INTERNATIONAL LABOUR MIGRATION

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

EDITED BY

SHULA MARKS
Institute of Commonwealth Studies
and School of Oriental and African Studies
University of London

AND

PETER RICHARDSON
University of Melbourne

PUBLISHED FOR THE
INSTITUTE OF COMMONWEALTH STUDIES
BY MAURICE TEMPLE SMITH
THE CORNISH DIASPORA OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

GILL BURKE

Throughout the nineteenth century there were massive migrations from Britain to the colonies and ex-colonies of the Empire from rural and urban areas. Cornwall contributed to these migrations at both a general and a particular level. In general, the agricultural population took ship to settle in the new worlds. In particular, workers in the tin and copper mines took ship also, but apparently not with settlement as their main aim. The metalliferous mining industry of Cornwall was one of extreme antiquity; industrialisation took place relatively early in the eighteenth century, and by the nineteenth century thousands of men and women were employed in deep, hard rock mines which were run on the Cost Book system of investment. Ownership of the mining companies was diffuse and complex; it was spread between shareholding ‘adventurers’, landlords who owned the mineral rights, and the tin smelters who exercised powerful control as price setters for tin ore. By the mid-nineteenth century Cornwall was supplying almost one-third of the world’s tin and copper. Thirty years later the development of overseas ore deposits had rendered Cornwall’s output negligible, a decline marked in Cornwall by abandoned and closed mines and ‘clemmed’ (starving) mineworkers.

This decline was not the sole cause of labour migration from Cornwall, however, and in this paper I will examine the various forms that Cornish mine labour migration took during the century. Much of the historical literature on labour migration has been characterised by parochialism and filio-pietism and has rightly been criticised for this. Nickolakos has powerfully and persuasively argued for the need for a general theory of migration despite the difficulty of developing such a theory beyond the broadest generality. Most often it is argued that all labour migration falls into two main categories. That is, migration because of ‘push’ factors at home — particularly the ‘push’ of poverty, starvation, and trade depression; or migration because of the ‘pull’ of higher wages and ‘bright lights’ abroad.
Undoubtedly, push factors operated for very many of the migrants from Europe during the nineteenth century. As Hobsbawn comments, people migrated 'overwhelmingly for economic reasons, that is to say because they were poor.' Erickson has suggested that 'dark forebodings' about the future of Britain, plus hopes of economic advancement, also took many migrants from Britain to the United States in the early part of the nineteenth century. The notion of the pull of the 'bright lights' has recently been challenged, however, particularly the implication that the labourer exercised free choice in going or staying. Corrigan, arguing that labour was unfree, with no choice between working or starving, has developed a 'coercion model' of labour migration which he suggests was an important part of capitalist relations.

An examination of the migration patterns of the Cornish mine workforce during the nineteenth century is saved from parochialism in part because of the part such migrations played in the development of capitalist organisation of world metalliferous mining and investment, and in part because of the possible contribution such an examination can make towards the development of theoretical perspectives. Migration by workers in the mining industry from and to Cornwall during the nineteenth century, while similar in some ways and on some occasions to migrations from other parts of Britain, also differed in important ways. Often, it is true, the Cornish mineworkers were 'pushed' by poverty at home, not least because of the indebtedness that made poverty a structural part of Cornish mining organisation. In the depressions of the 1840s, the 1860s, the 1870s, and the 1890s there was clearly little choice between leaving or starving. At other times it might be said that perhaps they were 'pulled' abroad by the bright lights of mining frontier towns, but this would seem to miss the complexity of Cornish mining migration.

Throughout the nineteenth century the Cornish provided a highly mobile, highly skilled workforce whose expertise made a significant contribution to the world development of metalliferous mining, a contribution that can still be traced today in the use of Cornish mining terms such as 'stope', 'winze', 'rise', and 'adit' by mining engineers and metalliferous miners throughout the world. In addition the established practice of migration, in good times and bad, had important consequences for social and economic relations within Cornwall, particularly for the development of trade unionism within Cornish mining. In this paper, therefore, both the nature and the type of Cornish mining migration, and the relationship of migration to labour relations both within Cornwall and overseas will be discussed.

