

THE LOST LANDS OF LYONESSE:

Telling stories of Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly

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ABSTRACT: Lyonesse an imaginary territory, often represented as a lost space, containing a once vibrant, now submerged, land and peoples, was most commonly portrayed as having occupied an area between or including Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, in south west England. Drawing on Arthurian legends, poets, novelists, musicians, and dramatists from the mid-19th Century onwards use Lyonesse, particularly within the romantic mode, to suggest both the loss of some kind of superior social and geographical space, and as a critique of existing conditions. In addition, Lyonesse becomes a space for rethinking gender, class, history and nationality, while also being harnessed for commercial purposes such as tourism. In these representations Lyonesse encompasses lost land, existing islands and a *presqu'île* (a peninsular 'almost island').

KEYWORDS: Lyonesse, Cornwall, Isles of Scilly, tourism, Arthurian legends

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*The sea itself: it sings, it calls, it tells its stories.*¹

Introduction: Early references to Lyonesse, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly

The English literary tradition of Lyonesse began its journey in Sir Thomas Malory's epic *Morte d'Arthur* (1485).² The section called 'The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones' details the doomed love story of Mark, Isolde and Tristram (which runs parallel to the main story of Arthur, Guinevere and Lancelot). This became the template for many dramatic love stories in English literary history. Malory's references to Lyonesse (or Lyones) are brief but establish it as the birthplace of Tristram, nephew to Mark of Cornwall: "There was a king called Melyodas, and he was lord of the cuntry of Lyones... And by fortune he married King Mark's sister of Cornwall" (1977: 229). Malory associates Lyonesse with Cornwall, but Lyonesse itself receives very little mention and there is no reference to the flooding of land here. His treatment of Lyonesse is brief, and lacking in specificity, but the links he suggests between Lyonesse and Arthurian legends became increasingly significant in literary treatments from the mid-19th Century onwards, as we shall see later.

The earliest English reference to Lyonesse as an historical location of any significance seems to occur in Camden's *Britannia* (1586) in an account of Land's End, in Cornwall:

¹ Quotation from Mike O'Connor's song 'House of Storms' (2013).

² It must be noted that Malory was drawing on French romance stories, adapting them for an English audience, translating French themes into English political and social contexts.

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This Promontorie heeretofore ran further into the Sea, and by the rubbish which is drawn out from thence the Mariners affirme the same, yea and the neighbor Inhabitants avouch out of I wote not what fable, that the earth now covered there all over with the in-breaking of the sea was called Lionesse. (section 8: online)

Following him, Carew's *Survey of Cornwall* of 1602 describes the lost Lyonesse in its first few pages:

The encroaching sea hath ravined from it [Cornwall] the whole country of Lionesse, together with divers other parcels of no little circuit, and that such a Lionesse there was these proofs are yet remaining. The space between the land's end and the Isles of Scilly, being about thirty miles, to this day retaineth the name, in Cornish Lethowsow, and carrieth continually an equal depth of forty or sixty fathom (a thing not unusual in the sea's proper dominion) save that about the midway there leith a rock which at low water discovereth his head. They term it the Gulfe, suiting thereby the other name of Scilla. Fishermen also casting their hooks thereabouts have drawn up pieces of doors and windows. Moreover, the ancient name of St Michaels's Mount was Cara clowse in Cowse, in English, The Hoare Rocke in the Wood, which now is at every flood encompassed by the sea, and yet at some low ebbs roots of mighty trees are described in the sands about it. (1602/2000: 113)

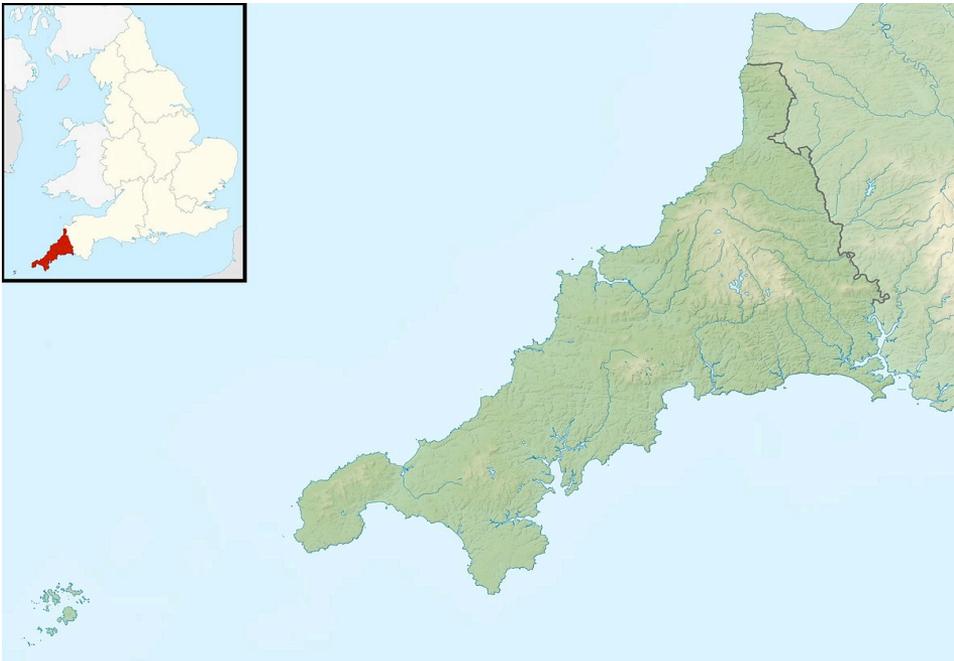


Figure 1 – Map of Scilly Islands (bottom left), Cornwall and south west Devon (map contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right, CC BY-SA 3.0, sourced: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=17515502>)

