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Representations of Cornishness in the novels of Daphne du Maurier

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to add to the literature on the cultural construction of Cornwall and Cornishness, taking as its basis that there is no ‘real’ notion of Cornishness, and ‘casting place as a social and cultural process rather than an achieved state or pre-social residue and refuge.’ It will examine the depiction of Cornwall given to us in the novels of Daphne du Maurier, and will suggest that the view of Cornishness she presents is one of escape and excitement, a view no doubt formed by her personal relationship with the area, rather than one of fixed historical, cultural and ethnic identities which is often the stuff of nationalist movements. It will also suggest that as a result of this depiction the notion of the Tourist Gaze helps us to understand du Maurier’s depiction of Cornishness. As such this paper broadly accepts Payton’s assertion that du Maurier’s fiction was ‘entirely devoid of nationalist constructions of Cornwall, political or cultural.’ Although, we shall see that from time to time du Maurier does flirt with traditionally nationalist concepts, she seldom uses these in a traditionally nationalist manner. What she does do, however, is portray Cornwall in a particular manner, a manner which has become resonant to readers of her novels.

To do this, this paper will begin by attempting to show the relevance of a discussion of du Maurier’s depiction of Cornishness by illustrating her links with the area, and examining, briefly, her non fictional accounts of Cornwall in particular examining the position she takes on Cornish self-rule in her article produced for the Cornish Nation entitled ‘Stand on Your Own Two Feet.’ This section will portray du Maurier as an author with considerable interest in the depiction of Cornwall and the Cornish. We will then go on to examine the use of the word Cornwall in the fictional works of du Maurier and note that Cornwall is sometimes juxtaposed against England as a national identity, but is just as frequently used in the same manner as Devon as a county identity. In this
respect, du Maurier’s novels use the term Cornwall in a variety of different ways and is broadly ambivalent to whether Cornwall constitutes a nation or a county. It will then go on to examine the relationship between land, climate and personal characteristics in du Maurier’s novels, and show that whereas she does suggest that an individual's temperament and characteristics can be shaped by the area in which they grew up (a staple of nationalistic literature), she does not suggest that there is a ‘Cornish’ climate that creates a ‘Cornish’ people. Rather, she uses this imagery for dramatic purposes in her novels to create characters that have different temperaments and this often highlights differences in Cornwall rather than seeking to show unity. The paper will then go on to look at du Maurier’s depiction of Cornish history and note that whereas it often reflects its Celtic mythology, it also focuses on aristocratic families and houses creating quite an elite view of history. This then links to the final section of this paper which examines how Cornwall was for du Maurier, both in her fiction and her lived experience, a place of escape from the hum drum and a place of personal freedom free from the constraints of London.

**Cornish not English; du Maurier and Cornwall**

In their excellent sourcebook on English literature between 1900 and 1950, Giles and Middleton provide us with a selection of works that allowed us to reflect upon the ‘construction of [English] national identity’ that occurred in this period by examining ‘a version of Englishness written by the English about England.’ This work includes an excerpt from *Rebecca* where Maximilian de Winter and his second wife are in exile abroad and are reflecting on their lost life at Manderley and their idealised remembrance of English culture, sport and countryside. As such du Maurier is included in this sourcebook as an author who contributes to the construction of English identity, and the excerpt chosen certainly justifies this inclusion, with Mrs de Winter idealising about the English countryside when:

> [s]ome old copies of the *Field* come my way, and I am transported from this indifferent island to the realities of an English spring. read of chalk streams, of
the mayfly, of sorrel growing in the green meadows, of rocks circling above the woods as they used to do at Manderley. The smell of wet earth comes to me from those thumbed and tattered pages, the sour tang of moorland peat, the feel of soggy moss splattered white in places by a heron’s droppings.⁷

Daphne du Maurier is not, however, unproblematically English. Or to be more precise the location of many of her novels is not England but Cornwall, and often the national identity she is creating in her works could be said to be Cornish rather than English. Most of her fiction is set in Cornwall, was written in Cornwall and there is no doubt that du Maurier was happiest in Cornwall. As Horner and Zlosnik suggest, du Maurier’s ‘frequently stated affinity with Cornwall, and the fact that she used Cornish milieux in many of her novels, have ensured her reputation as a ‘Cornish’ novelist’.⁸ Rebecca it is true is probably, despite mostly being set in Cornwall, France and in a nameless place of exile, an English novel in spirit so Giles and Middleton are right to include her work in their anthology.⁹ Something more needs to be said about Daphne du Maurier and the cultural construction of place, however, and this study aims to examine the way in which she created a sense of Cornish national identity. This will in part be based on the same assumption held by Giles and Middleton that national identity is written and constructed by authors in their works, rather than being static. In du Maurier we have a writer who wrote both fiction and nonfiction based in, and often about, Cornwall, who was involved, albeit in a modest way, in Cornish nationalist politics and whose name is often invoked in reflections on Cornwall as a place. There can be no doubt that du Maurier would have understood the distinction between ‘Cornish’ and ‘English’.