There were three main areas of migration by the Cornish: to North America from the 1830s, to Australia from the late 1850s, and to South Africa from the 1880s. These continents provided the greatest concentration of mining activity, and considerable Cornish settlements grew up there over time. Rowe has estimated that at least four or five thousand of the settlers of the Wisconsin region had emigrated there from Cornwall in the years between the ending of the Black Hawk war in 1832 and the discovery of gold in California in the 1840s - at which time many of them removed to the goldfields. In Montana from the 1880s the racial feud between Cornish and Irish was a fundamental part of the war of the copper kings - Marcus Daly employed only Irishmen at Anaconda, while William Clark employed only Cornishmen. These came either directly from Cornwall or indirectly from the Comstock or California. In Australia, Blainey has drawn attention to the numerous 'cousin Jacks' at the gold mines of Ballarat and Bendigo in Victoria and at the silver, lead, and zinc mines of Broken Hill, New South Wales, while during the 1860s the copper fields of Moonta and Wallaroo in South Australia became known as 'Little Cornwall'. In South Africa, prior to the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer war, it was estimated that 25 per cent of the white mine workforce on the Rand came from Cornwall.

In addition to these foci of mining migration, however, the Cornish migrations were both more diffuse and of earlier beginning. From the late eighteenth century Cornish miners had been exporting themselves, initially into England and Wales but also abroad. By the early nineteenth century there were Cornish miners working in the copper mines of Anglesey and the lead mines of Shropshire, while migration between mines in different parts of Cornwall was also clearly established:

Oh I'm a miner stout and bold,
Long time I've worked down underground
To raise both tin and copper too
For the honour of our miners.
Now brother miners I bid you adieu
I'll go no more to work with you
But scour the country through and through
And still be a rambing miner.

The difficulty of travel within Cornwall and into England, later eased by the opening of the Saltash railway bridge in 1859, apparently made it almost as easy to cross the Atlantic as to cross the Tamar. Certainly it was
possible to book right through to Houghton, Michigan, from the general stores in St Just.16

In the 1820s English mining companies were taking Cornish miners and Cornish equipment to Central and South America, especially to the silver mines of Mexico.17 These were recruited by the John Taylor Company, were bound by contract, and had part of their wages remitted home. Perhaps the most famous migrant at that time was the engineer Richard Trevithick, who, in 1828, was maintaining the pumps at the San Judas Socavon in Peru.18 Absent for eleven years, he returned destitute to Cornwall, having borrowed the fare from Robert Stevenson.19 At Hayle he was given a tumultuous reception, 'welcomed home by all the neighbourhood with the ringing of bells'.20 As Trevithick had not written or sent any money home the whole time he was away, it is perhaps fortunate that his wife’s comments on his arrival have not been recorded. Cornish miners were to continue to be found in Central and South America throughout the century, in Mexico and Peru but also in Brazil, Chile, and Bolivia,21 while by the 1890s they were also to be found in Central and West Africa and India.22

As Blainey has pointed out, the development of any particular mineral deposit during the nineteenth century cannot be seen as purely coincidental but was closely related to wider economic factors.23 Thus it was not unusual for the initial opening up of an orebody overseas to coincide with a depression in the Cornish industry which released skilled labour for overseas expansion and development. But, in addition to this, at all times there was a steady passage of miners from Cornwall taking their skills to participate in less significant fields, like Brazil, or to reviving areas such as Nevada after the first boom, or to continually growing districts such as Butte where there was almost constant demand. In addition there was a demand for Cornishmen as prospectors and as consultant experts. This fondness for Cornish consultancy was most marked among British investors in North American mines24 and continued even after the loss of the chance to purchase the (subsequently) rich Batemans Eureka in the 1870s.25

As technological changes and increasingly capital intensive working began to change the nature of metalliferous mining, the skills and expertise of the Cornish began to come into question, and the risk of investing on the strength of a Cornishmen’s report was increasingly stressed. In 1881 The Economist termed this:

... a most risky of investments ... A company is formed, two or three mining captains are readily obtained, some picked up lumps of ore are assayed ... and an allotment made to a small sprinkling of gullied investors.26

The dispersion of migrant miners throughout the world and throughout the various metalliferous fields of the foci continents suggests that even in hard times their migration was purposive. They were not simply fleeing poverty at home but, rather, were setting their faces purposefully towards mining frontiers where their skills would be required. This was often in conflict with the recruiting policies of developing British colonies where stress was placed on the need for migrants to have agricultural skills:

The majority of the immigrants are natives of Cornwall and it appears they have all been more or less accustomed to work in mines. From what has been seen and heard of these people it is apprehended that, taking account of their previous habits and occupations they are not the descriptions of persons who are likely to prove useful in the colony.27

Such a migration pattern meant that on the majority of occasions the Cornish miner did not benefit from assisted passage schemes. Thus, unless he was going out under contract, the miner had to pay his own fare. While this frequently led to further indebtedness at home, it added greatly to the miner’s autonomy and freedom of movement. It separated him from those who were simply fleeing from poverty perforce. Robert Louis Stevenson’s description of the Cornish on their way to America in the 1880s caught this autonomy very well:

There were no emigrants direct from Europe — save one German family, and a knot of Cornish miners who kept grimly to themselves, one reading the New Testament all day long through steel rimmed spectacles, the rest discussing privately the secrets of their old world mysterious race. Lady Hester Stanhope believed she could make something of the Cornish — for my part I can make nothing of them at all ... A division of races, older and more original than Babel, keeps this closed esoteric family apart from neighbouring Englishmen. Not even a Red Indian seems more foreign in my eyes.28

This freedom of movement and the autonomy it gave had important implications for the Cornish miners’ relations with other workmen, as will be discussed below.

Although it was their skills as hard rock miners that made Cornishmen in demand, this did not prevent them participating, like many others, in the ‘rushes’ that followed discovery of alluvial deposits of minerals — the gold rushes of California and Victoria and to Griqualand West for diamonds. Unlike many others, however, the Cornish miner was more likely to remain at the field as panning dried up and as holes in the ground began to deepen. At that point he might send word back to his ‘cousins’ in Cornwall to come and join him. The varying development of mineral
deposits, and the spread of these alongside major mining areas, all helped to determine the type of migration undertaken by the Cornish miner.

II

I would suggest that there were two kinds of mining migration from Cornwall. The first was that of the ‘single roving miner’ who, if married, left wife and family in Cornwall and who (married or single) returned as often as possible to Cornwall either to work or en route for somewhere else. The second type was emigration pure and simple, with the miner and his family leaving Cornwall never to return. This type characterised the periods of deep depression within the Cornish industry, most particularly the late 1860s and late 1870s; indeed, during the decade of the 1870s, one third of the population of Cornwall — men, women, and children, migrated in this way. For these there was little or no autonomy and freedom of movement. They had their passages paid either through the Poor Law or through various Assisted Passage schemes such as the County Distress Committee fund established in Cornwall to coordinate charitable relief during that depression. Yet there was no clear-cut relationship between depression in Cornish mining and family migration. The period of deepest crisis and depression in Cornwall, the 1890s, was marked by migration of single men not families.

Although it was the single roving miner that was most characteristic and the most significant form of Cornish labour migration, such mobility did not preclude settlement abroad. Passage money might be sent back to enable families to come to Mexico, Michigan, or Moonta, or the miner himself might return to fetch them: ‘... and indeed, this is one of the most pleasing traits in the miner’s character’. Likewise, young men would often return to Cornwall to find a bride, and would subsequently either go back overseas with her or, more often, leave her to keep the home in Cornwall. The ‘three lives’ system of leaseholding allowed this type of migration perhaps more easily than did other renting systems elsewhere.

It is a quite common thing for them to stay away for 20 years without ever returning and very often after being married only a few months. In the majority of cases they send money home and write the most affectionate and interested letters. They are an extraordinary people ... Inevitably returning to Cornwall was infrequent. For every miner who returned home to work, visit, or marry there was another who rarely if ever returned. Yet it seemed that for most miners the intention was ultimately to return to Cornwall with sufficient to give up mining for a small farm or shop, or to become an innkeeper. Some few did achieve this, but more did not. Inevitably, too, many lost touch with wives or relatives at home. Thus some returned to find parents dead or wives remarried — a favourite theme for popular novelists at the time. In any case returning to Cornwall was expensive, and often miners apparently preferred to use their money to get to another mining area. Thus miners went from Mexico to California, from California to Nevada, from Nevada to Michigan or Montana, or South America, or Australia, following the development of mineral deposits as fishermen follow shoals of fish.