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Mumford's work *Portrait of the Isles of Scilly* summarises the key points concerning Lyonesse in histories of Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly:

Local legend has it that the Isles of Scilly are the remnants of the lost land of Lyonesse, a piece of country which once upon a time joined the islands to Lands End (and included St Michael's Mount) and which was drowned by a huge flood never to reappear. This catastrophe was supposed to have happened in the sixth century at the time of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. (1970: 50)³

What Mumford means by "local legend" is not clear but the high level of correlation about key details is evident in reading the post-medieval materials on Lyonesse. For example, there is consistent reference to the loss of 140 churches, the reference to the Cornish phrase *Cara clowse in Cowse*, to the Cornish name *Lethowsow*, and the reference to the Trevilian family arms bearing a horse fleeing the flood. As Thomas points out (1986: 287), much of the material is straightforward repetition, Carew drawing on Camden, with others then following Carew. There is a clear literary/historical trajectory for the most commonly repeated elements of the Lyonesse story. Nevertheless Thomas is not the only one to hope that the stories have real and local provenance: "on balance I prefer to think that Carew's source was in large part the native tradition of his countrymen" (1986: 287).⁴ And arguably, the source material itself refers back to its provenance: "the Inhabitants avouch out of I wote not what fable;" "the inhabitants name it;" "they say of it;" (Camden) and "they term it" (Carew). This suggests that literary and historical traditions are built on oral and folk traditions.

Lyonesse in Victorian writings: Romance and Tourism

It was not until the 19th Century that Lyonesse as an idea really took off. One catalyst was the rising popularity of medieval stories, and of Arthurianism in particular, partly based on Malory. The reasons for this have been well documented⁵ but in brief, can be attributed to the effort of amateur historians and enthusiasts of literature who were particularly interested in promoting little-known medieval texts for the purposes of a better developed and broader reading public in their own times. In particular, book-reading clubs mushroomed with the specific intent of making good stories available to a wider range of readers. The intention was to provide such stories that had specifically British roots and traditions, rather than classical Greek or Roman antecedents.

Furthermore, commercial interests and tourism played an important role in reviving Lyonesse. In 1922 two volumes of pamphlets entitled *Legend Land: Being a Collection of some of the Old tales told in those Western Parts of Britain served by the Great Western Railway* had the specific intent of advertising Cornwall and train travel to the public, with

³ See also Deane and Shaw's (1975) discussion of the solitary horseman to escape the flood.

⁴ Here we might understand experiences such as very high tides and local flooding, which continue to occur today, with often devastating effects. (Most recently, extremely high seas on February 8th 2016 brought spectacular effects in Cornwall and elsewhere as a product of Cyclone Imogen (see Duell and Glanfield, 2016: online).

⁵ See, for example, Matthews (1999).

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each story associated with a particular part of Cornwall that could be reached by train.⁶ 'The Lost Land of Lyonesse' has its own entry and is designed to advertise the specific attractions of Land's End, Penzance and the Isles of Scilly. Lyonesse, as the title page and foreword explain, is the narrator, the re-teller of these old stories, which, Lyonesse admonishes "[a]ll people should like...all nice people do. To them I commend these tales of Legend Land, in the hope that they may grow to love them and the countries about which they are written" (1922: 32).⁷ While the representation of Lyonesse as a character has antecedents in Malory's stories of Arthur and the Round Table,⁸ *Legend Land* is an explicit and unashamed harnessing of myths and legends as publicity and advertising for the new industry and technology in the expansion of the railway system down into the south west.

One key figure in the Victorian period who contributed significantly to the revitalisation of Lyonesse was Alfred, Lord Tennyson. His long narrative poem 'Idylls of the King' (1859-1885), takes Malory's Arthurianism, in particular the embedded sense of inevitable doom, and uses Lyonesse as the place in which the last of Arthur's battles were fought. Under extreme pressure from his son Mordred, Arthur nevertheless pushes Mordred back to Lyonesse. Lyonesse here is a desolate watery wilderness, fit location for the end of the once mighty king. Lyonesse came "from the abyss" and will return "to the abyss... a coast/of ever-shifting sand... moaning sea... waste sand by the waste sea":

*Then rose the King and moved his host by night,
And ever pushed Sir Modred, league by league,
Back to the sunset bound of Lyonesse —
A land of old upheaven from the abyss
By fire, to sink into the abyss again;
Where fragments of forgotten peoples dwelt,
And the long mountains ended in a coast
Of ever-shifting sand, and far away
The phantom circle of a moaning sea.
There the pursuer could pursue no more,
And he that fled no further fly the King;
And there, that day when the great light of heaven
Burned at his lowest in the rolling year,
On the waste sand by the waste sea they closed.
Nor ever yet had Arthur fought a fight
Like this last, dim, weird battle of the west.
A deathwhite mist slept over sand and sea:
Whereof the chill, to him who breathed it, drew
Down with his blood, till all his heart was cold
With formless fear...*

*...the pale King glanced across the field
Of battle: but no man was moving there;*

⁶ The Great Western Railways Archive is available online at: http://www.greatwestern.org.uk/m_in_gwr_history2.htm

⁷ The writer-narrator (ie Lyonesse) was actually George Basil Barham, see Göller and Göller (1992: 422, fn 15).

