that the Cornish had established in South Australia.⁵⁴ Bill Peach, in his popular 1970s series of historical travel programmes, screened on the ABC, visited Moonta and munched a Cornish pasty, as did Don Dunstan, Premier of South Australia in the 1970s, who remembered his own Cornish ancestry and suggested that the inhabitants of northern Yorke Peninsula should make more of their Cornish heritage.⁵⁵

Largely due to Dunstan’s prompting, the local community rose to the challenges of ‘heritage tourism’, the Kernewek Lowender (‘Cornish Joy’) festival emerging in 1973 as the principal focus for this activity. An instant success, Kernewek Lowender – held every other year at Moonta, Wallaroo and Kadina – went from strength to strength, so that by 1999 it was hailed as ‘the world’s largest Cornish festival’.⁵⁶ Global pretensions had re-surfaced, just as in the old days, and although the three towns were

marketed collectively as 'Australia's Little Cornwall', Moonta remained their spiritual heartland. In addition to the powerful Gorsedd ceremony, there was the unrivalled National Trust museum at Moonta Mines – dedicated in its entirety to the locality's mining history and Cornish inheritance – and a new 'tourist railway' which took visitors into the heart of the eerie mining landscape.

Figure 4: *Trades and Labour procession Kadina, September 1st, 1905.*



Source: Courtesy of the State Library of South Australia, reference B59866.

The post-war re-invention of Moonta – largely prompted by Oswald Pryor and those who followed so enthusiastically in his wake – had re-established Moonta's myth in literature and broadcasting but, in the new Kernewek Lowender festival, it had also had tangible, practical effects upon local society and economy and the ways in which the local community understood itself. In so doing, consciously or not, it had responded to the multicultural imperative of modern Australia, marking out as emphatically 'different' a small and relatively remote part of rural South Australia. In other circumstances this apparently nondescript locality would have received only cursory treatment from those who, casting their eyes briefly across mallee scrub and paddocks of ripening wheat, would have seen just another glimpse of Anglo-Celtic homogeneity.

Not for the first time had Moonta seen advantage in asserting – and institutionalizing – its remarkable sense of place.

Endnotes

¹ An interesting latter-day statement of this position is Geoffrey Partington, *The Australian Nation: Its British and Irish Roots*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 1994.

² See, for example, Eric Richards, 'The Importance of Being Irish in Colonial South Australia', in John O'Brien and Pauric Travers (eds.), *The Irish Emigrant Experience in Australia*, Poolbeg Press, Dublin, 1991, p. 64.

³ Jean Blondel, *Voters, Parties and Leaders: The Social Fabric of British Politics*, Pelican, London, 1963, 6th ed., 1974, p. 20.

⁴ Hugh Kearney, *The British Isles: A History of Four Nations*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge, 1989.

⁵ See Philip Payton, 'The Cornish in South Australia: Their Influence and Experience from Immigration to Assimilation, 1836-1936', unpub. PhD, University of Adelaide, 1978.

⁶ Manning Clark, 'Rewriting Australia', in Manning Clark, *Occasional Writings and Speeches*, Fontana/Collins, Melbourne, 1980, p. 9. This was originally delivered as a lecture in Canberra in 1954.

⁷ Geoffrey Blainey, 'They View Australia's History as a Saga of Shame', in Geoffrey Blainey, *Blainey – Eye on Australia: Speeches and Essays of Geoffrey Blainey*, Schwartz Books, Melbourne, 1991, p. 47. This was originally delivered as a lecture at Mt Eliza Uniting Church on 4 October 1985.

⁸ Patrick O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, New South Wales University Press, Sydney, 1986, new ed. 1993, p. 10.

⁹ See Philip Payton, *The Cornish Overseas: A History of Cornwall's 'Great Emigration'*, 1999, 2nd ed., Cornwall Editions, Fowey, 2005.