The Report on the Health of Cornish Miners of 1904, illustrates this migration pattern clearly. The Appendix to the Report gave the history of all miners who had died in the Redruth, Camborne, and Illogan districts during 1900, 1901, 1902. Of the 342 deaths examined, 216 or 64 per cent had worked in one or more mines abroad, while among the 126 men who had only worked in Cornwall all save five had worked in more than two mines. Almost certainly there was under-reporting of some miners’ work patterns when details had to be obtained from the workhouse rather than from the miner’s widow or close family. All those men who had worked abroad had been to more than one country, most had been to several, as the following examples show:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case No</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Place(s) Worked</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Condurrow (Cornwall) some years Durham 15 years Montana 2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>93</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Dolcoath some years Peru 3 years California 8 years South Africa 1½ years South Africa 4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>112</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>St Day Mines first Dolcoath some years California 7 or 8 years Mysore, India</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Obviously such a wide ranging pattern was less typical of the younger men. These had, in the main, gone chiefly to South Africa. One such miner, aged 26 when he died of miners’ phthisis, had worked in the ‘Cornish mines until 19 yrs of age — then left for South Africa, worked as engine driver there until the war commenced, removed to Australia;
return to Africa; came home very ill’. 37
Indeed, South Africa dominated the Report. Of the men who had worked abroad more than half of them had spent some time there. Fewer had been to North America (68 men, 31 per cent) and only six had been to Australia which by that time had ceased to be a focus for the single roving miner and had become a place of settlement. The wide dispersion pattern remained however: 11 men had been to Central America, 15 to South America, and 19 to the Mysore gold mines in India. Six had worked in coal pits (in Wales, Durham, and Pittsburgh), four had been to West Africa and one each to Italy, Ceylon, Germany, Demerara, Cumberland, and the Straits Settlement. 38 Not all these last were hard rock mines so presumably the men went out in a management capacity.

Such mobility between Cornwall and other countries, coupled with the way in which migrants were classified in the returns of both Britain and the receiving countries, makes the actual extent of the Cornish diaspora extremely difficult to quantify. Isolated though they may have been, the Cornish figured in the returns as ‘English’, and, when classified by occupation, the metalliferous miners were often not distinguished from coal miners and both were often subsumed under the heading ‘mechanic’. Furthermore, at the time of mass migration during the depressions, it was not solely the underground mineworkers who left. The extent of mine closures during these times made it imperative that other mineworkers migrated also. The masons, smiths, and carpenters previously employed at the mines had almost as little hope of work in Cornwall as the miners themselves. These skilled men formed part of the Cornish mine labour migrations, but their migration patterns and the numbers involved are even more difficult to quantify, since they are categorised in the returns by their original craft. Thus, although there are clear indications that migration from Cornwall was considerable, and passing references build up a qualitative picture — ‘Probably Cornwall contributed a sensible contingent of the 42,990 miners of British or Irish origin who emigrated for example, in his case study of emigration to New South Wales from the United Kingdom in the course of the ten years 1881-1891’39 — the full extent would appear to have been underestimated. Ross Duncan, for example, in his case study of emigration to New South Wales from Cornwall and Gloucestershire, omits from his calculations all those who had what he terms ‘pre-industrial’ skills, e.g. carpenters. 40

It is too crude to suggest that these Cornishmen who went from mine to mine throughout the nineteenth century were forced to do so by the prospect of starvation, except at the most general level. It is true that the Cornish were poor. Earnings were lower than those of most colliers and diet was correspondingly poor. Both wages and food were better overseas. But the high degree of autonomy with which they came and went suggests more than simply the coercion of starved labour. In addition, the relationship between these migrant miners and Cornwall remained sustained and complex. A man might return and take work at a Cornish mine after an absence of many years, only to find a deduction made from his first month’s earnings to cover an ‘advance’ owed from years before. 41
At least one Cornish newspaper ran a ‘News from Foreign Mining Camps’ column from the 1890s to the outbreak of the First World War. This carried gossip culled from correspondents the world over: news of weddings, deaths, visits home, labour disputes, new mineral strikes, etc.