⁸ Lyonesse as a character plays a key role in the story of Gareth of Orkney.

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*Nor any cry of Christian heard thereon,
Nor yet of heathen; only the wan wave
Brake in among dead faces, to and fro
Swaying the helpless hands, and up and down
Tumbling the hollow helmets of the fallen,
And shivered brands that once had fought with Rome,
And rolling far along the gloomy shores
The voice of days of old and days to be.*

For Malory and Tennyson, Lyonesse has links to the south-west of Britain, but these links are general rather than specific, based on a sense of remoteness and savagery, of a place beyond rule. As Charles Thomas put it, “In Tennyson’s youth Cornwall was unimaginably far either from his Lincolnshire home or from Cambridge” (1986: 269). For writers based in the middle of England, the farthestmost parts of the land would have been associated with remoteness, the unfamiliar and the supernatural. Lyonesse is a place dominated by the sea, sunken lands, the inevitability of death, betrayal and sadness. Here Lyonesse has truly romantic origins in these associations with decline, atrophy, and human insufficiency in the face of indomitable natural and supernatural forces.

Lyonesse, Wessex and Cornwall: Thomas Hardy’s Fiction

Thomas Hardy’s depiction of Lyonesse drew on some aspects of Tennyson’s work, and extended its reach both in terms of the geographical location of Lyonesse and its associations with Cornwall, and through extending its impact into the popular novel. Lyonesse here is part of Wessex, a fictional area that created such interest that it had a quasi-real status in readers’ minds. Separated into Wessex, Upper Wessex, Lower Wessex, North Wessex, South Wessex and Outer Wessex, it (like Broadway) even has an Off Wessex. Wessex is generally associated with Dorset, while Hardy’s maps clearly delineate Off Wessex as Cornwall. Nevertheless, descriptions of places in his novels are generic rather than specific. As Kent puts it, Hardy used “the mythical concept of Lyonesse to stand in for the whole of Cornwall”, but his use of Cornwall is often vague, “shifting the action from real to unreal place” (2000: 171). Hardy was not the only one to use Cornwall as both a real and imaginary site to explore particular human situations and relationships. Hardy, Virginia Woolf and D.H Lawrence, were the leading lights amongst a group of early 20th Century writers who were finding in Cornwall’s apparent marginality an ideology congenial to them” (ibid 148). As Kent’s words make us realise, in some ways Cornwall is as mythical—that is, abstractly unreal, not represented with its own specific values and characteristics—as Lyonesse is. Cornwall for Hardy, Woolf, Lawrence and others is a conveniently blank canvas for writers and readers to develop for themselves. Hardy’s novels describe places that have a cinematic visualisability, but are nowhere in particular.

Cornwall, in this context, though firmly attached to the rest of Britain, shares certain qualities with islands, as Hayward (2016) has pointed out.⁹ Like the Isles of Scilly, Cornwall has a particular insularity, partly through its peninsularity and the Tamar river, which separates Cornwall from its only land neighbour Devon. As Hayward argues, Cornwall’s

⁹ I am grateful to Hayward for giving me access to his article ‘Bounded by Heritage and the Tamar: Cornwall as “almost an island”’, prior to publication in *Cornish Studies* (forthcoming).

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distinctness and status as “almost an island” (or *presqu’île*, in French) has been consciously exploited for cultural and commercial reasons.

Lyonesse is subliminally relevant to Hardy’s *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873). The front matter of the novel describes the scene as “Off-Wessex, or Lyonesse, on the outskirts of Wessex”. As a writer who wanted to be successful and sell books, Hardy was very conscious of the interests of the time. In going to Lyonesse he links the new popular novel with the earlier prose work by Malory and poetry by Tennyson. He hooks his work back to the past and classical texts, and at the same time seeks out new women readers by creating strong female protagonists in vividly-drawn locations. The core of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* is the dilemma faced by the young Elfride, whose options in life are limited to what kind of a marriage she might make. She ends up betraying her first lover, the impecunious architect Stephen Smith, for his mentor, the sophisticated Henry Knight, in a series of twists, turns and pieces of down-right bad luck for which Hardy’s novels became famous.

Lyonesse plays a larger role in Hardy’s short piece ‘A Mere Interlude’ (1885), which continues some of the themes that can now be seen as hallmark Hardy concerns. The focus is an impoverished single woman Baptista, forced into school teaching to make a living. She was brought up on St Maria’s “one of the Isles of Lyonesse” (for which St Mary’s, in the Isles of Scilly is an obvious reference). Educated and trained on the mainland as a teacher, Baptista leads a dour existence plagued by the fear of the school inspector’s assessment of her work, until she is approached by Mr Heddegan in marriage. Heddegan is “an old bachelor at Giant’s Town, St Maria’s, with no relations whatever, who lives about a stone’s throw from my father... he’s the richest man we know—as a friend and neighbour” (Hardy, 1992: 126). Yet Heddegan is twenty years Baptista’s senior. The poverty of Baptista’s options are sharply drawn:

I simply hate school. I don’t care for children—they are unpleasant, troublesome little things, whom nothing would delight so much as to hear that you had fallen down dead. I think mother and father are right. They say I shall never excel as a schoolmistress if I dislike the work so, and that therefore I ought to get settled by marrying Mr Heddegan. Between us two, I like him better than school; but I don’t like him quite so much as to wish to marry him.
(ibid: 126-7)

Between the rock of a job she does not like and the hard place of a love-less marriage, Baptista chooses the hard place, but on her way back to Lyonesse to marry Heddegan, via Pen-zephr (Penzance, the departure point for ferries to the Isles of Scilly,) she accidentally meets up at with a previous admirer Charles Stow, whom she marries in secret, with a plan to return to the island and present her parents with a done deed. When Charles drowns, with her marriage still a secret, Baptista resolves to carry on to her first proposed marriage with Heddegan. The sting in the tale here is that Heddegan has his own secret—he too has had a previous marriage, and the three daughters that it produced become Baptista’s new pupils and charges. It seems that Baptista has the worst of both worlds, in a loveless marriage, stuck with the permanent job of teacher to her step-daughters.

