

# WŁADYSŁAW SOMMERVILLE LACH-SZYRMA AND THE CORNISH REVIVAL

KATARZYNA GMEREK

Władysław Sommerville Lach-Szyrma (1841–1915) was born in Devonport, 25 December 1841, to a Polish father and English mother, Sarah Frances Field Sommerville, and brought up speaking English, Polish and French. As an Anglican clergyman, writer and historian he contributed to the Cornish Revival in the early twentieth century, with his historical, folklorist and linguistic research. In Poland he is relatively unknown, unlike his more famous father – the academic and writer Krystyn Lach-Szyrma. In the United Kingdom, Władysław’s Cornish activities seem to be relatively unknown today, and he is more famous for his science-fiction literary works. This paper examines his Polish background, and the Cornish chapter in his life, starting from his gathering of Cornish folklore and ending with his cooperation with Henry Jenner on the rebirth of the language. It would be difficult to understand his interests in languages and cultures without discussing his Polish background.

## **1. Krystyn Lach-Szyrma**

Krystyn Lach-Szyrma was born in 1790, in Wojnasy, in the Polish-German region of Mazury. May it be only mentioned here that the autochthonic Baltic tribe of Prussians used to live in Mazury, but German colonisation made them disintegrate and their language died out in the seventeenth century. In the early nineteenth century Mazury belonged to Prussia, and the Polish-speaking community was subjected to Germanisation. The religion of most inhabitants was Lutheran, and local pastors (like Krzysztof Mrongovius, 1764–1855) were most important activists in defence of Polish at the time. Krystyn was from a farming background, but thanks to his intellectual abilities was initially considered as a

candidate for a pastor. After a time in school in Königsberg (Prussia), however, he moved to the Polish University of Wilno/Vilnius in Lithuania (at that time in the Russian Empire), where he studied philosophy and literature. Contact with Polish and German early Romanticism inspired his interests in folklore and comparative literature. Having been born in a region that used to be multi-ethnic and then moving to Lithuania and mixing with Polish academics, he developed a deep fascination with the ancient history of peoples inhabiting the former Polish Commonwealth.

Employed as a teacher of a young Prince Adam Czartoryski, Krystyn spent three years in Scotland, where, Nina Taylor-Terlecka maintains, he took the opportunity to do his PhD in Philosophy in the University of Edinburgh; he also contributed to *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (Taylor 1988: 137). After returning to Poland, he was certainly awarded PhD in the University of Warsaw and worked in the University of Warsaw, and published a variety of works, one of them of enduring fame – *England and Scotland, reminiscences from a journey*, 1828. Scotland was the predominant subject of this work, as Lach-Szyrma was fascinated by the history and culture of the country. Although acquainted with modern Scotland, in love with the Highlands and in awe of Scottish music, Lach-Szyrma was never a Celtic scholar. In 1829 he published an article, “A Glimpse of the Primeval Peoples of Europe,” where he made an attempt to create an ancient link between Celtic and Slavonic peoples, using the myth of Hyperborea (quoting John Toland, but interpreting his writings in a rather controversial manner, to support his own thesis) (Lach-Szyrma 1829). This kind of Romantic Celtophilia was characteristic for the circle of writers connected to the Czartoryski family (Gmerek 2010).

In 1831, Krystyn took part in the Polish November Insurrection against the Russians (as a popular young academic, he became a leader of a regiment made up of Warsaw University students), and after the failure, became a political émigré in the United Kingdom. In the beginning, he tried to settle down in Edinburgh, but later moved to England. The reason for this might be his pro-Polish political activities, including work with the Hotel Lambert group of Polish political exiles and as a secretary of the London-based Lord Dudley Coultts Stuart, the actual head of the Literary Society of the Friends of Poland. In 1841, as a widower, he married an Englishwoman, Sarah Frances Sommerville, and settled down in Devonport, close to the Devon-Cornwall border (Chojnacki and Dąbrowski 1971: 120).

## 2. Władysław's early years

As Władysław was the only surviving son, his father had high expectations of him. Raised bilingually in Polish and English, with the addition of obligatory French, Władysław was expected by his father to become a British diplomat, or possibly to work for the Polish exile think-tank Hôtel Lambert (Perry 2000: 155).<sup>1</sup> A Polish uprising in 1863–1864 failed and support of Western politicians for Polish émigrés waned. In the meantime, the young man graduated from Brasenose College, Oxford (M.A. in 1865), where he studied Classics but also International Law and Political Economy. When Garibaldi visited Cornwall in April 1864, both Lach-Szyrmas greeted him in Penquite, where young Władysław presented his printed poem *Heroes of the Day – Franklin and Garibaldi*. The poem praised heroes who fought for independence, but it is clear that the sense of moral argument for the freedom struggle was for the author more important than the politics or real combat.