James Stevens, head Timberman at the Tamarah Shaft of the Calumet and Hecla mine, and his son-in-law Fred Jeffry, were amongst those who took advantage of the cessation of work in the Copper Country to pay a visit to friends in the iron Ranges and in the course of their journey visited Thomas Chenhall, a brother-in-law of Mr Stevens. 42

This autonomy of the Cornish mineworkers was sustainable not least because they had a particular and specific skill. None the less, such autonomy and mobility should not necessarily be interpreted as suggesting that these Cornish were ‘free’ labour; it seems rather that their migration pattern justified, possibly more than any other group of industrial workers, Marx’s description of migrants as ‘the light infantry of capital’. 43
That is, a segment of the labour force which could be flexibly deployed wherever there was a need for labour to enable commodity production to expand. It was in this way that the Cornish mineworkers played a crucial part in the expansion of world metal production during the nineteenth century, and it was this that also played a crucial part in determining relations of production within Cornwall.

III
There has been general agreement among writers, both today and in the past, that the Cornish miners were far from the forefront of labour struggle and that in Cornwall strikes, industrial unrest, and political activity were conspicuous by their infrequency if not by their complete absence. The Webbs were unable to find any evidence of trade unionism when they investigated during the 1890s44 and a similar lack of evidence had been noted by earlier commentators: ‘No one has heard of disagreements between Cornish miners and their employers — no combinations or unions exist on the one side or the other.’ 45 The cause of
this apparent lack of militancy has been variously ascribed. Rowse, for example, in 1969 appeared to attribute it to some deep innate Celtic virtue. Other twentieth-century writers have adopted a more multi-causal approach while differing in the stress they put on various factors. Thus Hamilton Jenkin attributed much of the miners’ behaviour as he saw it to their indentification of interest with the mine companies and their ability to ‘face facts’. Todd and Harris, on the other hand, saw occupational isolation and the influence of Methodism as of more importance: ‘Methodism unmasked the folly of ever expecting that the New Jerusalem could be found in Cornwall.’ Both Rowe and Rule support this view of the controlling role of Methodism, although neither give it predominance as a causal factor. Rule quotes a writer who, in 1865, commented: ‘We have few turbulent demagogues in Cornwall. A miner who has any rhetorical powers and strong lungs prefers the pulpit to the platform.’ (Interestingly enough, among coal miners, whom commentators see as the antithesis of the Cornish miner, these or similar features are often cited as being the causes of militancy or radicalism, but what is significant here is not that apparently similar causes were ascribed for apparently contradictory behaviour, but that both causal conjectures are open to question.)

The factor that is often given most prominence in explanations of Cornish labour relations is the Tribute system of work organisation. Under Tribute a miner would bid for the pitch to mine, in competition against his fellows, and received a percentage payment of the value of the subsequent ore, thus appearing to be a self-employed contractor selling the proceeds of his labour rather than his labour itself. Rule suggests that, despite other explanatory factors, Tribute was of paramount importance in explaining the weakness of Cornish trade unionism during the period he studied, prior to 1870.

Yet while it may be true that the Tribute system offers an explanation of events in the early part of the nineteenth century, it cannot be said that this holds true of the later part. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere that to focus primarily on Tribute is misleading, not least because the majority of the mine workforce were not Tributers, and because this ignores the relationship of the Cornish metalliferous mining industry as a whole with the rest of the world, in particular the growing links of investment and ownership. Above all, by focusing on one aspect of work organisation in Cornwall, it overlooks the role played by labour migration overseas, a role which suggests that they were far from being ‘anti-union’ as such.

Cornishmen were prominent among the founders and officers of the Miners’ Union on the Rand, in the Australian Miners’ Union, and in the Federation of Western Miners in the USA. It was not until 1917, however, that trade union organisations arrived in Cornwall. I would suggest that the patterns of Cornish mine labour migration had much to do with this late development. This is not to suggest a ‘safety valve’ theory with migration acting to prevent social unrest or the development of class consciousness at home — indeed I would suggest that class consciousness was on occasion quite clearly expressed in nineteenth century Cornwall but rather that the existence of an established habit of migration provided an escape route during a period of change within the home industry where otherwise the development of clear class antagonisms might have been expected to occur.