Lyonesse has a greater presence in Hardy’s short story than in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. Lyonesse as an island suggests the limited options that Baptista has, and the weight and expectations of home and family but the mainland does not provide any greater options for her. Here Pen-zephyr as a transit point, with travellers coming and going, allows a certain kind of anonymity, with marriages by license, and transitory relationships less questioned. It seems

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incredible that a man could keep a marriage and three children secret on a small island, but at a thematic level it serves to suggest that home and island may not have the innocence and predictability that Baptista expected. Baptista finds love for her step-daughters and “a sterling friendship at least” with her husband, a marked improvement for a “pair in whose existence there had threatened to be neither friendship nor love”. In Lyonesse, between Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, Baptista discovers a happiness based on friendship and love.

Hardy’s poem ‘When I set out for Lyonesse’ (1870), is essentially an exploration of poetic inspiration. This short, three stanza poem tells of a journey that is physical, intellectual and emotional, but the details are never shared with the reader.

*When I set out for Lyonesse,
A hundred miles away,
The rime was on the spray,
And starlight lit my lonesomeness
When I set out for Lyonesse
A hundred miles away.*

While the second stanza hints at a transformation (“What would bechance at Lyonesse/While I should sojourn there/No prophet durst declare/Nor did the wisest wizard guess/What would bechance at Lyonesse”) (ibid), it is far from clear what this means. What did happen in Lyonesse? With “magic in his eyes”, and a “radiance rare and fathomless” the effect of Lyonesse on the speaker is recognised by others (“All marked with mute surmise”), who silently wonder at the cause but no explanation is forthcoming from the traveller. Here, the poem lets the idea of Lyonesse wander in the mind of the reader. There is very little reference to any kind of detail about it, save the one line “the rime was on the spray”, and the repeated reference to Lyonesse being a hundred miles away from the speaker’s starting point, which itself is undisclosed. Lyonesse is far away and dominated by the sea, yet a sea described with poetic terms “rime” and “spray” where the lack of specificity allows the reader to fill the space with their own imaginations. Lyonesse here provides all the magic and radiance that a lonely, thoughtful traveller (and reader) might require.

Finally, Hardy invokes Lyonesse in one of his last works, *The Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall in Tintagel* (1923), written just five years before he died. Hardy had been exploring ideas about Lyonesse for something like fifty years. His one act play is the most firmly rooted in medieval stories and has two Iseults. One is married to King Mark, in love with Tristram, and the other is married to Tristram himself.¹⁰ Here there are two sets of adultery. The Queen of Cornwall is unfaithful to Mark, as Tristram is unfaithful to his wife Iseult. So, drunk and enraged, Mark kills Tristram, and is then killed by his wife, who subsequently throws herself off a cliff. Hardy rings changes on the theme of the doomed lovers present in Malory (which later writers will continue) and through different modes creates narratives and characters using Lyonesse as a springboard designed to appeal to readers’ imaginations. In Lyonesse Hardy finds sea-wrapped islands, abstract and imaginary spaces, which he can fill with romance and intrigue.

¹⁰ This invention on Hardy’s part, while in keeping with the kinds of duplications evident in Malory’s work, suggests specific concerns that Hardy might have had, about his first and second wives - see Hale et al (eds) (2000).

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Lyonesse and the Isles of Scilly: Walter Besant's *Armored of Lyonesse* (1884)

Walter Besant's *Armored of Lyonesse* (1884) is a novelistic journey to Lyonesse that introduces key new dimensions and firmly locates Lyonesse in the Isles of Scilly. Most noticeably, Lyonesse now belongs to a female protagonist, Armored, a young parentless child taught at school to value the place of her birth. In geography she is also taught world history, and her homeland's place in that history:

The world is only the Scilly Islands spread out big—and history too. You would be surprised to find out what a lot of history there is that belongs to Scilly. (ibid: 55)

The Isles of Scilly are represented as what remains of Lyonesse and offer a set of values that are no longer present on the mainland of England. Armored is the spirit of Lyonesse, an unspoilt, intelligent, and diligent child of the islands, and Lyonesse is a pre-industrialised land dominated by natural beauty and community values. The novel is essentially a love story that follows Armored's unselfish belief in the young naïve painter Roland Lee, and develops over years of his absence and her gradual education and growth. The novel is undoubtedly romantic, both in its core revelation of a pure love that withstands time and various human machinations, and in its strong belief in the power of human female love to re-educate a flawed male human. The woman's love civilises and redeems her chosen man, bringing him both peace and financial prosperity.

