

Literature in Cornish: select bibliography

The best general guide remains Brian Murdoch, *Cornish Literature* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1993 – partially available through google books). Other editions and studies are indicated below. In our brief overview, we will be focusing on a few key extracts, provided in Additional Resources.

The medieval plays

Four plays in Middle Cornish have survived in manuscript, and all four manuscripts are available to view online (click on links below). Two derive their stories from the Bible, and two tell the stories of Cornish/Breton saints.

I. The Ordinalia A three-day cycle probably written in the C14th:

Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Bodl. 791

II. Gwreans an Bys ('The Creacion of the World') This is dated 1611 but again may have been written earlier.

Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley 219

III. Beunans Meriasek ('The Life of St. Meriasek'). The surviving manuscript is dated 1504, but the play was very probably written earlier.

Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Peniarth 105B:

<https://www.library.wales/discover/digital-gallery/manuscripts/the-middle-ages/beunans-meriasek/>

IV: Bewnans Ke ('The Life of St Kea'). This recently-discovered play is incomplete; the surviving manuscript is sixteenth century; the play was composed earlier.

Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales MS 23849D:

<https://www.library.wales/discover/digital-gallery/manuscripts/early-modern-period/beunans-ke/>

Some editions and translations of the plays:

I: The Ordinalia

Markham Harris, *The Cornish Ordinalia. A Medieval Dramatic Trilogy* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1969). Translation only.

Alan M. Kent, *Ordinalia - The Cornish Mystery Play Cycle - A verse translation* (London: Francis Boutle Publishers, 2005). With an introduction by Brian Murdoch.

R. Morton Nance, A.S.D. Smith, Graham Sandercock, *The Cornish Ordinalia* (3 vols. n.p.: Kesva an Tavas Kernewek/Cornish Language Board, 1982-1989).

Edwin Norris, *The Ancient Cornish Drama* (2 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1859; repr. 1968). This text is available online: [Volume 1](#), [Volume 2](#).

II: Gwreans an Bys

Paula Neuss, *The Creacion of the World. A Critical Edition and Translation* (New York and London: Garland, 1983).

Whitley Stokes, *Gwreans an bys. The Creation of the World* (London & Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1864).

III: Beunans Meriasek

HARRIS, Markham, *The Life of Meriasek. A Medieval Cornish Miracle Play* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1977). [Translation only]

STOKES, Whitley, *The Life of Saint Meriasek, Bishop and Confessor. A Cornish Drama* (London: Trubner, 1872)

IV: Bewnans Ke

Graham Thomas & Nicholas Williams, *Bewnans Ke/The Life of St Kea: Critical Edition with Translation* (Exeter, Exeter Medieval Texts & Studies, 2007).

Other Works in Cornish up to the C18th

Besides these four plays there exists **an earlier poem**, *Pascon Agan Arluth* (the Passion of Our Lord, dated 1375) which tells the story of Christ's final days and the Crucifixion. It was evidently known to the author of the *Passio Christi*, one of the three Ordinalia plays. An early edition and translation is available here:

<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=100AAAAcAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>

The earliest examples of Cornish **prose** are the *Tregear Homilies*, a series of sermons originally written in English by Edmund Bonner and translated by John Tregear circa 1555-1557. These translations constitute the largest single work of traditional Cornish prose.

See Talat Chaudri, 'A Description of the Middle Cornish Tregear Manuscript' (MA Dissertation, University of Aberystwyth, 2001). Available at:

<http://cadair.aber.ac.uk/dspace/handle/2160/377>

Nicholas Boson (1624–1708) has left us **three texts in Cornish**, *Nebbaz gerriau dro tho Carnoack* (A Few Words about Cornish, dated between 1675-1708); *Jowan Chy-an-Horth, py, An try foynt a skyans* (John of Chyannor, or, The three points of wisdom) which was published by Edward Lhuyd in 1707; and *The Dutchess of Cornwall's Progress* (this is partly in English and survives only fragments).

See Oliver Padel, *The Cornish writings of the Boson family* (1975).

Lost and Unwritten Cornish Literature?

Much of what we know of Cornish literature comes from a single ecclesiastical institution, Glasney College, at Penryn near Falmouth. Where else (and how else?) might stories, poetry, drama, legends have circulated? One or two clues in medieval sources and place-names are explored by Oliver Padel.

O. J. Padel, 'The Cornish background of the Tristan stories', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 1 (1981) 53–81

O. J. Padel, 'Evidence for oral tales in medieval Cornwall', *Studia Celtica*, Vol. 40 (2006), p. 127-153.

Cornish Literature: Further reading

An extensive bibliography of studies of Cornish literature, including many articles on modern productions and staging, has been compiled by Sydney Higgins and can be found here:

http://www.ikjordan.plus.com/Players/medievaldrama/Bibliography_of_Cornish_Medieval_Drama.html

John T. Koch (ed.) *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*: s.v, 'Cornish'.

Brian Murdoch, *Cornish Literature* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1993).

Brian Murdoch, 'The Cornish Drama'. In Richard Beadle *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.211-239.

Jane Bakere, *The Cornish Ordinalia. A Critical Study* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1980).

O. J. Padel 'Where was Middle Cornish spoken?' *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 74 (Winter 2017), p. 1-31.

Orme, Nicholas, 'Education in the medieval Cornish play Beunans Meriasek', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 25 (1993) 1–13

Daisy Black, 'The Time of the Tree: Returning to Eden after the Fall in the Cornish Creation of the World', *Medieval Feminist Forum*, 50.1 (2014), 61-89.

Alan Kent, "Glasney College." In *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. John T. Koch, pp 814–815

Another book on matters Cornish well worth exploring is by the C18th antiquarian, William Borlase, *The Natural History of Cornwall* (1758)

https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=iXxaAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=William+Borlase+history+of+Cornwall&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiDvMGdoP_fAhUPSxUIHTV1CGkQ6AEIKjAA#v=onepage&q=William%20Borlase%20history%20of%20Cornwall&f=false