But the prayers of injured virtue,  
The tortured captive's groan,  
Have risen to the King of Kings,  
And reached His awful throne. (...)  
Ye Men of England! men of peace,  
Learn what volunteers can do,  
Vain is the rifle, vain the sword,  
Unless the heart be true.

(Lach-Szyrma 1860: 29–31)

There is no personal declaration from Władysław on his eventual career choice, but nothing suggested any kind of dramatic soul-searching. It may seem that from the beginning he was rather more interested in the Church than diplomatic service, which was rather his father's unfulfilled dream for his only surviving son (Perry 2000: 155). Some interest in matters Polish persisted, but rather as a research subject for comparative studies – in 1864 he published *On the Relation of the Slavonians to the Other Indo-European Nations*. Later he would also use his knowledge of the Polish language for linguistic comparisons. In 1865 he was ordained a deacon and became a curate at Pensilva, a small mining village in

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<sup>1</sup> Materials used by the author included letters and family papers received from Władysław's great-grandson, Francis Lach-Szyrma.

Cornwall. At that time he changed posts frequently. Luckily for his academic interests, the young Lach-Szyrma spent the years 1872–1873 as a librarian in St. Augustine’s College, Canterbury. In 1873 he joined a local philological society, and probably met Henry Jenner for the first time (Perry 2000: 161).<sup>2</sup>

### 3. “The Cornish nationality”

As Władysław Lach-Szyrma was born near the Devon-Cornish border, family holidays might have been spent there (the poem “Ocean” was written in Whitsand Bay, when he was 16). Cornwall seemed to be always close to his heart. As early as in 1867, when a curate in Pensilva, he delivered a lecture entitled “The Cornish Nationality” in Athenaeum, Plymouth Institution. His interpretation of the term “nationality” can be understood from his own words:

The Cornish nationality was evidently of the same family as the Welsh, the Bretons of North France, the Cimbrian branch and the Celts and Manx. The distinctive character of the Cornish was evidenced first, in their language; second, in the elements of which that nationality has originated; third, in their history; and fourth, in the rapid destruction of its distinctive character.

(“Cornish Nationality” 1867: 7)

One can only speculate what the author meant by “the Cimbrian branch.” In his article from 1864, speaking on the migration of the Indo-European peoples, he wrote: “The Kymbrians followed the other Kelts, the ancestors of the Ancient Britons and Armoricans” but unfortunately he did not say more on the subject (Lach-Szyrma 1864: 18). It is possible that he meant ancient inhabitants of Denmark, who in the Iron Age migrated south, reaching as far as Noricum, and are usually listed together with Teutons. Today it is often believed (though there is no certainty) that “Cimbri and Teutones” were Germanic tribes but even as early as in the nineteenth century the possibility that they were Celtic in character was not excluded (Busse and Koch 2006: 437).

The most important element of this lecture might be not the research presented, but the enthusiastic approach of the young author, who took up the case

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<sup>2</sup> Henry Jenner (Bardic name Gwas Myghal, 1848–1934) is sometimes known as the father of the Cornish language revival. He was born in St. Columb Major, Cornwall, and very early started working in the British Museum, where he developed an interest in Celtic languages. After finding old Cornish manuscripts in the Museum, Jenner started researching the subject.

of Cornish culture and ethnicity as it was a current topic, and a phenomenon linked to other Celtic cultures. Perhaps more or less consciously, Lach-Szyrma's revulsion against the suppression of smaller cultures by mainstream culture is similar to what could be seen later in Alfons Parczewski's participation in Pan-Celtic meetings. We do not have, however, the author's explicit word for that. In the lecture Lach-Szyrma quoted Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900), a German philologist, whose lectures he may have attended in Oxford. The philological background of Lach-Szyrma might have ignited his fascination with comparative linguistic studies, though it was only one of his many fascinations, and he never went as far as becoming a linguist himself. The dilettantish approach displayed in his lecture raised polemics from veteran Celticist John Bannister (1816–1873), who pointed to sources neglected by Lach-Szyrma and corrected some of his mistakes (Bannister 1867: 6). The polemic was substantive, and probably could only inspire Lach-Szyrma to pursue further study, following the exhaustive bibliography listed by Bannister. As was mentioned before, after joining the Philological Society in Canterbury, Lach-Szyrma probably met Henry Jenner (Perry 2000: 161).