Cornish national identity does not exist in an intellectual vacuum; Cornwall, Cornish national identity and notions of Cornishness are created and written, therefore studying the works of perhaps the most prolific Cornish author might help us to build a better understanding of how we can construct (and perhaps deconstruct) notions of Cornishness. The popularity of du Maurier’s novels, and their use in the marketing and tourist industry in Cornwall (and, indeed, the sense of ownership some Cornish people display to du Maurier and her works) could lead to her having a central role in the creation of Cornish identity rather than simply reflecting what she saw.
Daphne du Maurier is big business in Cornwall. With so much of her work based and written in Cornwall, du Maurier country is sold as (or, as Westland suggests ‘commodified as’)\textsuperscript{10} central to any tourist experience of the area. As one tourist guide suggests:

\begin{quote}
[A]ttractions include a Literary Centre on South Street with an exhibition devoted to her, an annual Daphne du Maurier Festival…and any number of guided walks and Daphne souvenirs on offer – “du Maurier country” has a resonance for those who’ve loved her novels and know something of her life.\textsuperscript{11}
\end{quote}

Not only are people attracted to Cornwall to visit Jamaica Inn or Fowey to witness the landscapes and buildings that inspired the novels, but our image of Cornwall is shaped by her stories and locations. If we assume that there is no such thing as intrinsic Cornishness, but that Cornishness is a creation, then study of such a popular and resonant author such as du Maurier with regards to how she shapes Cornishness is crucial to our understanding of the Cornish world. As A.L Rowse noted, perhaps somewhat ruefully ‘there is no doubt that the people see Cornwall through the eyes of Miss du Maurier.’\textsuperscript{12}

\section*{Biography}

Despite coming from a London based metropolitan family Daphne du Maurier has long been associated with Cornwall, providing, as it does, the backdrop to most of her novels. Her link with Cornwall was a committed and long lasting one. Indeed in \textit{Vanishing Cornwall}, she explains the excitement that came over her family when she was a small girl when they left Plymouth station and headed towards the Tamar:

\begin{quote}
We jumped around, excited. All was anticipation, and it was unbearable to wait. The adults smiled mysteriously… [t]he governess, whipping our fever, held up a warning hand. “shut your eyes, quick” she commanded, “and keep them shut until we come to Cornwall.”\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

Her family kept Ferryside, a house in Fowey Harbour, which would become a refuge for du Maurier when she was a young woman building her writing career. Later, as her
success burgeoned, she was able to rent Menabilly, a house she had coveted for some
time and was the inspiration for *Rebecca’s* Manderley, a house that would become her
home and labour of love for the rest of her life.

Daphne du Maurier, although one can hardly regard her as being a political activist,
became a supporter of the Cornish nationalist movement. When she was asked to join
the Cornish Nationalist Party (sic) she accepted with an attitude that was inspired by
equal parts commitment to the cause and contrariness, an attitude that perhaps had
previously characterised her writings about Cornwall. Her biographer Margaret Forster
describes her joining the party as part of her constant desire to be different from her
Conservative supporting friends, and on the back of considerable correspondence with
the local authorities with concerns that the area was about to be spoiled, concerns that
were always ‘more concerned with stemming tides than initiating change.’

An invitation to join the Cornish Nationalist Party was therefore exactly in tune with
her thinking, and she accepted at once, greatly amused, after warning that she
would never attend any meetings ‘because I am a recluse’. She wrote to Foy
[Quiller-Couch] that she was thinking of wearing the Party’s black kilt and quite
fancied ‘blowing up bridges’ should the need arise. The whole idea appealed to
her sense of the ridiculous, but there was also a real belief in what the Cornish
Nationalists were about. So long as she could maintain her low profile and not be
asked to do anything more strenuous than write for their journal, she was happy
and proud to think she belonged to a ‘rebel’ organization.