More interestingly, from the point of view of this journal, *Armored of Lyonesse* is firmly located in the real here and now of the Isles of Scilly, with extended portraits of the physical place and a refusal to see it as marginal to the big city from which the male protagonist comes. The opening of the novel introduces place and girl to the reader almost simultaneously. Amored is quintessentially the spirit of the place:

The sun of Scilly is never too fierce or too burning in summer, nor in winter does it ever lose its force; in July, when the people of the adjacent islands of Great Britain and Ireland venture not forth into the glare of the sun, here the soft sea mists and the strong sea air temper the heat; and in December the sun still shines with a lingering warmth, as if he loved the place. This girl lived in the sunshine all year round; rowed in it; lay in it; basked in it bare-headed, summer and winter; in the winter she would sit sheltered from the wind in some warm corner of the rocks; in summer she would lie on the hillside or stand upon the high headlands and the sea-beat crags, while the breezes, which in the Land of Lyonesse do never cease, played with her long tresses and kept her soft cheek cool. (ibid: 1)

The Lyonesse that we see in *Armored of Lyonesse* incorporates specific features of the Isles of Scilly.

It takes many days to see these fragments of Lyonesse, and to get a true sense of the place. They [Armored and Roland] sailed round the southern point of Samson, and they steered westward, leaving Great Minalto on the lee, towards Mincarlo. (ibid: 56)

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Samson is the largest of the uninhabited islands in the archipelago, and Minalto and Mincarolo are rock formations on St Marys, the largest inhabited island in the group. There is much detailed physical description of the islands, their flora and fauna:

Behind the beach is a low bank on which grow the sea-holly, the sea-lavender, the horned poppy, and the spurge, and behind the bank stretches a small plain, low and sandy, raised above the high tide by no more than a foot or two...Among the fern at this season [September] stood the tall dead stalks of foxglove. Here and there were patches of short turf set about with the withered flowers of the sea-pink, and the long branches of the bramble lay trailing over the ground. (ibid: 26)

But beside these detailed yet lyrical descriptions is also knowledge of the history of the earlier industry of kelp farming:

All round the rocks at low tide hangs the long sea-weed, undisturbed since the days when they manufactured kelp, like the rank growth of a tropical creeper: at high tide it stands up erect, rocking to and fro in the wash and sway of the water like the tree-tops of the forest in the breeze. (ibid: 57)

Inevitably, this novel of the islands, whose subtitle is 'A Romance of Today', does contain romantic aspects, and an otherworldly idyllic quality. So for Roland, who addresses Armorel consistently in the early section as "child", "Everything is possible on an island" (56), "All my life,' [Roland] said, 'I have dreamed of islands. This is true joy'" (57), "[T]hose things, which one expects and observes without wonder in all the islands, were new to Roland" (57) and "I don't believe in London. It is a dream. Everything is a dream but the islands and the boat and Armorel'" (58).

But it is conspicuous that this is the naïve outsider or off-lander Roland's view of the islands and island life. Armorel's view is much more practical and down-to-earth. "Roland Lee,' said the girl... 'Why do you say such extravagant things? This is the island of Samson, and I am nothing in the world but Armorel Rosevean'" (56).

Narrative is woven into the fabric of the islands:

There is a shipwreck story belonging to every rock of Scilly, and to many there are several shipwrecks. As there are about as many rocks of Scilly as there are days in the year, the stories would take long in the telling. (ibid: 60)

Nor is the narrative solely idealistic. As an anonymous reviewer of the novel wrote in 1890, Armorel "comes from a race of seadogs, freebooters, privateers, smugglers, and pilots" (Unattributed, 1890: online). While smuggling entails moving products in the dark of night to avoid custom and excise taxes, or liberating goods washed ashore from a wreck, the deliberate misleading of ships to produce the wreckage is another order of behaviour. "All's ours that comes ashore", that's what we used to say" (83) as Armorel's grandmother says, but how it comes to shore makes a difference:

In old days the people of those Scilly Islands did not enjoy the best of reputations. To tie a lantern on a horse and to move the animal and the light along the coast of a stormy night was to invite ships to destruction. (ibid)

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Part of Armorel's story involves the stealing of some rubies from a shipwrecked man, presumed dead, who survives. The failure to return the rubies results in the curse of the Roseveans, which Armorel must repair. A significant thread of the story involves returning the rubies to their rightful owners, and this involves an acknowledgment that not all the history of the islands would stand the scrutiny of the most scrupulous eyes. Alongside the romance of Lyonesse, the fragments of which are left in the Isles of Scilly, goes the pragmatism of a people making do.¹¹ This Lyonesse story is rooted in the moralism of the 19th Century, its disavowal of money-making, its belief in the gentility of a particular set of class values, including a kind of romanticism about the worthy poor, and in particular an assumption that women can and should civilise men. While Roland is a deeply flawed individual, and that flaw partly consists of his naïve and preposterous attitudes towards women, there is a residual relevance in his pronouncement that a woman "[a]bove all... is sympathetic. She does not talk so as to show how clever she is, but to bring out the best points of the man she is talking with" (79). Nevertheless, Armorel, the child and spirit of Lyonesse and the Isles of Scilly, is the redeemer and the change-agent in this story. Lyonesse and the Isles of Scilly have a positive status as enabling superior ethical codes of conduct, and high aesthetic values and standards of beauty. Besant's use of Lyonesse has a very specific sense of the Isles of Scilly as a core part of its narrative and values. Furthermore, it has been suggested that Besant's book "played no small part in adding tourism to the economy of Scilly" (Thomas, 1986: 237). That Besant was active in advertising the Isles is reinforced by the chapter by him added in 1906 to the fourth edition of J. C Tonkin's *Lyonesse: A Handbook for the Isles of Scilly*, originally published in 1897.