#### **4. Cooperation with Jenner and individual work**

From 1875 to 1888 Władysław Sommerville Lach-Szyrma was a curate of Newlyn, but his participation in the Philological Society continued and cooperation with Jenner followed. Margaret Perry argued that his fascination with Cornwall was the real reason behind his choice of the remote parish of Newlyn, as with his education and published books on religious and other matters he should have been able to get a better position (Perry 2000: 161–162). In 1876 Jenner gave his first lecture on the Cornish language, in which he stated: “Some while ago I received information from the Rev. W.S. Lach-Szyrma, Vicar of Newlyn, Penzance, to the effect that he had found in his parish some old people who could repeat the numerals and knew a few other words of Cornish.” (Jenner 1875–1876: 534). Jenner then made a field trip to West Cornwall, in the company of Lach-Szyrma, to listen to old people from Szyrma's parish, who could still say a few words in Cornish, without realising (Jenner's remark) that they were speaking another language (Jenner 1875–1876: 533). The lecture provoked growing interest in Cornish. Lach-Szyrma himself later published a short article on Cornish numerals in *Revue Celtique* (Lach-Szyrma 1876–1878: 239–242). Apart from this, he kept delivering lectures and publishing popular articles on Cornwall, and it is

clear that popular interest in the subject was growing at that time. While his first lecture on “Cornish nationality” in Plymouth 1867 had a very small audience (though *The Royal Cornwall Gazette* reported that “animated discussion” rose in the end), during his lecture on “Cornish language and literature” in Penzance, 1875, the room was reportedly overcrowded (“The Rev. W.S....” 1875: 7). Lach-Szyrma spoke this time on Cornish literature, awakening successfully, it seems, the audience’s pride in the literature of their ancestors. He also put forward a provocative question: “Is Cornish quite extinct?” Discussion was animated again, with audience members quoting Cornish words they remembered and telling of old people who used to have more Cornish and had died only recently (impossible to verify, obviously). Someone even was reported to have said that “the modern so-called Cornish dialect was not a mere corrupted English, but a mixture of Celtic and Anglo-Saxon” (“The Rev. W.S....” 1875: 7). In the following years he published many popular pieces on Cornwall, with rare excursions into the academic sphere, like an 1887 paper on “The Manx and Cornish languages considered historically” during the 44<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the British Archaeological Association in Liverpool (“British Archaeological Association” 1887: 3).

One of the reasons Lach-Szyrma, though probably capable of doing much more academic work, remained essentially a popular writer, might be that he took very seriously his pastoral duties in Newlyn. The parish was poor, and the pastor felt obliged to do time-consuming social work there; he married also and had a growing family. Another reason was that he had so many interests (writing science-fiction among them) that it seemed impossible to devote himself exclusively to any single subject. In 1878 Lach-Szyrma published *A Short History of Penzance, St. Michael's Mount, St. Ives, and the Land's End District*. The publication was illustrated and contained historical appendices with a variety of data, including comparison of Cornish words with their other “Aryan” (Indo-European) equivalents. The book was, nevertheless, sometimes criticised for being merely a compilation of secondary sources (“Review of *A short history...*” 1878: 297) – it is clear that the author had rather modest ambitions to be an educator of the wider public than a scholar who paves new ways in linguistics or history.

Lach-Szyrma continued to work in Newlyn until 1886, when, after the death of three of his children, he decided to move with the rest of his family to a bigger city. He returned in 1888 but left Cornwall for good in 1896, his new appointment being the parish of Barkingside in Essex. His interest in all things Cornish continued, it seems, as did his exchange of thought with Jenner.

## 5. The 1904 letters

Margaret Perry was a Cornish local historian, who towards the end of her life retired to Newlyn and wrote an article on Lach-Szyrma's life (Perry 2000). In late 2001 she purchased two letters written by Władysław Lach-Szyrma to Henry Jenner, both from 1904 and concerning the Cornish language.<sup>3</sup> Also in 1904, Jenner published his famous book *A Handbook of the Cornish Language*. The pastor wrote him one letter before the anticipated publication, and another one after (Jenner 1904).