And write for their journal she did, penning ‘Stand on your Own Two Feet’ for *Cornish
Nation*, Mebyon Kernow’s newsletter in 1969, an article which gives us the clearest
overview of her opinions on self government for Cornwall which was, she thought,
‘possible within ten years.’ In this short piece du Maurier tackled a number of the
issues that resonate in discussions of nationalist politics, and moved beyond the
(perhaps) stereotypical view of Cornish nationalism to which she appealed in her letter
to Quiller-Couch, without actually providing us with an out and out programme of
nationalist politics. The piece reads more as a collection of thoughts around Cornish
nationalism which briefly addresses issues such as who the Cornish people are, what
education system the Cornish should invest in, Cornish employment, the importance of tourism and how to attract tourists without it spoiling the countryside, and how not to be over-romantic about the past. It culminates in the rallying cry:

The aim must surely be to make Cornwall a really worth-while place in which to live, and work, and play, and bring up future generations, not harking back too much to the past, but looking forward and planning for the century ahead. Not “just another county,” but a Cornwall where “One and All” means what it says, no divisions, no petty strife, no interborough squabbles, no east versus west, a united Cornwall able to run its own affairs with minimum direction from London yet remaining part of the U.K. and loyal to the crown.17

The right of self governance for Cornwall is asserted in the piece (as one might expect given the readership), but never really justified. Indeed the claim here is certainly for increased self government rather than national independence18, as she envisages that Cornwall should remain part of the UK and loyal to the crown (indeed she encourages the Duke of Cornwall to come and live in Cornwall to attract tourists). But upon what grounds should Cornwall get this self government? Supposing that Cornwall should, and Bedfordshire, Hampshire and Yorkshire should not, some notion of ‘otherness’ needs to be appealed to if Cornwall is to be singled out for their claim to self-government; and this is something du Maurier refuses to engage in. Indeed she questions ‘who are the Cornish people’ and ‘how many people living in Cornwall can actually prove Cornish ancestry’, before suggesting that Celtic Cornish blood and has got mixed up in the last thousand years ‘more so than in Scotland, Wales, Ireland’.19 This slightly sceptical nationalism is echoed by retired actress Mad in Rule Britannia when discussing Celtic nationalism;

I never can make up my mind about nationalism... it’s inclined to turn fanatical, and the fanatics make such a point about where one is born. I was born in Wimbledon, and although I used to adore going to the tennis there in old days I wouldn’t die for it. In fact, it wouldn’t worry me if Wimbledon and all its houses ceased to exist. But I’ve made this corner of this particular peninsula my home for a long time now, and I’d certainly die for it if I thought it would do any good.20

Consequently even du Maurier’s most explicitly ‘political’ writings does not even attempt to offer us a systematic account of Cornish self government; but it does overview a
number of themes present in any narrative of nationality. Daphne du Maurier’s non-fiction writings are not the place, however, where most people have derived her ‘sense’ of Cornwall and Cornishness from. To analyse this we must turn to her novels, and first examine whether she referred to ‘Cornwall’ as a country or a county therein.

**Use of the word ‘Cornwall’**

Cornwall is sometimes referenced as a country, or juxtaposed with England in du Maurier’s Cornish novels, indicating as being a nation like England rather than as a part of it. For example, in her 1946 Civil War novel *The King’s General* Honor Harris, heroine and narrator of the novel reflects upon the royalist defeat in Cornwall to the parliamentarians and the state that the interregnum had left them in. ‘Oh, brave new world!’ she laments, the ‘docile English may endure it for a while, but not we Cornish… [t]hey cannot take our independence from us.’ Clearly here Honor distinguishes the Cornish from the English, creating a notion of Cornwall as being separate from England. Indeed the central theme throughout the novel is Richard Grenvile’s (the eponymous King’s general) defence of Cornwall from the parliamentarians, with the Tamar often presented as a barrier from the ‘savage rebel hordes’ outside of Cornwall. Honor sees Richard in her mind’s eye ‘pen in hand, with a map of Cornwall spread on a table before him’ planning the defence of Cornwall from this alien invasion. *The King’s General*, therefore symbolically often presents Cornwall not only as being separate from England but also as being under threat from it, with the Tamer being a border to defend.

This theme of Cornwall being described in a manner to indicate it as being politically separate from the rest of the country is not limited to *The King’s General*, as the theme also emerges in *Jamaica Inn*. Mary Yellan whilst in discussion with Jem Merlyn, for example, states that it ‘will be a good thing when there’s not a Merlyn left in Cornwall…[i]t’s better to have disease in a country than a family like yours.’ Mary clearly says a *country* here, indicating that Cornwall can be regarded as such, rather than a more neutral *the county* which would not have necessitated such a claim. Country, of course can be used in a manner to describe the countryside. For example
in *Vanishing Cornwall* du Maurier says that in order to understand ‘the Cornish, and their country’ one needs to use one’s ‘imagination and travel back in time.’\(^{25}\) This is an interesting statement with regards to the part that history plays in our understanding of Cornishness, however the use of country here is probably not in the sense of nationality but geographical location. The granite tors, the estuaries, the sand-dunes and the ‘forbidding grandeur of the coast-line’ and the country of which du Maurier speaks here, and its interrelationship with economic activity, not country as in state or national grouping.\(^{26}\) This use of the word *country* does not make sense with regards to Mary Yeallan’s statement above, so we can assume that here it was used in the sense of national grouping.

