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FEATURE (PEER REVIEW)

A FLUID BORDER: THE RIVER TAMAR AND CONSTRUCTED DIFFERENCE IN TRAVEL WRITING OF CORNWALL

By Tim Hannigan

Editor's note: This feature article has been peer reviewed.



*The main Tamar crossing at Saltash, engraved from a painting by
J. M. W. Turner around 1830.*

The Tamar is a relatively modest river. With a length of just 61 miles, and an average discharge at the upper tidal limit of just 807 cubic feet per second, it is dwarfed by other British rivers such as the Severn and the Thames. But despite its small scale, the Tamar has a heightened cultural significance: for more than a thousand years it has served as the border between the bulk of England to the east and Cornwall—a region with some distinct quasi-national characteristics—to the west. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century travel writers’ accounts of crossing this border have tended to construct the Tamar as a site of absolute transition from familiarity to otherness—a construction which has at times intersected with (and arguably informed) the emergence of modern identities of difference from *within* Cornwall.

Rivers are a long-established subject for the travel genre. However, attention has tended to focus on narratives of journeys *along*, rather than *across*, rivers (see Burroughs 2019) despite the emphasis elsewhere on the general significance of border crossings in travel writing. Tim Youngs, for example, notes that travel writing is “frequently populated with the representation of borders between the known and the unknown, the civilized and the savage, the domestic and the wild,” and that the travel genre is also replete with symbolic and metaphorical borders, not least those “between the past and the present which give travel texts their (often problematic) temporal texture” (2019, 25). Elsewhere, Churnjeet Mahn points out that “travel has a long association with subjects crossing conventional borders and boundaries, and the margin and periphery are



The main crossing point on the Tamar for nineteenth-century travel writers, between Plymouth and Saltash, is now spanned by twin rail and road bridges. Image “Cornwall: The River Tamar” by Lewis Clarke. CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED.

travel writing staples” (2016, 47). The Tamar, then, provides a significant case study of the border function of rivers and of the complexities and ambiguities that close inspection of such a function may reveal. It is also an unusual example of a river which has frequently featured in travel books specifically as a border to be crossed rather than a watercourse to be journeyed along.

This article begins with a brief overview of the historical contexts of the Tamar as a border. It then goes on to focus on three specific aspects of perceived Cornish difference, emphasized at the moment of crossing the river by the travel writers Walter White, Alphonse Esquiros, Wilkie Collins, and Ithel Colquhoun. The article also briefly considers the way the Tamar has

provided an imaginative Rubicon for internal Cornish identities to flow back against. Finally, in keeping with what Manfred Pfister identifies as an emergent postmodernist tendency for travel writers to “not only cross but criss-cross borders,” the article outlines the ambiguous—and indeed fluid—actualities encountered when exploring the upper reaches of the Tamar (2016, 293).

Before proceeding to outline the essential historical and cultural context of Cornwall and its border, a clear statement of positionality is required here: I am from Cornwall; I was born there, and generally identify myself as “Cornish.” Thus, my own approach to the River Tamar generally goes directly against the flow of the travel writing I will discuss here.

Cornwall and the Tamar: A Very Brief History

Administratively, Cornwall is—and has long been—simply the westernmost county in England (a county being the first administrative subdivision of territory below the level of country in the United Kingdom). It is a tapering peninsula, stretching roughly 70 miles into the Atlantic from the border with the neighboring county, Devon. But calling Cornwall a “county” and referring to it as part of “England” is likely to generate complaint from some Cornish people today—an indication of Cornwall’s unusual historical and imaginative status in the wider nation to which it notionally belongs.

The peninsula now known as Cornwall lay at least partly outside the Roman military and infrastructural network in Britain between the first and fifth centuries C.E. Later, it was largely beyond the westernmost limits of the Anglo-Saxon settlement—though it was technically within the emerging Anglo-Saxon state from a relatively early stage. Thus, on the eve of the Norman Conquest in the eleventh century, Cornwall was a part of the English realm still largely occupied by people who were not themselves English: they

were Britons, who spoke their own Brythonic (or P-Celtic) language. In this, it was markedly *unlike* most of the rest of England and much more closely akin to Wales. Indeed, the second syllable of the name “*Cornwall*” shares an etymology with “Wales”: *wēalas*, an Old English word often translated as “strangers” or “foreigners,” but perhaps better understood as, specifically, “not English.” [1] Something of this distinction endured post-Norman Conquest, and the Latin formula “*Anglia et Cornubia*” (“England and Cornwall”) was sometimes used in official documents into the medieval period (Payton 2004, 71).