A new kind of romance: Mary Ellen Chase's *Dawn in Lyonesse* (1938)

Mary Ellen Chase also created a concrete sense of place in a lyrical but little-known novel, *Dawn in Lyonesse*. Chase was a prolific novelist who had spent some time in Cornwall, but generally wrote novels set in the USA, sometimes in her home state of Maine. Chase seems to have been a mentor to Sylvia Plath, and was certainly familiar with Hardy's work, having published a book on him in 1927 and, in 1951, an introduction to an edition of *Far from the Madding Crowd*.¹²

This novel also rings some very significant changes in the traditional love story in which two men vie for the love of one woman. It begins with passages of vivid realism and contrast between the fishing village of St Ives, and Bodmin Moor in Cornwall—two very different geographical and social settings. While one is characterised by the sea, the other by land, in both descriptions it is the natural environment that dominates:

¹¹ There is considerable debate about whether wrecking occurred on a big scale in either the Isles of Scilly or in Cornwall. Romance in this sense works both ways, as a harmless idealisation of people and places, and as a hyperzone of behaviour outside the law. Daphne du Maurier's *Frenchman's Creek* (1941) is a combination of these elements where the bored housewife finds sexual satisfaction with a naughty pirate whose goal is not money but adventure.

¹² While there does not seem to be much scholarly study of Chase, some biographical and bibliographical material is available - see Cary (1962) and the Mary Ellen Chase Papers (nd).

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Two o'clock in her father's cottage on the outskirts of a village near Land's End: the terrific impact of the Atlantic wind whistling in the interstices of the slates, hurling her father's oilskins on their peg beside the door smack against the door itself with slaps and cracks like pistol shots, shaking the four walls of the house as though it were like one of cards, threatening to shatter it in pieces and to hurl its rain-swept slats against the black cliffs for all the world like thousands of shining pilchards torn from out the sea; the thunder and the crash of the Atlantic itself, the roar of its surf upon ledge and shingle, and the resounding roll of beach stones caught in the receding drag of the sea. (Chase, 1938: 2)

She could never understand why on Bodmin the silence was increased and deepened, made more soundless by the very presence of any number of sounds. There was the wind for instance. It had a hundred voices. It sighed through the stems of the bracken, whispered through its feathery tops, and then in a sudden mad gust sent its widespread fronds with a whir and a swish to the ground or hurled them with a tearing sound among the interlacing black stalks of the gorse and furze. (ibid: 7)

Ellen Pascoe and Susan Pengilly grow up together, sharing a room in St Ives, as they work gutting and cleaning fish. When Ellen's father and grandmother die, she takes a job as a waitress at the Castle Hotel in Tintagel and becomes immersed in the world of medieval romance, both in the physical context, overlooking Merlin's cave and Tintagel castle. In emotional terms as she becomes absorbed in a "red book on the drawing room table" (31) with its stories of Tristram and Isolde. In stark contrast with these mythical elements is Ellen's experience of her everyday life, and in particular with her proposed marriage to the fisherman Derek Tregonny, a man "not young any longer" (19). As each new day breaks it brings back to her the reality of her situation:

King Mark would fade from his high throne, and the ship which had borne his nephew Tristram to Ireland to seek the fair Iseult to be his uncle's bride would give place to Derek Tregonny's fishing boat, at this very hour perhaps rocking on the seas above the lost and sunken land of Lyonesse where Tristram had been reared.

Derek Tregonny, she knew, had never heard of the lost land of Lyonesse. His thoughts were solely on his cork-strewn nets, his mind intent only on sea and wind and weather. (15)

Ellen is sensible enough to understand the differences between romance and reality, and she is happy enough in her prospective marriage. Yet fortune intervenes even in this prosaic relationship when she receives a postcard from her old friend Susan, now working in a pub near Land's End, to tell her that Derek has drowned. What emerges after the funeral, attended by the old friends is that Susan had provoked in Derek a romance and lyricism that Ellen did not. As Susan explains, with her Derek "was like a person in a story, not like folks 'ere" (105): "Once at night in spring 'e brought me primroses that 'e'd gathered 'imself from the little field above the cove" (106). When Susan makes it clear that this was not simply a platonic relationship, that Derek spent the money on Susan intended for his wedding to Ellen, and likely killed himself with remorse, Ellen's response is influenced by her reading and understanding of the possibilities represented by Lyonesse:

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As she [Susan] spoke, she [Ellen] felt suddenly alive again. The sloping walls of Susan's room fell back, opened into the wide spring fields of Lyonesse. Her visions had at last come to earth, not for her, indeed, but for those whom she had loved. Derek and Susan had for a brief moment lived an old romance, which had in some strange way brought back to sombre Cornwall the enchantment of its earlier, higher days. (110)

Ellen's resolve to take Susan back to Tintagel, to live and work with her, provides a strikingly different ending to the traditional love stories. This story ends with the intimate relationship between two women that overcomes the emotions of guilt and jealousy in favour of more robust and generous impulses. Dawn is a significant time in this novel. The time in which "life is most fully lived, life unworried by time, life before which time creeps, submissive and shorn of its power" (12), is also a time of new possibilities. As Ellen again lies beside the sleeping Susan, Ellen momentarily feels acute awareness of all the other dawns past, but knows that "there must be other dawns":

She watched the flashes of light pale against the wall and die at last before the coming day; she heard the gulls waken with their first sharp cries; and just before she fell at last asleep, she saw the early sunlight brightening the sea over the Lost Land of Lyonesse. (115)

The clear subtext in this novel, articulated for the reader through the very self-aware reflections of the protagonist Ellen Pascoe, is that romance is available in various forms and that myths like those accumulating around Lyonesse can be deployed for different sensibilities, including in this case, intimate same-sex relationships.¹³ Both Besant and Chase use material locations in their versions of Lyonesse in the settings of the Isles of Scilly and Cornwall respectively, and each writer uses Lyonesse to map out new psycho-sexual relationships.