The illusions to Cornish difference takes a slightly different form in other novels. In *Frenchman’s Creek*, for example, heroine Dona St Columb escapes London and the vanity of courtly life it contains, and arrives at their holiday home Navron House in Cornwall. She is met by a new manservant, William, whose accent causes her to reflect that ‘Cornish people spoke in so strange a way, foreign almost, a curious accent.’\(^{27}\) Later, when Dona discovers that William is in fact not Cornish, but a henchman of French pirate Jean Aubrey who has oared his ship nearby, she admits to Aubrey that she thought William Cornish he responds that ‘Cornishmen and Bretons are very much alike. Both are Celts.’\(^{28}\) In this short interplay the Celtic origins of Cornwall are introduced in such a way as to make a Cornishman seem foreign to someone from London. The Cornish and Bretons are portrayed as ‘romantic’ whereas the local gentry, who bore Dona, are portrayed as ‘somehow not Cornish but unimaginatively and lethargically English.’\(^{29}\)

However, whereas these examples speak of Cornwall as being constructed as something different from the rest of England, numerous examples also exist of language du Maurier uses that constructs Cornwall as being a county and very much part of England. When talking about the early campaigns in the war in *The King’s General* Honor noted that Essex and his ‘rebel army’ were growing in size and that it ‘would be a matter of weeks before he passed through Dorset into Devon, with nothing but the
Tamar between him and Cornwall.30 Here Cornwall is presented as being a similar entity to Dorset and Devon and as such not a country or nation as the previous examples. Elsewhere in the same novel Cornwall is described as ‘a poor county at the best of times’31, people watching His Majesty’s Fleet sail into Plymouth cheer when they see ‘the colours and the arms of a Devon leader, or a Cornishman’32, and Honor notes that ‘Cornwall is only one portion of the kingdom’ and that ‘the whole of England… will suffer the same fate [as we have].’33

Likewise in Jamaica Inn Cornwall is often described as a county, however one example of this illustrates the problematic nature of this description. When Mary visits Launceston she describes there being ‘a certain sophistication; Devonshire and England were across the river. Farmers from the next county rubbed shoulders with countrywomen from East Cornwall’.34 The phrase ‘Devonshire and England’ is revealing; on the one hand it speaks of a county relationship, on the other of a national difference, and as such reveals the ambiguity of Cornish identity quite nicely. It is one, it is both.

In her non-fiction, du Maurier is very specific on the literal relationship between Cornwall and England; the Tamar, she states, marks ‘a natural boundary between Cornwall and Devon’, not between Cornwall and England.35 Cornwall ‘remains the tail of England’ very much part of England even though it is often ‘aloof and rather splendidly detached from the activity across Tamar hailed as progress’, indeed part of the Cornish character is ‘a fiery independence, [and] a stubborn pride’, but despite this, is part of England.36

So overall du Maurier’s writings do not give us a consistent use of Cornwall as either a county or a country; she uses both uses, sometimes in the same novel and sentence, and appears somewhat ambivalent about its use, therefore not engaging in one of the mainstays of nationalist writings. Next we must examine du Maurier’s use of land in her novels, and specifically the nationalist theme of the relationship between land and personal characteristics, and we shall see that just as du Maurier does not use ‘Cornwall’ in a narrowly nationalistic manner, neither does she suggest that the Cornish
Landscape leads to a Cornish character despite often using the landscape as a metaphor for character.

**Land**

*Jamaica Inn* can be seen as part of a genre of English literature whereby novelists use rough countryside unfamiliar to the metropolitan elite as a backdrop to the narrative of their melodramas. Hughes sums up the use of Cornwall in *Jamaica Inn* as being part of this tradition.