However, the most obvious marker of Cornish distinction from England—its entirely separate language—gradually eroded. Cornish had probably ceased to be the main community language in the border areas *before* the Norman Conquest of 1066, and it retreated westwards in the following centuries. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, it had fallen entirely out of use as an authentic community language and had no more native speakers (though, of course, many words

of Cornish origin survived in the local Cornish-English dialect and as placenames, and a version of Cornish was revived in the early twentieth century).

By the mid-nineteenth century, Cornwall was a heavily industrialized tin- and copper-producing region, with a Methodist-majority population and a rapidly developing emigration culture. The general view amongst Cornish people themselves at this point appears to have been that their homeland was an English county, albeit one with some unique characteristics (Deacon 2018, 241), and Cornish writers of the period tended to refer to their homeland explicitly as “England” (Hannigan 2023, 304). But at the same time, literary narratives written by outsiders were constructing Cornwall as a decidedly exotic—and indeed un-English—land.

Wilkie Collins claimed that “a man speaks of himself as Cornish in much the same spirit as a Welshman speaks of himself as Welsh” (1851, 94) and Robert Louis Stevenson declared of Cornish emigrants encountered in America that “Not even a Red Indian seems more foreign in my eyes” (1892, 61–62). This tendency emerged, in part, from a popular fascination with the so-called “Celts” which had developed in the previous century (Cunliffe 1999, 11–12), with Cornwall identified as part of the so-called “Celtic Fringe.” It also emerged from a more general hankering for a pastoral escape hatch from the rapidly industrializing and globalizing realities of the day, with Cornwall suitably distant from the metropolis to serve that purpose (Deacon 2007, 180–181).

This essentially imaginative construction of Cornwall may, however, have had a foundation in a residual sense of actual difference which had clung to the place down the centuries, aided by its peninsular geography and the fact that, from the tenth century onwards, Cornwall’s eastern edge was firmly demarcated by an official border: the River Tamar.

The Tamar rises close to the north coast of Cornwall near Bude. But it then turns southwards, flowing across the peninsula to emerge into the English Channel at Plymouth, leaving Cornwall almost entirely surrounded by water, salt and fresh. The river is believed to have been fixed as a border by the early English king Athelstan in 936. The reasons for Athelstan’s action are unclear, for Cornwall seems to have already been under some kind of English overlordship for at least a century at this point. But nonetheless, in the tenth century the river did delimit two blocks of territory, the majority of whose populations were ethnically distinct: Old-English-speaking Anglo-Saxons to the east, and Old-Cornish-speaking Britons to the west. This makes the Tamar one of the oldest quasi-national borders in Europe, and perhaps the world, still in existence today.

By the mid-nineteenth century, any clear ethnic and cultural distinction between “Cornwall” and “England” had largely dissipated, but this did not stop visiting writers from making great imaginative use of the Tamar as a geographic, ethnic, and atmospheric frontier.

A Stern and Unfinished Aspect: The Tamar as a Geographical Border

Landscape has long featured prominently in literary depictions of Cornwall. Today, those landscape depictions are overwhelmingly positive, and a modern author might write admiringly of “the fantasy of Cornwall—the blinding sand, the subtropical plants, the Atlantic storms” (Woodcock 2019, 13) or of their “vivid impressions of surf, sand and sky” (Barkham 2015, 149). But this has not always been the case, and past topographic depictions have at times been openly hostile.

For William Gilpin, great popularizer of “the picturesque” as an aesthetic ideal in the late

eighteenth century, Cornwall was a “coarse naked country, and in all respects as uninteresting as can well be conceived” (1808, 192). Its landscape was “undisciplined,” he wrote, “heavy, unbroken, and unaccommodating” and “without a single beauty to recommend it” (Gilpin 1808, 196–198). Gilpin’s mentee in matters of the picturesque, Richard Warner, had a similar view, emphasizing what he saw as “the deformity of [Cornwall’s] exterior” (1809, 346). Such attitudes gradually changed, to become broadly appreciative of rugged topography by the end of the nineteenth century. But a Gilpinesque revulsion periodically resurfaces in the twentieth century and beyond.