¹⁰ Dudley Baines, *Migration in a Mature Economy: Emigration and Internal Migration in England and Wales, 1861-1900*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985, pp. 157-9.

¹¹ See Payton, *Cornish Overseas*, 2005.

¹² See Philip Payton, 'Cousin Jacks and Ancient Britons: Cornish Immigrants and Ethnic Identity', *Journal of Australian Studies*, 68, 2001, pp. 54-64.

¹³ C. Lewis Hind, *Days in Cornwall*, Methuen, London, 1907, p. 352.

¹⁴ See Payton, *Cornish Overseas*, esp. ch. 5: 'South Australia's Copper Kingdom', pp. 161-200.

¹⁵ Michael Davitt, *Life and Progress in Australasia*, Methuen, London, 1898, p. 63.

¹⁶ Philip Payton, 'Re-inventing Celtic Australia', in Amy Hale and Philip Payton (eds.), *New Directions in Celtic Studies*, University of Exeter Press, Exeter, 2000, pp. 122-3.

¹⁷ See, for example, Maurice Perry and Ian Auhl, *Burra Sketchbook*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1969; Peter Finch and Ian Auhl, *Burra in Colour*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1973; Ian Auhl and Denis Marfleet, *Australia's Earliest Mining Era: South Australia 1841-1851*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1975; Ian Auhl, *Burra and District: A Pictorial Memoir*, Lynton Publications, Cormandel Valley, 1975; Ian Auhl, 'The Story of the Monster Mine': *The Burra Burra Mine and its Townships, 1845-1877*, Investigator Press, Hawthorndene, 1986. The latter book is dedicated to: 'the nameless Cornish and English miners; Welsh and German smelters; Irish teamsters and Chilean muleteers who helped to establish the Burra Burra Mine and its Townships "in the wilderness" '.

¹⁸ Oswald Pryor, *Australia's Little Cornwall*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1962; in the same historiographical tradition is Philip Payton, *Pictorial History of Australia's Little Cornwall*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1978.

¹⁹ Anthony Trollope, *Australia*, 1873, repub. P.D. Edward and R.B. Joyce (eds) University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1967, p. 684.

²⁰ May Vivienne, *Sunny South Australia*, Hussey & Gillingham, Adelaide, 1908, pp. 254-5, 263.

²¹ Roslyn Paterson, *Thankyou Walter Watson Hughes: Essays on Northern Yorke Peninsula*, Gould Books, Adelaide, 1993, p. 52.

²² Pryor, *Australia's Little Cornwall*, pp. 7, 13.

²³ Keith Bailey, *James Boor's Bonanza: A History of Wallaroo Mines, South Australia*, Bailey, Kadina, p. 111; see also Phyllis Somerville, *Not Only in Stone*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1942, repub. Seal Books, Adelaide, 1973.

²⁴ <http://www.pcug.org.au/-terryg/main.html>, 'Read about Moonta and its People', 3 May 2006.

²⁵ Pryor, *Australia's Little Cornwall*, p. 148.