Historical novels of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries painted regions such as the West Country or Yorkshire as exotic, wild and marginal. By doing so they emphasised the differences between the rural community and what might be called ‘metropolitan’ England, which might be viewed as an English ‘norm’. *Jamaica Inn* builds an idea of Cornwall as an ancient, wild and marginal land, but uses the image for different purposes: to provide the setting for melodrama and romance, with an erotic undercurrent. The earlier romances created a picture of a picturesque community whose attraction sprang from nostalgia and which had the effect of confirming a concept of ‘Englishness’ which privileged the South East. 37

Hughes sees *Jamaica Inn* as being part of this process, with du Maurier’s picture of the Cornish being one ‘which suggests their inferiority and subordination as well as their unique, special qualities’ suggesting that perhaps ‘this is how du Maurier herself, for all her love of Cornwall, saw it: as sealed off from the ‘main’ part of England, with all its sources of power.’ 38 Mary Yellan would leave Cornwall at the end of the novel and head to the midlands and Cornwall, for Hughes, ‘is left to its cordon of customs officers, who will keep its people safe but also extend English hegemony to the region, perhaps destroying all but the last vestiges of those qualities which make it so intriguing.’ 39

Of course du Maurier in *Jamaica Inn* provides us with two images of Cornwall, not one; it is Bodmin Moor that requires taming, not the entire of Cornwall, and certainly not Helford. ‘The benefits of law are thus associated with the future, and ‘Cornishness’ recedes into the past’ Hughes asserts, but in reality the law is only to be applied to a certain part of Cornwall, so one should not associate du Maurier’s depiction of Cornwall to be only that presented of Bodmin. 40 The area of Helston and Helford, where Mary
was from, is often contrasted with the rough and dangerous Bodmin Moor. When she first arrives on the moor in the coach, Mary notes:

The country was alien to her, which was defeat in itself. As she peered through the misty window of the coach she looked out upon a different world from the one she had known only a day's journey back. How remote and hidden perhaps for ever were the shining waters of Helford, the green hills and the sloping valleys, the white cluster of cottages at the water's edge. It was a gentle rain that fell at Helford, a rain that patterned in the many trees and lost itself in the lush grass, formed into brooks and rivulets that emptied into the broad river, sank into the grateful soil which gave back flowers in payment.41

Of course this description of the Helston area is one that comes to Mary's mind when faced with the desolation of Bodmin Moor, as the first few pages of the novel describes the area as in economic crisis with a sickness that had affected all crops meaning that there 'would be starvation in the farms before long' and an area that could not support Mary.42 Often Mary Yellan's view of Helford can be seen as ideal depictions or remembrances, rather than reflecting reality at the time the novel was set. Contrast the ideal description of Helford above with one that Mary gives us of Bodmin Moor:

No human being could live in this wasted country, thought Mary, and remain like other people; the very children would be born twisted, like the blackened shrubs of broom, bent by the force of a wind that never ceased, blow as it would from east and west, from north and south. Their minds would be twisted, too, their thoughts evil, dwelling as they must amidst marshland and granite, harsh heather and crumbling stone. They would be born of strange stock who slept with this earth as a pillow, beneath this black sky. They would have something of the Devil left in them still.43

But this is not the Cornish that Mary is describing here, as she is Cornish, as was her mother and Aunt Patience, coming from an area whereby the gentle rain and lush grass bore flowers such as them. It is the Merlyn's and the people who frequent Jamaica Inn who come from this land. The air around Jamaica inn was 'strong' and as 'cold as mountain air' as opposed to the 'warm soft climate of Helford' where even 'the east wind had... no hardship.'44 There is a difference between the harsh climate of Bodmin moor and the soft climate of Helford, and this is reflected in the sensibilities of those from that
area. Land shapes people, but it is not a ‘Cornish people’ who are being shaped here; the Cornish countryside divides people and their characters here, it does not unite them.

The theme of a difference in countryside across Cornwall, and the influence this has on the personalities and temperament on those brought up in that area is also addressed in *The King’s General*, in particular in relation to the difference in character between Richard and Honour. Again, here, it is stressed that the rugged Cornish countryside does lead to character traits in individuals, but that there is a difference between areas in Cornwall. There is not one Cornish countryside leading to one character, but rather there are different countrysides leading to different characters. Honour, for example, has a picture of Richard as a young man in her mind, imagining him as ‘a red-haired lad rebellious of authority flaunting his elders, staring out across the storm-tossed Atlantic from the towering, craggy cliffs of his north Cornish coast’. Honour’s point is not, however, that Cornish people share this tough rebelliousness, but rather it is understandable from someone who had grown up by the storm tossed northern coast. This is different from the southern coast that she grew up on, Honour notes, and this played its part on her character:

We have, I think, a more happy disposition here in south-east Cornwall, for the very softness of the air, come rain or sun, and the gentle contour of the land, make for a lazy feeling of content. Whereas in the Grenvile country, bare of hedge-row, bereft of tree, exposed to all four winds of heaven - winds laden, as it were, with surf and spray - the mind develops with a quick perception, with more fire to it, more anger, and life itself is hazardous and cruel. Here we have few tragedies at sea, but there the coast is strewn with the bleached bones of vessels wrecked without hope of haven, and about the torn, unburied bodies of the drowned the seals play and the falcons hover. *It holds us more than we ever reckon, the few miles of territory where we are born and bred, and I can understand what devils of unrest surged in the blood of Richard Grenville.*
This stirring passage illustrates that the ‘few miles of territory’ where we were born and bred play an immense impact on our character, a theme which is, of course, central to nationalist literature.\(^48\) Honour’s point here is not to link this point to Cornwall though, as it is the ‘few miles of territory’ that is important here, not the country, country or nation. This is being used as a dramatic storytelling device to illustrate the differences between Honour and Richard as characters, much as it was used in Jamaica Inn to illustrate the differences between Patience and Mary on the one hand and Joss and Jem on the other.

**History**

In her non-fiction discussions of Cornishness du Maurier is at pains to suggest that any future Cornwall must look forward and not be obsessed with the past, and in doing so, of course, she is distancing herself from another key nationalist argument; that a nation share a distinct and different history to others.\(^49\) We should not keep ‘harking back too much to the past’ but keep ‘looking forward and planning for the century ahead’ she states with some rhetorical flourish in her *Stand on your Own Two Feet*.\(^50\) And this was a theme she had also addressed in *Vanishing Cornwall*, suggesting that nationalists painted an unhelpful backward-looking view of Cornish identity. Mebyon Kernow, she noted (two years before penning a piece for their *Cornish Nation*) would ‘put the people into black kilts, speaking the old Cornish language’ a vision which ‘is idyllic but hardly practical.’\(^51\) Despite all this she spent a lot of time depicting and reflecting upon historical Cornwall in her novels, as the historical backdrop provided much of the romance. Indeed it is a heady historic view of Cornwall that du Maurier presents us, being one infused with Arthurian myths, Tristan and Isolde, wreckers, pirates and aristocratic houses. Virtually all of the novels we have looked at in this paper have been set in the past, with *The House on the Strand* set in the fourteenth century, *The King’s General* in the civil war, *Frenchman’s Creek* in the restoration and *Jamaica Inn* in the early nineteenth century. Her *Castle Dor*, which was a half completed manuscript that she finished left by Arthur Quiller-Couch, is a nineteenth century retelling of the Cornish
tale of Tristan and Isolde, and whereas the choice of topic was not hers, it fits comfortably with her oeuvre.

Daphne du Maurier was, we should stress, a writer of literature not an historian. Her purpose in choosing certain historical subjects was to create plots and dramas rather than recreate Cornwall of the past accurately. That drama, however, can help shape how we begin to understand a place. Her novels stress the links with the Celtic fringe and ancient myths, and that Cornwall is full of large houses and established families, and that aristocratic and/or courtly individuals would often use the place to escape the rigours of London life. It was also a place where lawlessness ruled with aristocratic French pirates who are portrayed sympathetically plied their trade, and working and lower middle class wreckers acted, who are condemned as murderous thugs.

Cornwall’s past is therefore certainly presented as different from that of England’s with its Celtic past and cultural myths, a claim that is of course central to any nationalist depiction of Cornwall, and distant from central authority. Its cultural difference is quite historical, literary and elitist though; du Maurier does not spend time discussing the way in which the working classes lived in Cornwall in the past or the cultural practices that they continued. Indeed when the Cornish working and lower middle classes are introduced to the novels they are often presented in quite a cartoonish manner.

**Escape and Tourist Gaze**

Cornwall is often portrayed in du Maurier’s novels as being a place of escape; an exotic place away from the hum-drum boredom of London and the rest of the UK, and a place that represents freedom. For example Londoner Dick in *House on the Strand* travels, by way of a drug, back to fourteenth century Cornwall and becomes obsessed with his experiences there and the escape it provides him from his marital problems he was facing outside of Cornwall. Here du Maurier parcels up her love of Cornwall with the drug scene developing in the 1960s, linking the escape she got from being in Cornwall
to that achieved by drug users. Dick describes the Cornwall he was obsessed by in a quite psychedelic fashion, and the longing and addiction for it being like a drug, stating:

...the world I had come to love and long for because of its magic quality of love and hate, its separation from a drab monotony.52

And that life in his (fourteenth century Cornwall) was:

... a reality more vivid than anything hitherto experienced, sleeping or awake. Now every impression was heightened, every part of me singularly aware: eyesight, hearing, sense of smell, all had been in some way sharpened.53