The middle section of the Tamar as depicted—with a certain amount of hyperbole—in an 1830s illustration. By Thomas Allom; license in ‘The Morwell Rocks, on the River Tamar, Devon & Cornwall’ from ‘Devonshire Illustrated.’

Having visited the coast near Land's End in the 1900s, Walter de la Mere, for example, was convinced that there was “a brooding of evil in that rock-scene” (Stanley 1958, 120–121), and the poet John Heath-Stubbs described nearby Zennor in the 1950s as “a hideous and a wicked country” (1988, 311).

However, it is important to note that these responses are all specifically to the landscapes of Cornwall's central spine of granite moorland and its exposed northern and western coasts, and *not* to the area around the River Tamar. Nonetheless, some nineteenth-century travel writers sought to convey a sense of abrupt and absolute landscape change right beside the river. Walter White, writing in *A Londoner's Walk to the Land's End* (1855), describes a crossing from Plymouth to Torpoint:

Here, for the first time, I set foot in the venerable Duchy—Cornwall. A few minutes take you clear of the houses, and then at once you are struck with the difference between the county you are in and the one you have left. It is obvious. The generally soft features of Devonshire are exchanged for a landscape of a stern and unfinished aspect. Trees are few; and you see a prominent characteristic of Cornwall—a surface heaved into long, rolling swells, brown and bare, not unlike what we should fancy of waves from the adjoining ocean solidified, cut up into squares by thick stone fences. (White 1855, 111)

In the following decade, the French travel writer, Alphonse Esquiros, took a very similar line. Having crossed the Tamar from Plymouth, he claimed to have immediately detected “a great change in the style of the landscape” writing, “There is a perfect contrast between the two counties [Devon and Cornwall]. The soft features of a fertile district are succeeded by a stern country, especially distinguished by the rudeness and grandeur of its lines” (1865, 6).

To be clear, these accounts of the countryside immediately alongside the lower reaches of the

Tamar are *not* an accurate representation of any actuality. The areas that might reasonably be characterized as “stern and unfinished,” “brown and bare,” and divided by “thick stone fences” (generally known as “hedges” in Cornwall) are the aforementioned moorland spine and northern and western coastal strip—a considerable distance from the Tamar Valley. (It is also worth noting that Devon itself contains a large area that could be similarly characterized, Dartmoor, also some distance from the river.) The actual landscapes immediately east and west of the Tamar are broadly indistinguishable—a mixture of rich pasture, tidal mudflats, and woodland, as well as, in the mid-nineteenth century, an area of extensive tin- and copper-mining on both sides of the middle section of the river around Gunnislake.

A peculiar phenomenon is at play here: writers crossing the river from east to west are describing a stark and immediate physical difference *which does not actually exist*. There are two probable explanations. White's and Esquiros' books were obviously written *after* their journeys; they may, then, have retrospectively ascribed in their memory and in their text the characteristics of the most strikingly *other* parts of Cornwall to the entire place. In doing so, they accepted the idea of the Tamar as an absolute border, and created a homogenous vision of Cornwall's geographical difference, beginning and ending abruptly at the river. The other possibility is that they actually *did* see (nonexistent) geographical difference the moment they crossed the Tamar, having been primed in advance by other writers. If they had read Gilpin and Warner, they would naturally have expected a rugged and perhaps repulsive Cornish landscape, and so, knowing that they had arrived in Cornwall, that is precisely what they saw. This is what Edward Said identifies as a tendency for travelers to “fall back on a text,” to defer to the antecedent authority of the books they have read in advance of a journey, giving the text precedence over their own experience of the actuality (1978, 93).