Regendering Lyonesse: From Walter de la Mare to Sylvia Plath

A similar kind of transition from a universalised sense of the human condition to one that is specifically gendered can be seen in the movement between Walter de la Mare's 'Sunk Lyonesse' (1922) and Sylvia Plath's 'Lyonesse'¹⁴ (1962). De la Mare's poem is a *momento mori*, a reminder of death for the living, and a reminder of the passing of all things. These dead things live on in a ghostly otherworld, with old voices, like Tennyson's voices, that may still be heard.

*In sea-cold Lyonesse,
When the Sabbath eve shafts down
On the roofs, walls, belfries*

¹³ While it is not necessary to read biographically to find this interpretation, it is significant to note that Chase had a long term partner in Professor Eleanor Shipley Duckett. It would be interesting to know whether Chase knew of Radclyffe Hall's *Well of Loneliness*, regarded as the first "lesbian" novel, published in 1928. Given the notoriety of the novel, and Chase's academic and scholarly position this seems likely. In that context Chase's mobilisation of the themes of Lyonesse might have had more specific and strategic intent.

¹⁴ NB Plath spells the term with a double 'n'.

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*Of the foundered town,
The Nereids pluck their lyres
Where the green translucency beats,
And with motionless eyes at gaze
Make minstrelsy in the streets. (1922: online)*

Here references to the “Sabbath eve” and “belfries” recall the 140 churches of early legends of Lyonesse. Mermaids play harps, and the sunken world continues its life unknown to the world above it, standing in silent warning and rebuke to those who enjoy the transitory pleasures of life. De la Mare’s poem describes the ornaments of the once living, those carved stone splendours that seem to mock their creator by their eternal stillness, traversed now by “blunt-nosed fish,” though the statues remain standing while he is no more. The artist has become a figure in his own creation, caught within it and denied any transcendence through it. Plath’s poem spikes this generalised warning to all mankind with gender specific references linking back to de la Mare’s poem, explicitly refusing any melancholy nostalgia for the lost:

*No use whistling for Lyonesse!
Sea-cold, sea-cold it certainly is.*

Lyonesse, for Plath, becomes an example of how the traditionally portrayed all-seeing God has taken his eyes off the ball, in letting Lyonesse wash away.

*The Lyonians had always thought
Heaven would be something else,*

*But with the same faces,
The same places...
It was not a shock—*

*The clear, green, quite breathable atmosphere,
Cold grits underfoot,
And the spidery water-dazzle on field and street.*

*It never occurred that they had been forgot,
That the big God
Had lazily closed one eye and let them slip*

Over the English cliff and under so much history!

While for other writers Lyonesse is recruited to remind readers of moral values, and a warning that life is a fragile and transient thing, in Plath’s hands Lyonesse becomes a warning of the meaninglessness of the traditions that human beings create for themselves. In place of the omniscient, omnipotent and compassionate Christian God, we have a battle-weary being who turns from the Lyonians, absent and blank-minded, caught in his own prison:

*They did not see him smile,
Turn, like an animal,*

In his cage of ether, his cage of stars.

Mitchell: Lyonesse

*He'd had so many wars!
The white gape of his mind was the real Tabula Rasa.*

Lyonesse here is not only lost, but neglected, even lost in an act of neglect. If reminders of death and human transience in many writers' hands are invocations to mend human ways or promises of future redemption, or of kings to come again, Plath's modernist mind invites a reflection on the ultimate meaninglessness of all things. The relentless repetition of God's gender (the male pronouns "he", "his", and "him" occur five times in the last six short lines of the poem) knocks against a subliminal sense of Lyonesse as a homophone of lioness or female lion, adding a gender-specific criticism of moral certainties.¹⁵ De la Mare's Lyonesse is a site for reflections that are general and supposedly universal, but for Sylvia Plath, Lyonesse has feminine connotations, and it is drowned not simply by accident but by a negligent male God.

Reviving Lyonesse: Brenda Wootton, Craig Weatherhill, Mike O'Connor and Cornish Nationalism

Three final examples illustrate how Lyonesse has most recently been used to explore ideas of Cornwall from what might be described as Cornish perspectives. Much loved in Cornwall, Brenda Wootton (1928-1994) wrote and sang songs about her country in her distinctive Cornish accent, and sometimes in Cornish language. Her own contribution to the Lyonesse story occurs in the song with the same title, with lyrics written by Richard Gendall. Released in 1982 on an album entitled *Lyonesse*, this song has something in common with Plath's poem in that here Lyonesse is not pronounced with a French inflection but as "lioness."¹⁶ This four stanza ballad links itself back to the familiar ideas of a lost land in its question "where was your shore?" and its references to houses and villages "seen no more". It also includes a sense of a future return:

*Lyonesse, Lyonesse, under the sea,
Dreams lie with mermaids, children to be,
Dreams lie with mermaids, children to be.*

It is in the third and fourth stanzas, though, that a specific sense of Cornishness enters the picture. Here the sense of a future Lyonesse is specifically linked with the possibilities for Cornish children, which given the demographics of Cornwall and its status as one of the poorest counties in Britain, is at once optimistic and a rallying cry.¹⁷ Cornish children can be as good as anyone else, sings the proud Cornish woman:

*Every year, every year, life springs again,
Giving new chance, giving new chances, healing pain,
Dream woven palaces round each new child,
Dream woven palaces round each new child.*

¹⁵ See Göller and Göller's (1992) provocative analysis of Plath's poem.