Cornwall provides for Dick an escape from his personal problems and excites his senses, removing himself from his mundane monotone existence. Likewise Dona St Columb in Frenchman’s Creek found excitement, freedom and adventure in Cornwall away from the boredom of London. The romantic life of piracy is explored in this novel, but it is Cornwall and Cornish life that provides the escape for Dona. In a chilling scene where Rockingham murderously confronts Dona about her complicity with pirate Jean Aubrey, the importance of her piratical life becomes clear to them both, especially when Dona defiantly states ‘when you have caught your pirate, you may hang us both side by side from the same tree.’ ‘[Y]ou would suffer that, would you not’, ‘you would not mind dying’ responds Rockingham, ‘because you have had, at last, the thing you wanted all your life.’ He then suggests that if Dona had stayed in London she may have had her fun with him, but that it would have been ‘from boredom, from idleness, from indifference, even from disgust’, this Dona denies, but the message is clear: Cornwall has provided excitement and escape for Dona who was stifled with boredom, idleness and disgust in London life.54

In Rebecca the second Mrs de Winter in the famous ‘last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again’ overture to the story, where she is reflecting upon life back home from her unnamed place of exile, idolises her former house Manderley to which she ‘can never go back’ thinking of how she could have ‘lived there without fear’ if things had been different.55 Imagining Manderley, idealised and removed from the troubles, people
and associations with the past, becomes an escape for her. Here she imagines Manderley as:

... secret and silent as it had always been, the grey stone shining in the moonlight of my dream, the mullioned windows reflecting the green lawns and the terrace. Time could not wreck the perfect symmetry of those walls, nor the site itself, a jewel in the hollow of a hand.56

Escape is, for the second Mrs de Winter, contextualised in a sense of place, Manderley. Indeed perhaps Manderley is a more important symbol of escape for the second Mrs de Winter in Rebecca than for Dona and Navron in Frenchman’s Creek or Dick and Tywardreath in the House on the Strand as for Dona it is Navron plus Jean Aubrey, and Dick it is Tywardreath plus Roger and Isolda. For Dick and Dona escape is linked to place and people, whereas for the second Mrs de Winter the mental escape of imagining Manderley involves depersonalising it (or at least removing the tyrannical presence of Mrs Danvers). Grand houses and aristocracy are a crucial part of du Maurier’s depiction of Cornwall, although local elites are seldom portrayed in a positive manner (du Maurier is aware of the lives of the Cornish gentry, see du Maurier, 1972, pp85-98).57 It is in grand houses that the heros and heroines of du Maurier’s stories (who are generally not Cornish) come to escape the boredom of their lives elsewhere. They find, in these great houses and in Cornwall, the freedom that lack elsewhere, and become obsessed and passionate about the place (and sometimes about the houses).

This is for du Maurier, of course, quite autobiographical. As noted above, du Maurier was from a wealthy and famous family from London, but found in Cornwall and the various houses she and her family occupied, escape and the potential writing career she could build there. Forster points out that when du Maurier was young and building her writing career, she only ever wanted to be in Cornwall. When in London she was ‘not writing but daydreaming, seeing herself walking along the cliffs at Fowey, standing entranced before shuttered Menabilly.’58 She also adored large houses, not primarily because of their ‘size or beauty or history’ but because of the secrecy they provided. Menabilly added to this by being ‘buried among trees in the middle of the Gribbin peninsula’ so at it ‘she could be herself.’59 Here we see in du Maurier what we often
see in her characters and stories, people escaping and seeking to find out who they are. Cornwall provides the backdrop for these personal adventures.

This is a positive depiction, but it is a partial upper-middle class view of an elite who love the area for the escape it provides which may well be different from a depiction of Cornwall that may be presented by someone from a different economic position. As such the depiction of Cornwall in many of du Maurier’s novels can be characterised as a type of tourist gaze, where (in this case) wealthy outsiders reflect on their experiences and the escape Cornwall brings to them; the excitement and technicoloured life being exotic to them. This experience is central to John Urry’s depiction of tourism and the tourist gaze. As he explains, tourist locations are chosen for a notion of escape from the routine of daily life:

Places are chosen to be gazed upon because there is an anticipation, especially through daydreaming and fantasy, of intense pleasure, either on a different scale or involving different senses from those customarily encountered…Such aspects are viewed because they are taken to be in some sense out of the ordinary.60

This then leads to a situation in the tourist gaze when tourists (or perhaps novelists seeking escape) come to an area expecting an excitement that is different or ‘other’ and the tourist industry reinforce this by helping to provide it. Literary evocations of place can help build and reinforce sense of place within the power of the tourist gaze as well, as it contributes to the narrative of place that tourists then expect. This is a view of a place that is not one that would resonate with many other people’s experiences of that area, but may become powerful economically as tourists’ expectations are reflected back at them for trade.