Are We Still in England? The Tamar as an Ethnic Divide

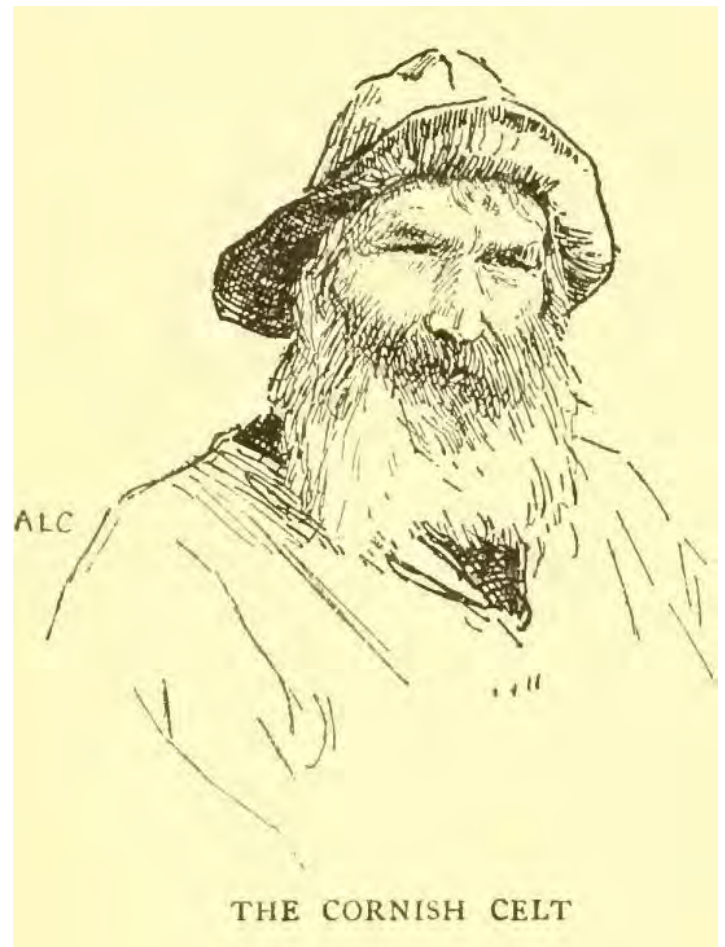
Having already identified a (nonexistent) “great change in the style of the landscape” right at the Tamar, Alphonse Esquiros also seeks to establish the Devon-Cornwall border as an absolute ethnic frontier:

You have scarce crossed the border of Devon and entered Cornwall, ere you are struck by a change in the human physiognomy. On the roads, in the inns, in the wagons, you continually notice oval faces with elongated features, black hair, grey eyes, prominent noses, large mouths—in a word the Celtic type. Are we still in England? We might doubt the fact. (Esquiros 1865, 100)

The concept of “the Celts” is fraught and much debated (see Chapman 1992), but suffice to say that there is no evidence that the term was ever actually used to refer to the peoples of Britain during the Iron Age or Roman period, and the modern identification of Britain’s northern and western regions as “Celtic” lands is the product of what Barry Cunliffe (1999) has termed the “Celtomania” which swept Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: a heady brew of legitimate linguistic scholarship, forgery of ancient texts, literary romance, misinterpretation of archaeology, scientific racism, and inflections from contemporary colonial encounters with otherness. As Philip Payton notes, the idea that there is or ever was an identifiable “Celtic type” is patently absurd—not to mention wildly inconsistent (the alleged archetype ranges from redheaded and burly to dark and diminutive) (2004, 36).

Even allowing for the possibility that Celts exist as an actual ethnic group with recognizable common characteristics, and that some of them might be found in Cornwall, Esquiros’ contention that you would be able to spot them when “You have scarce crossed the border of Devon”

strains credibility. Again, we might conclude that Esquiros is seeing abrupt difference on the banks of the river, simply because he has been primed for it by the texts he has read: Esquiros clearly “knows” that Cornwall is a “Celtic” region, therefore he “sees” Celts the moment he crosses the Tamar. (Walter White similarly detects a common Celtic “eye, feature and expression” in Cornwall, though he doesn’t explicitly mention it until Truro, some distance west of the Tamar (1855, 201–202).)



One of the “Celts” purportedly found west of the Tamar, as depicted in a 1908 travel book, “The Land’s End,” by W. H. Hudson.

A Borderline Less Palpable: A Change of Atmosphere

Less concrete than geography or ethnicity, “atmosphere” is the third component which travel writers imagined changing abruptly at the Tamar.