-
- ²⁶ Ruth Hopkins, *Where Now Cousin Jack?*, Bendigo Bicentennial Committee, Bendigo, 1988, p. 12. It appears that Hopkins was drawing attention to the extensive treatment afforded South Australia in Philip Payton, *The Cornish Miner in Australia: Cousin Jack Down Under*, Dyllansow Truran, Redruth, 1984. Hopkins made a similar claim in Ruth Hopkins, *Cousin Jack, Man for the Times: A History of the Cornish People in Victoria*, Hopkins, Bendigo, 1994, p. 37.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1986, p. 26.
- ²⁸ Graham Jenkin, *Calling Me Home: The Romance of South Australia in Story and Song*, South Australian College of Advanced Education, Adelaide, 1989, pp. 136-7.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 136.
- ³⁰ Pryor, *Australia's Little Cornwall*, p. 149 - my italics.
- ³¹ *Yorke's Peninsula Advertiser*, 4 July 1873.
- ³² 'Trelawny' appeared in full in the *Yorke's Peninsula Advertiser*, 10 October 1873.
- ³³ *Yorke's Peninsula Advertiser*, 16 April 1875.
- ³⁴ For a dramatized biography, see Mandie Robinson, *Cap'n 'Ancock: Ruler of Australia's Little Cornwall*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1978.
- ³⁵ D.B. Barton, *Essays in Cornish Mining History: Volume 2*, Bradford Barton, Truro, 1971, pp. 53-4.
- ³⁶ Pryor, *Australia's Little Cornwall*, p. 40.
- ³⁷ *Yorke's Peninsula Advertiser*, 3 August 1877.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 28 April 1874.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 13 May 1873.
- ⁴⁰ Mark Stoye, *West Britons: Cornish Identities and the Early Modern British State*, University of Exeter Press, 2002, p. 89; Matthew Spriggs, 'William Scawen (1600-1689) - A Neglected Cornish Patriot and Father of the Cornish Language Revival', in Philip Payton (ed.), *Cornish Studies: Thirteen*, University of Exeter Press, Exeter, pp. 114-5; Oswald Pryor, 'Who are the Cousin Jacks?', *People's Weekly*, July 1954, reprinted in Liz Coole (ed.), *Writings of Oswald Pryor from the People's Weekly*, Moonta Branch of the National Trust of South Australia, Moonta, 2002, n.p..
- ⁴¹ *Yorke Peninsula Advertiser*, 28 April 1874.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 21 April 1874.
- ⁴³ Arnold Hunt, *This Side of Heaven: A History of Methodism in South Australia*, Lutheran Publishing House, Adelaide, 1985, pp. 117-127.
- ⁴⁴ *Yorke's Peninsula Advertiser*, 2 June 1874; For a detailed account of the strike see, Peter Bell, 'The Power of Respectful Remonstrance: the Wallaroo and Moonta miners strike of 1864', *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia*, 1998.
- ⁴⁵ Janet Scarfe, 'The Labour Wedge: The First Six Labour Members of the South Australian Legislative Council', Department of History BA Honours thesis, University of Adelaide, 1968; R.J. Miller, 'The Fall of the Verran Government 1911-1912: The Most Determined attempt to Abolish the Legislative Council of South Australia, and its Failure', Department of History BA Honours thesis, University of Adelaide, 1965.
- ⁴⁶ *People's Weekly*, 28 September 1901.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 12 September, 1896.
- ⁴⁸ South Australian Archives (SAA) D3267 (L), Raws addendum.
- ⁴⁹ See Philip Payton, '“Vote Labor, and Rid South Australia of a Danger to the Purity of our Race”: The Cornish Radical Tradition in South Australia, 1900-1939', in Philip Payton (ed.), *Cornish Studies: Nine*, University of Exeter Press, Exeter, 2001, pp. 173-203.
- ⁵⁰ K.W. Thomson, 'The Changes in Function of Former Mining Settlements: The Wallaroo Copper Belt', *Proceedings of the Royal Geological Society of Australia, South Australian Branch*, 56: 47-58, 1955, p. 57.
- ⁵¹ *People's Weekly*, 15 September 1927.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 10 June 1933.
- ⁵³ Geoffrey Blainey, *The Rush That Never Ended: A History of Australian Mining*, Melbourne University Press, 1963, 2nd ed. 1969, pp. 119, 124.
- ⁵⁴ John Reynolds, *Men and Mines: A History of Australian Mining, 1788-1971*, Sun Books, Melbourne, 1974, p.16.
- ⁵⁵ Bill Peach, *Australia Wide*, Australian Broadcasting Commission, Sydney, 1977; Dunstan was careful to note the Cornish inheritance in his *Don Dunstan's Australia*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1977.
- ⁵⁶ Leaflet produced by Kernewek Lowender Inc., 1999.