¹⁶ A recording of the song is available online: <http://www.patrickroper.co.uk/lyonesse/> - I am very grateful to Sue Ellery, Wootton's daughter, for making the lyrics of the song available to me.

¹⁷ For a recent discussion of Cornwall's financial status see Wigmore (2016).

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*Cornish child, Cornish child, you are today,
Travelling with every man, travelling with every man, on your way,
Cornish child, Cornish child within your life's will,
There is a Lyonesse that can be still,
There is a Lyonesse that can be still.*

Just a few years later in 1991, Craig Weatherhill published the first volume of a trilogy passionately concerned with children and Cornwall using the Lyonesse traditions. All three volumes (*The Lyonesse Stone* 1991, *Seat of Storms* 1997 and *The Tinnners' Way* 2010) spring from the Trevelyan (Trevilian) horse-back escape from the flooding of Lyonesse. All three novels use specific place names, legends, characters, language and dialect to promote the significance of Cornwall and its history. Detailed depictions of West Cornwall, iron-age stone clusters and Cornish myths and legends abound in each of these books. While initially pitched at young readers, the novels also have an educational function for adult readers in terms of reviving Cornish culture and history. So readers learn of *fogous* (underground stone structures), the *bucca* (a sea monster), Cornish giants, Cornish dialect and language.

Most significantly from the point of Cornwall's association with Lyonesse, Weatherhill employs mythical figures, such as Tristan and Merlin, alongside real figures to revisit key moments in Cornish history. "Intermingling" past with present, the fictional characters from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries re-enact battles in 1473 and 1549 where the Cornish were defeated by the "English State" (Payton, 1992: 57) with devastating effects for the welfare and future of Cornish language and culture.¹⁸ Weatherhill re-runs these battles so that the Cornish win, thus "is the land of Kernow [Cornwall] saved from destruction and slavery" (Weatherhill, 2010: 186). In 2009 his promotion of Cornish culture took on a different kind of significance in the republication of *The Lyonesse Stone* in Cornish language. Using the amorphous attractions of Lyonesse, Weatherhill creates time tunnels between Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, re-engaging with Cornish history and bringing back the Cornish language that centuries of English dominance have washed away.¹⁹

Mike O'Connor's CD *Return to Lyonesse* is also a sustained attempt to revivify Cornish culture through the Lyonesse story and knits "together a prototypical Celtic inundation myth",²⁰ in a deliberate attempt to construct culture and meaning. With harpist Barbara Griggs, O'Connor performs a complex narrative of Cornish, Breton and Welsh ideas and imagery that is eclectic and rich in symbolism, and won the 2013 British award for Storytelling Excellence. With its seal-maidens, transformations, House of Storms, horse-

¹⁸ Philip Payton has a good summary of these key events in Cornish history, and he explores the argument that the publication of the Book of Common Prayer in English rather than Cornish made a significant and long-term contribution to the decline of the Cornish language (1992, chapter 3).

¹⁹ That the battle to revive the Cornish language is an ongoing one is made very clear in reviews of Nicholas Williams' translation of Weatherhill's *The Lyonesse Stone*, where strong praise for the enterprise is matched with criticism that the wrong form of Cornish language has been used. See: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/aw/cr/rR15FH3OS AQ15E3> - accessed 14th August 2016.

²⁰ Mike O'Connor's personal notes. There are two useful websites on O'Connor's *Return to Lyonesse*: <http://www.lyngham.co.uk/RzL.html> and http://www.lyngham.co.uk/mike_oconnor.html

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back escapes from flooding, and dangerous love affairs, *Return to Lyonesse* combines many elements of early stories of Lyonesse and Celtic legends. Its settings are lush and vividly drawn, and are part of an education of a new generation of Celtic children. While travellers to Lyonesse bring news of a new god, suggestive of the Christian religion, the druids retreat to the forest, and the young girl Dahut needs to be taught to sing the old songs, to speak the ancient language, and she needs to learn how to sing or summon the seals. The circularity of the work's narrative structure, where the scene of a young boy listening to an older man is repeated, indicates the sense of a culture needing to pay attention to its past to learn about its future. While the old man listening on the beach can hear the mermaids, and the bells of Lyonesse ringing "far below the waves", when the boy asks "what else can you hear?", the old man answers "the sea itself: it sings, it calls, it tells its stories" in a gnomic way that suggests that each person has to know their past through listening to the present and to the natural world, specifically to the ever-present presence of the sea that surrounds the land.

O'Connor has carried out significant research on Lyonesse and its correlatives in Welsh and French folklore, and suggests that in Lyonesse we have "a mechanism where community memory of an ancient event is 'topped up' by repeated similar, more recent, events" and that this is "a process analogous to the preservation of folk tales on slightly less dramatic themes, because they address oft repeated common experiences." As Robert Hunt observed "There are few countries washed by the waters of the ocean, which do not preserve some traditions of lands having been engulfed, by advances of seas" (1884: 57). The stories of Lyonesse may speak of long-held community memories but its cultural and literary histories also demonstrate how Lyonesse was morphed into different spaces and shapes for specific ends. In Lyonesse, islands, *presqu'îles* and lost lands provide fertile soil for the cultural imagination.

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