Wilkie Collins’ *Rambles Beyond Railways* (1851), probably the best-known nineteenth-century travel book about Cornwall, provides a particularly pronounced example of this atmospheric change in crossing the Tamar. The book begins

as Collins and his travelling companion, the artist Henry Brandling (who was collecting sketches to develop as prints for the planned book about the journey) cross the Tamar from Plymouth to Saltash. They are conveyed across the water at dusk by a “a fine, strong, swarthy fellow, with luxuriant black hair and whiskers” (Collins 1851, 9). As he rows them westwards, the buildings of the modern port from which they have departed



The Royal Albert Bridge, spanning the Tamar at the traditional crossing point from Plymouth to Saltash, under construction in the 1850s.

turn “pale and indistinct,” and the scene takes on an intensely gothic atmosphere:

As the twilight gloom drew on—as the impressive tranquillity of the whole scene deepened and deepened gradually, until not even the distant barking of a dog was now heard from the land, or the shrill cry of a sea bird from the sky—the pale massy hulls of the old war-ships around and beyond us, assumed gradually a spectral and mysterious appearance, until they looked more like water-monsters in repose than the structures of mortal hands, and the black heights behind them seemed like lairs from which they had issued under cover of the night! (Collins 1851, 12)

Collins extends his account of the crossing over five pages in much the same style—a gothic extravaganza beginning in daylight on the eastern bank and ending in total darkness on the western shore. By the point of disembarkation, readers can be in little doubt about what has happened: the travelers have crossed an absolute frontier; they have moved between the civilised, domestic, and present, to the unknown, savage, wild, and past; they set off from one distinct place and have arrived somewhere else entirely via the threshold provided by the Tamar.

Explaining the motivation for his journey as a travel writer to Cornwall, Collins makes a perceived otherness explicit, declaring that “Even the railway stops short at Plymouth, and shrinks from penetrating to the savage regions beyond!” (1851, 7-8).^[2] By the time of Esquiros’ journey the following decade, Cornwall had been directly connected to the national rail network via the Royal Albert Bridge opened in 1859. But Esquiros instructed his readers that “Old Cornwall should be approached by steamer.” His own reasoning is that “by railway the view of the Tamar is to a great extent lost” (1865, 4), but the phrase “Old Cornwall” is telling: he is placing the land on the western side of the Tamar in a rhetorical past, deploying what Johannes Fabian terms the “denial

of coevalness” common to colonial ethnographers and travel writers, in which a destination (and its inhabitants) are placed on a separate, less advanced temporal and civilizational plane (2014, 35).

It is important to note a slippery suggestion of irony in some such depictions of Cornwall and the Tamar crossing, in particular *Rambles Beyond Railways*. While Paul Young takes Collins’ talk of “savage regions” at face value and regards it as a construction of Cornwall as a “gothic location” of “embodied, anachronistic time and space, set apart from the mechanism of modernity” (2011, 55), Erika Behrisch Elce detects an ironic register—one so pronounced that it “actually consistently pushes against this trope [of a savage, anachronistic Cornwall]” (2017). This modern scholarly disagreement is itself indicative of a significant ambiguity: even if Collins *is* writing ironically, some readers will always miss the point, and he *does*, then, contribute to the gothic, savage, anachronistic construction of Cornwall, even if inadvertently.

That construction was certainly fully established and multiply reiterated a century after Wilkie Collins in the 1950s, when the surrealist artist and travel writer Ithell Colquhoun crossed the Tamar and declared that “a change of atmosphere is perceptible” even from the train as it rattles across the Royal Albert Bridge: “The hoar lichen on apple branches, more twisted than they would be in Devon, or a glassy paleness of sky gleaming between torn clouds may hint that one has passed a borderline less palpable than that of the river” (2016, 65). This less palpable, imaginative borderline is arguably itself the product of a Tamar-crossing trope already very well established by writers, including those previously discussed here, long before Colquhoun made her own first trip to Cornwall.

One of the very few counternarratives to all this comes from another mid-twentieth-century writer, like Colquhoun resident in but not originally from Cornwall: Daphne du Maurier.