Indeed du Maurier’s aforementioned ‘nationalist’ manifesto in the Cornish Nation spends rather a lot of time reflecting on the type of experience a visitor to Cornwall could expect than what one might expect for a short piece on self-government. ‘We must offer the visitor, and Cornishmen themselves’ she state ‘interesting activities’ such as archaeology, history, riding, walking and climbing. Crafts should be sold, and creative ‘originals must compete with the tawdry stereotype’, but most of all ‘the tourist
trade should be encouraged to advertise Cornwall as being different, not to try and turn Cornwall into a second-rate copy of other English holiday centres. This difference that is presented to the tourist, a difference and exoticness in Cornwall that du Maurier reflects in her novels whilst eschewing other more nationalist literary devices, can be seen as part of the tourist gaze.

**Conclusion**

This paper has examined the depiction of Cornwall presented to us in the novels of Daphne du Maurier and suggested that she tends not to use devices such as the relationship between land and identity or the definition of a place as a nation in a traditionally 'nationalist' manner. That said the paper reflects on the fact that du Maurier flirted with Cornish nationalism, and even if she had not the depiction of Cornwall is important to the number of her novels set in Cornwall and the popularity of those novels. The overriding sense of Cornwall that one finds in her novels is one that also seems to have resonance with her biography and that is that Cornwall was an exciting place that was a destination to escape the monotony of everyday life. Whereas this is a view of Cornwall that has gained much popular support recently, and is an inclusive view of what Cornishness is about, the process of viewing an area in this manner is that can be seen as an example of the tourist gaze, with the power relations that that this entails between the tourist and the local population.

**Works cited**


du Maurier, Daphne (1969) ‘Stand on your Own Two feet’ in *Cornish Nation*, Jan-Feb 1969, p.3.


1 I would like to thank Polly Flinders, Jodie Matthews, Andrew Clifton, Chris Gifford, Magda Danciu and the anonymous reviewer for Cornish Studies for their comments on previous drafts of this paper.


5 D. du Maurier, ‘Stand on your Own Two feet’ in Cornish Nation, Jan-Feb 1969, p.3.


9 See, though, Wisker, Gina ‘Dangerous Borders: Daphne du Maurier’s Rebecca: shaking the foundations of the romance of privilege, partying and place ‘ in Journal of Gender Studies, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp 86-88 for a different account of the importance of place, where du Maurier’s nomadic existence is stressed as an inspiration in the creation of Rebecca.


15 ibid., p.372. See also see also P. Payton, John Betjeman and Cornwall, (2010, Exeter: University of Exeter Press) pp.191-193 on the ambiguous attitude that du Maurier displays to Cornish nationalism. It should be noted that whereas Forster here speaks of the Cornish Nationalist Party we can safely assume that this means Mebyon Kernow despite the use of capital letters. The date (1968/69) is prior to the formation of the Cornish Nationalist Party in 1975 and the same year as she penned ‘Stand on your Own Two Feet’ for the Mebyon Kernow publication Cornish Nation.

16 D. du Maurier, ‘Stand on your Own Two feet’ in Cornish Nation, Jan -Feb 1969, p.3.

17 ibid., p.3.

18 Of course this should not surprise us as the claim of political Cornish nationalism is generally for devolution rather than independence. On this see B. Deacon et al, Mebyon Kernow and Cornish Nationalism: The Concise History, (2003, Cardiff: Welsh Academic Press).

19 D. du Maurier, ‘Stand on your Own Two feet’ in Cornish Nation, Jan-Feb 1969, p.3.


22 ibid., p.229.

23 ibid., p.284.


26 ibid., p.15


28 ibid., p.66.


31 ibid., pp. 62-63, my italics.

32 ibid., p.27.

33 ibid., p.271.
36 *ibid.*, p.9.
38 *ibid.*, p.74.
39 *ibid.*, p.74.
40 *ibid.*, p.71.
42 *ibid.*, p.4.
43 *ibid.*, p.13.
44 *ibid.*, pp.31-32.
50 D. du Maurier, ‘Stand on your Own Two feet’ in *Cornish Nation*, Jan-Feb 1969, p.3.
56 *ibid.*, p.2.
57 du Maurier is very aware of the lives of the Cornish gentry, see, for example, D. du Maurier, *Vanishing Cornwall*, (1972, Harmondsworth: Penguin) pp.85-98 on this.
59 *ibid.*, p.58.
61 D. du Maurier, ‘Stand on your Own Two feet’ in *Cornish Nation*, Jan-Feb 1969, p.3, original italics.