1904 was a noteworthy year in the history of the Cornish Revival: Jenner not only published his Cornish manual, but also participated in the Meeting of the Pan-Celtic Association in Caernarfon, 30 August to 3 September 1904, where he was made a Bard. The first letter from Lach-Szyrma to Jenner, dated 17 June, indicates a close relationship. The minister had not enough time to complete a recent conversation in person on Cornish with Jenner, so he listed in this letter some points he wanted to make, two of which are quoted below.

Prince Lucien L. Bonaparte (who was an expert in philology and interested in Cornish) impressed on me at our last interview soon before his death, that Cornish was a 'real Aryan [Indo-European] language' and neither a dialect of Welsh or Breton. The C[ornish] grammar and numeration show this more than the vocabulary which might be completed by English influences.

Lach-Szyrma then briefly listed European languages that had most recently died or were wrongly supposed to be dead by scholars:

Prof. Max Muller and I had a chat in re: [*sic*] Cornish as the last language to die in Europe. Mr. Muller was positive on this point. I pleaded possibly Mordvinian was, but he told me Mordvinian lives still (in spite of Russ[ian] influences). I have since had more evidence on this. Wendish [Sorbian] is very much alive. Newspapers and mags are printed in it. Manx lives of course. I heard it talked in I[sle of] Man and also heard Manx [*sic*] song sung

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<sup>3</sup> The present author received scans of printed sources and a copy of two MS letters from the very kind Margaret Perry. Unfortunately, contact was lost in August 2002. According to the Gorseth website, Ms Perry was appointed a Bard of Cornwall in 2007 (Hwilores Kedhlow – Seeker of Facts) and died in 2013. The letters from Lach-Szyrma to Jenner seem to have remained unpublished. As after Margaret's death all her papers were donated to the Newlyn Archive, the originals are probably to be found there.

before Gaelic League. (...) The last before Cornish to die in Europe was I think Prussian.

There is an interesting proposal for a competition for young students: "Might not a prize be offered for best student [*sic*] in Cornish of Cornish race who would learn to speak or compose in it. Welsh boys or girls (...) soon learn Cornish, so a condition might be 'Cornish race'."

The other letter from Lach-Szyrma to Jenner dated 19 November, is obviously from the same year, as the author says in it that he has just recently read Jenner's book, and developed his initial idea of a language competition. He still seemed to see Cornish as a dead language: "It certainly is the best manual of the Cornish language now extant, and deserves a place in every public library as the last book on the subject. Now do you not think there's the next step, if we want to revive the memory of Cornish would be to offer small prizes in Cornish Telegraph (...) for competition among Cornishmen or Cornish boys and girls for replying to a simple examination in the elements of the language."

After discussing some issues concerning Cornish language and publications, Lach-Szyrma gives his idea of the examination, indicating that this would be merely a sample to illustrate his view:

The Cornish Language Examination paper  
On Mr. Jenners Handbook

- I. What are the relations of Cornish to the other Celtic languages?
- II. Give a list of the chief books in Cornish which have already been printed?
- III. Who were the last persons who could speak Cornish?
- IV. Give the numerals in Cornish down to 20.
- V. What are the meanings of  
Cheal Vean – Padzhipow – Murrian – Bal – Huel – Pisgypon [?] and give Cornish derivation.
- VI. Give derivation of Chypous – Ponsnooth [Ponsanooth] – Street an Nowan
- VII. Translate a page from Gwavas Mss.
- VIII. Write a short letter in the Cornish language on any Cornish subject

The aim was here to encourage the youth of Cornwall to learn the old language. One can see a precaution that the competition should be exclusively for the



Cornish, since they, as true beginner learners, still needed some form of protection.

It is possible, however, that the idea of Cornish language competitions was not immediately put into action. At any rate it was impossible for the author of this paper find any information on it. It seems that only after the Great War did the language revival gain momentum. Old Cornwall Societies were formed by Morton Nance, and the first Cornish Gorseth was held in 1928, with many prizes offered to Cornish speakers. In this light, the proposal from the pastor would be a very innovative idea.

In August-September 1904 Lach-Szyrma and Jenner met during the Caernarfon Meeting of the Pan-Celtic Association. At the meeting, a Polish barrister and activist Alfons Parczewski gave a paper entitled “A survey of the Language Map of Europe and a Sketch of an International Peace Union for the Protection of Linguistic Minorities.” Lach-Szyrma participated in the animated discussion that followed, when the participants expressed their wish for international legislation on behalf of linguistic minorities (Parczewski 1904). As Poland had at that time no independence – having been partitioned by Russia, Prussia and Austria since 1795 – for a while it found itself in a similar position to some Celtic lands. This and his fascination with the language and culture of the Sorbs of Lusatia was the source of Parczewski’s interest firstly in minority languages and secondly in the Pan-Celtic movement (Gmerek 2003).

