

BOOK REVIEW

Philip Payton, *The Cornish Overseas: a History of Cornwall's 'Great Emigration'*, revised edition, University of Exeter Press, Exeter, 2020, pp. 519 + vii, ISBN 978-1-905816-10-1

This book is a revised and expanded edition of a title which was originally published in 1999, and previously revised in 2005. Philip Payton has comprehensively described the history of the Cornish diaspora in a prolific series of publications from the 1970s onward. I feel inclined to say this is his masterwork, but I hesitate because who knows what is still to come?

Even people with a limited knowledge of the Cornish in Australia probably know something of their role in the mining industry, most famously at the Moonta and Wallaroo mines in the Copper Triangle of South Australia. Payton tells that story among many others, but he expands on it to spell out its place in a global phenomenon.

In nineteenth century Australia, if you wanted to open an underground mine, you employed Cornish miners. Early in the century, Cornwall was one of the principal mining regions of Europe, dominating the copper and tin industries. The early adoption of steam technology for pumping, winding and powering crushing mills made it possible to mine cheaply at great depths, and gave the industry distinctive-looking boiler- and engine-houses, smokestacks and headframes. When Cornish miners were recruited to other countries, they took all that technology with them; the technology of underground metal mining in Australia from the 1840s to the 1920s was dominated by Cornish methods.

This Cornish dominance added many distinctive words to the vocabulary of mining. The words wheal, bal, mundic, attle and vug are all certainly Cornish in origin, and probably costean, bob, whim and buddle. But English absorbs words from many languages, and compilers of mining glossaries sometimes become over-enthusiastic in attributing a Cornish origin to terms such as adit (pure Latin) and kibble (from German kübel, a bucket).

Geographically, the Cornish became distributed astonishingly widely. The diaspora began with internal migration within the British Isles; Cornish miners moved to the Midlands and north of England, and to the Welsh coalfields. The copper mines of Ireland have unmistakably Cornish enginehouses and smokestacks.

Trans-oceanic migration soon followed, but there were both push and pull factors at work. In the 1840s, Cornwall like Ireland was devastated by the potato famine, and the response in both countries was to emigrate to America. The exodus from Cornwall coincided exactly with the opening of the copper mines in northern Michigan, while the mining companies were seeking a skilled workforce. Both the USA and Canada acquired significant Cornish communities in following decades, focused especially on mining fields in California, Nevada and Arizona.

By the 1860s the Cornish industry was in decline, and mines were closing, which coincided with recruitment for the new copper mines on South Australia's Yorke Peninsula. The exodus went on, to Cuba, New Zealand, Chile, South Africa, Mexico, India, West Africa, wherever there were companies in search of skilled miners.

However, it would be a mistake to associate the Cornish too narrowly with the mining industry and the transfer of mining technology. Everywhere they went they took

farming, sailing and fishing skills too. They took their surnames: Pascoe, Verco and Sando, Penberthy and Pendenning, Polkinghorne and Nankivell, Treloar, Tregaskis and Tregonning. They took their whole culture, including their traditional industrial organisations, their dissenting religions, their lodges, their cuisine and their politics. South Australia has had six premiers of Cornish descent.

Payton tells all this and much more. It is not a light read, 519 pages of dense and detailed prose. It is authoritative, based on decades of research and familiarity with its subject matter. An excellent reference work, meticulously referenced and indexed. I can find no fault with it.

Peter Bell