Given that she probably did more than any other twentieth-century writer to emphasize a gothic otherness in Cornwall in popular novels such as *Jamaica Inn* (1936), it is perhaps surprising that du Maurier resists the trope of absolute difference at the Tamar. Nonetheless, she subtly ironizes it, recalling her own first childhood trip across the river in her travel book, *Vanishing Cornwall* (1967). Having crossed the same rail bridge that carried Colquhoun—and that Esquiros eschewed—she finds herself staring out, disenchanted:

For what was different about this? The country was just the same. There were houses on a hill, and another smaller station,

A Fluid Actuality

The depictions of the Tamar discussed above belong to a centuries-old literary discourse produced by writers from without, in which Cornwall itself is constructed as other (possibly at times ironically). But a similar—and perhaps even symbiotic—process of difference-construction has emerged from within Cornwall over the last century. After centuries of apparent assimilation, a “cultural revival” which properly began in the 1920s has produced for Cornwall the trappings of modern nationhood: a flag, a costume (in the form of a tartan invented in the mid-twentieth century), quasi-national institutions (most notably the Gorsedh, a cultural organization with stylized annual ceremonies, based on an earlier Welsh model), historical narratives emphasizing separateness, and a renewed insistence that Cornwall is *not* a part of England (and also that it should always be referred to as a “duchy” rather than a “county”). In this, naturally enough, the Tamar recovers its original status as a quasi-national frontier between distinct peoples, rather than a mere county boundary. Exoticizing travelogues by outsiders in which everything changes at the Tamar may, then, align with the way some

even people and porters on the platform. What had I expected? ...

Something tremendous was supposed to have happened, by passing from Devonshire into Cornwall.

Greatly deceived, I went on staring out of the window. There must be a mistake. Somewhere there awaited the hidden land. It was not this. (1967, 5)

There is an implication here: the “hidden land” that begins abruptly on the shores of the Tamar in the books of White, Esquiros, Collins, and Colquhoun is no actual locale; it is a strictly imaginative—and perhaps imaginary—realm.

modern Cornish people see themselves and their place.

In modern Cornish discourse, the key crossings on the Tamar (in particular, the Royal Albert Bridge, which still carries the main train line between Cornwall and London) attain iconic status as entry points. Cookworthy Knapp, a small spinney of beech trees beside the main westbound highway a few miles east of the Tamar, has gained fame in recent years as the “Nearly Home Trees” (even for people like me who have a further two hours to drive beyond the Tamar before reaching their actual home), featuring in artworks, countless social media posts, and even a 2022 film, *Long Way Back*. The Cornish language—the original and most pronounced marker of genuine Cornish difference, and which likely vanished from the Tamar area a thousand years ago or more—now has a renewed presence on the border in dual-language signage: “Welcome to Cornwall/ *Kernow A’gas Dynnergh*.” A close inspection of the actuality of the river and its banks, then, may do more than simply reveal an artifice in the work of visiting travel writers; it may also pose an uncomfortable challenge to

personal conceptions of identity and “home” for Cornish people like me. For in truth, there is little absolute about the Tamar as a border.

As Mike Parker points out (of the rivers that form sections of the England/Wales border), the frequent use of watercourses as administrative boundaries teaches us to consider a border river as a natural divide when in fact “the opposite is true: it is the unifying factor in any topography, the tendrils of its watershed reaching up into the hills and gathering its flock with natural insistence” (2023, 55). The Tamar then, is not a natural division, but the central spine of a single zone, stretching from the watershed of Bodmin Moor in the west to that of Dartmoor thirty miles to the east, and fanning out across a wide area centered on the Devon town of Holsworthy north of the moors. And it is surely reasonable to assume that historically this zone had a cultural as well as geographic commonality, for as Parker

further notes, making a river into a border “ends up dividing otherwise natural brethren, pitching citizens of essentially the same city, plain or valley against each other” (2023, 55).

