

MURDOCH, Brian (1993): *Cornish Literature*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer. x + 174 pp. (£ 25). ISBN 0 85991 364 3.

This book gives a clear and up-to-date account of a subject which until now can have been known to few people. It breaks new ground, not only for those concerned with Cornwall's past, but for all students of medieval drama, popular religion, and apocryphal literature.

Cornwall, the most south-westerly county of England, was an independent Celtic state until its conquest by the English during the ninth century. Until the eighteenth century it retained its own language, Cornish, related to Welsh and (more closely) to Breton. During the later middle ages Cornish developed its own drama, the only medieval Celtic language to do so, and these religious plays are our main source of knowledge for the language. However, Cornish would be of interest to literary historians even if these plays had not been written, since Cornwall played an important role in the diffusion of legends associated with King Arthur, especially the tale of Tristan and Isolde. Unfortunately, there are no surviving Cornish texts for this material, which is known only from later versions in Latin and French. It is likely that much early Cornish story-telling was oral, and was never written down.

In six chapters, Brian Murdoch's book describes the scanty remains of Old Cornish; the four works (the "Poem of the Passion", *Ordinalia*, *Creation of the World*, and play of Saint Meriasek) which make up the bulk of Middle Cornish literature; and the varied texts of Modern Cornish during its seventeenth- and eighteenth-century decline, and twentieth-century form devised by enthusiasts attempting to revive it as a spoken and written language. The author ably sets out current knowledge of Cornish literature at a time when its texts are receiving fresh attention from editors and critics in Britain, Austria, and the United States. As a professional historian of literature, he also sets

out a strong and persuasive case for the merits of the religious texts as works of art.

What is the importance of this book for specialists in Old and Middle English?. Its main value is for students of medieval English drama. As is well known, much of this has been lost; most of what we have survives by chance in four cycles, from Chester, York, Wakefield, and "N-Town" (perhaps from Norfolk). What we can guess from these is greatly supplemented by the Cornish plays, which are influenced by English forms of drama, but yet show many distinctive features of their own.

Analysis of the *Ordinalia*, written probably in the later fourteenth century, brings this out. This cycle consists of three parts: the Beginning of the World; Christ's Passion; and the Resurrection of Our Lord. The first part represents the Creation of the World, Man's Fall (with a vivid depiction of Adam, Eve, and the Serpent), Cain's murder of Abel, Noah's escape from the Flood, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, Moses and Pharaoh, David and Bathsheba, and Solomon's building of the Temple. Much of this is familiar from the English plays of the period. But the unknown Cornish dramatist often shows great originality of treatment, especially through incorporating apocryphal material. An instance of this is his use of the "Legend of the Rood", that the three seeds from the Tree of Knowledge, placed by Seth in Adam's grave, eventually became the Tree of the Cross. This apocryphal narrative is unknown in medieval English drama, and very rare (to say the least) elsewhere.

Those involved in the producing of medieval plays will also be interested in the evidence for how Cornish drama was staged. While most medieval English plays were performed on carts, which could be hauled through the streets of towns, Cornish drama was performed in earthen amphitheatres. Two of these still exist, and the book includes a photograph of a 1969 revival of the *Ordinalia*, performed in one of these amphitheatres by students of Bristol University. Shown dressed as black, spiky devils emerging from a smoke-filled hell-mouth, these amateur actors bring home something of the

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vitality of the Cornish literature described in this book. Far from being of minority interest, Brian Murdoch's *Cornish Literature* is a book from which almost anyone concerned with medieval religious writing can learn much. It deserves a warm welcome.

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