One of the last pieces written on Cornwall by Lach-Szyrma was a small book from 1910 with the intriguing title “*Old Cornwall*” a tale of the *Men Scryfa* and essays on Cornish topics. “Men Scryfa” is a Cornish name, meaning Inscribed Stone, referring to a historic monument near Land’s End in Cornwall, with an inscription from ca. 500CE. The script on the stone is about a Rialobranus, or Royal Raven, son of a glorious prince buried there. Lach-Szyrma’s *Men Scryfa* is a short work of fiction set in Roman Britain, entwined around the story of Rialobran. Royal Raven was probably a chieftain whose name is linked to a local legend about a battle. For lovers of Celtic mythology, the story evokes associations with mythological characters turned into a black bird of prey. King Arthur was, for example, according to a Cornish legend, transformed into a chough, still alive and waiting for his time to come (Kent 2006). The little book, however, contains something more significant than fiction: one chapter, entitled “Last lost language of Europe,” is in fact a sample or a mini course of Cornish for beginners, in eleven lessons, with vocabulary. The author writes: “I shall little have to say for Mr H. Jenner has exhausted the subject, and those who wish to

know it, may find in his valuable manual all they want. But the words can only be found in big dictionaries, which cost much money (...).” In other words, the booklet was published to popularise the language among the less affluent reading public, and to promote Jenner’s work for further study.

Władysław Lach-Szyrma died on 25 June 1915, at the age 72 (“Death of...” 1915: 5) The obituary article listed his bibliography, including works on the Cornish language and culture, mentioned the learned societies of which he had been a member, emphasised that “he was among the first to advocate the resuscitation of the old Cornish see” (bishoprics), and that he campaigned successfully for a pier in Newlyn (which was important for local fishermen). A separate article mentioned his Polish background and membership in the Literary Society of Friends of Poland (“The Late Rev....” 1915: 7) The latter piece also mentioned briefly his enthusiasm for the folklore and history of Cornwall, though not his long-lasting interest for the language.

As we have no personal declaration from Lach-Szyrma about what exactly made him interested in the Cornish language revival, we may refer here to a letter he wrote concerning another Celtic language.<sup>4</sup> In a letter printed in *Irisleabhar na Gaedhilge* (The Gaelic Journal), he listed arguments “from an outsider’s point [of view],” “why an educated Irish gentleman ought to study Irish.” The first was that it was the language of his Celtic ancestor: “a man who has a spirit of patriotism should revere his ancestors’ memory and their tongue.” (Szyrma then promptly remarked that this might not be exactly relevant to many landlords in Ireland, who were not of Celtic origin.) The second point was very interesting and had a contemporary sound: “no language is useless which can be used as a mode of intercourse or thought.” In other words, it does not even matter how many people speak a language as it can always be an intellectual challenge and a source of creativity. The third and fourth points of his letter refer to the beauty, antiquity and usefulness of the Irish language for studies in comparative linguistics, while the fifth point presents learning a language – especially one as difficult as Irish – as a useful fitness exercise for the brain, “as opening fresh fields of thought and modes of expression (Lach-Szyrma 1882: 55).

When one reads the above, one sees there was only one reason for learning a Celtic language which could not apply to Lach-Szyrma – he had no Celtic roots himself. However, one can say that the remaining arguments would suffice to become interested in the subject, for someone so well educated and with linguistic

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<sup>4</sup> I am very grateful to Mark Ó Fionnáin. for pointing this out to me.

abilities. In all his writings, Władysław Sommerville Lach-Szyrma appeared to be a very down-to-earth person, and never seemed to succumb to a Romanticising version of Celtophilia. When looking at his work from a Polish perspective, however, one may imagine that an additional factor was at work, adding fuel to the pastor's initiatives: he was brought up by a Polish political activist father, and from childhood schooled in patriotism comparable to the Irish kind. Moreover, in his father's land, there was a tradition of pastors promoting the Polish language and literature in spite of Germanisation by the Prussian state, whose predecessors had annihilated the Baltic (autochthonic Prussian) language before. This mixture of fire and rationality was probably what made Lach-Szyrma so unique and encouraged him to persist so long with his support for the Cornish language.

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