Evidence that this is indeed the effect of the construction of the Tamar as a border can be found in the area of Cornwall abutting the northern stretch of the river, between its source and the confluence of the smaller River Ottery near Launceston. Throughout this area, which extends to the coast at Bude, the most obvious marker of actual historical Cornish difference is entirely absent. While Cornish-language placenames are overwhelmingly dominant across the peninsula—around 80 percent of all Cornwall’s placenames, and close to 100 percent in the far west—in this northern border region, the opposite is true. The standard Anglo-Saxon placename elements—stow, ham, cott, worthy—cover the map, as elsewhere in England, and Cornish-language



The source of the Tamar as depicted by J. M. W. Turner in the early nineteenth century.

toponyms—*tre, bos, pen, pol* and so on—are totally absent. The reasons for this are unclear, but certainly at some very early stage, quite possibly *before* Athelstan fixed the Tamar border, this region was either actively settled by Anglo-Saxons, or so thoroughly anglicized by contact from the east, that local language, lifeways, and identities shifted from British to proto-English. No traveler would *ever* have encountered abrupt ethnic difference on crossing the Tamar hereabouts.

Naturally, the mythical geographical difference is also wholly absent around the banks of the Tamar here, and the fact that the river itself is small, meandering, and joined by many other streams makes identifying which administrative territory a particular wood or hillside belongs to too difficult for a traveler moving through the

landscape. This is a characteristic emphasized by the twentieth-century poet Charles Causley (2000) (whose own ancestry spanned the Tamar, and who spent most of his life very close to the river) in his poem “On the Border”:

By the window-drizzling leaves,
Underneath the rain’s shadow,
“What is that land,” you said, “beyond
Where the river bends the meadow?”

“Is it Cornwall? Is it Devon?
Those promised fields, blue as the vine,
Wavering under new-grown hills;
Are they yours or mine?”

But there is a further ambiguity, for in this northern Tamarside region the river and the administrative border are *not* contiguous. At North



The actual source of the Tamar in the twenty-first century: a concrete cattle trough fed by a small spring at a remote spot north of Bude. Image courtesy of Tim Hannigan.

Tamerton a block of Cornish territory extends east of the river, deep into what ought, it seems, to be Devon. A little further north, meanwhile, a large chunk of what “should” be Cornwall is in the Devon parish of Bridgerule, home to “the only pub west of the Tamar but still in Devon.” And there is a further tiny chunk of Devon-west-of-the-Tamar close to the South Tamar Lake. These are the products of nineteenth-century attempts at rationalization by the government boundary commission, which decided that a parish spanning a county border was an unconscionable anomaly. A subsequent boundary commission attempt to return the border to the river in Bridgerule failed when the residents objected to the prospect of becoming Cornish. Further south, meanwhile, the large parish of Werrington is entirely on the western bank of the Tamar, but it has only been part of Cornwall since further boundary commission rationalizations in 1966. Prior to that it had been part of Devon, via a link to the Abbey of Tavistock, for 900 years.

This raises awkward questions: if a traveler like Walter White or Alphonse Esquiros were to have crossed the Tamar into Werrington via the crossing point at Druyton Bridge in 1965, would they have detected no particular change? And

if they returned the following year and crossed the same bridge, would they have instantly been greeted by a starkly contrasting landscape, an air of mysterious otherness, and local parishioners transformed overnight into obviously identifiable and decidedly un-English Celts—in their own self-perception as much as under the gaze of the travel writer? It seems unlikely. But when it comes to a border river like the Tamar, it is sometimes necessary to be reminded of this fact. As Carter et al note, a place is a “space to which meaning has been ascribed” (1993, xxi). And in the placeness of Cornwall, much meaning has certainly been ascribed. But a border—as the edge of a place, the point at which it runs up against *another* place—is equally a matter of ascription, and when a border function is given to something as tangibly actual as a river, we may end up assuming that it is the border itself that has the concrete and natural physicality. But in truth, the river—in its riveriness—is entirely independent of any territorial, political or administrative function. Indeed, it is magnificently indifferent to such things. As in the case of the Tamar, it may be the border, rather than the river, which is fluid, ambiguous, and shifting.

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Footnotes

[1] The modern Cornish word for Cornwall is Kernow; the Welsh word for Wales is Cymru.

[2] There were, in fact, railways and tramlines *within* Cornwall by the time Collins arrived, mainly built to service the burgeoning mining industry, and the world's first steam-powered automobile had been created and test-driven in Cornwall in 1801. However, there was no railway *across* the Tamar.

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