This period of change was closely linked to the expansion of world metal production in which the Cornish miners played such a part. Its beginnings can be traced to the period of Free Trade with the lifting of tariffs on imported ores during the 1840s. The establishing of the Amsterdam metal market at the time, and the increase of imported tin ore from the Straits, undermined Cornwall’s position as price setter for that metal, but the home industry survived the initial crisis relatively unaltered. Not until the drastic falls in the price of copper during the 1860s and of tin during the 1870s was change forced upon a reluctant industry. The further fall in the tin price during the 1890s, to its lowest point of the century in 1895, saw Cornwall finally moved from its position of premier producer of the world’s copper and tin to one of residual importance. At this time the Cornish industry was completely restructured, from cost book to limited liability company, and from what Samuel has termed ‘handcraft relations’ to full capitalist relations of production.

It was during this period of change and reconstruction of the Cornish mining industry that the beginnings of recognisable labour organisation occurred in Cornwall. But it was also during this time that the large-scale migrations occurred — the ‘family’ migrations during the late 1860s and again during the late 1870s, and the migrations of ‘single roving miners’ during the 1890s. The closure of the mines, and the massive shedding of labour from those mines that stayed open, provided powerful ‘push’ factors while ensuring that embryonic labour organisation withered. It was not surprising that the Webbs found no signs of trade unionism in Cornwall during the 1890s — most of the men were away, and those that remained behind and in work vented their frustrations in arson and sabotage below ground rather than in strikes and formal organisation.
From the 1850s onwards there were sporadic but large-scale spontaneous combinations at individual mines. As Rule has pointed out, these were not marked by class hatred, nor by attempts to form unions, but were of similar character to earlier recorded disputes. They were speedily crushed, but contained elements which were to crystallise in 1866 with the first real attempt at unionism — the founding of the Miners Mutual Benefit Association (MMBA) among the workers in the mines of East Cornwall and Devon. Almost all these mines were major copper producers and thus the level of men’s earnings had been drastically affected by the fall in price of copper, but the widespread membership and the apparent enthusiasm with which several thousand men joined the MMBA cannot be solely attributed to this. Drakewalls mine, at Gunnislake, for example, was a tin producer, yet there the Association was strong. The officers of the Association claimed ‘20,000 out of the 45,000 miners in Devon and Cornwall’, yet even half that number would have been a substantial membership. Certainly the mine companies saw the Association as a major threat for no sooner had the formation of the Association been announced, its rules published, and subscriptions collected, than they moved to a lock out that lasted almost two months. The March setting day (when pitches were agreed) at Devon Great Consuls mine took place in the presence of 150 soldiers of the 66th Regiment, 129 Police, and 150 Special Constables together with three local magistrates and the local Director of the Mine, yet only four pitches were taken up and the assembled miners stayed firm to the Association.

The speakers at the mass meetings of the MMBA — held in the open air and opened with a hymn — laid great stress on the fact that as members of the Association they were fighting for their rights as free-born Englishmen, and for ‘Liberty’. Yet, despite this rather eighteenth century style, there is evidence to suggest that the MMBA leadership itself clearly saw the class antagonisms implicit in the lock out: ‘They had the crushing weight of capital against them. The weight of capital was worse than king-craft, and worst than any priest-craft for the poor sons of men.’

Furthermore there was a recognition of the relationship of migration abroad to struggle at home. ‘Liberty’ could be found in a foreign land, and a possible bargaining counter existed in the use of migration as a threat:

The best way to make the higher classes feel this would be for every miner to cast his wife and family upon the support of the parish (cries of ‘yes’, ‘hear, hear’ ‘we shall be obliged to do it’). Every man could leave a place when he liked, and if the

Agents persisted in putting down the Association, the men should remove to another land and leave their families for others to maintain (‘hear, hear’).

However, the migration of the single roving miner could only be a threat in times of high labour demand. In 1866 it was no threat at all as the price of copper continued to fall. By the end of the decade most of the East Cornwall mines had closed. Many were never to reopen. Later commentators were to remark on the number of families kept alive by remittances from men who went overseas during this time in addition to the thousands who, with their families, left Cornwall for good.

The MMBA was crushed as much by the fall in the price of copper as by the swift action of the employers. After this attempt at unionisation, industrial action was spasmodic and took various forms, strikes, riots, and political agitation for reform of working conditions (following the enfranchisement of most of the mineworkers in 1884). In 1900 the votes of the ‘Rand Miners’ newly returned from South Africa following the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer war in 1899 played a decisive part in the defeat of the Conservative sitting member for the Mining Division. But there was no further attempt to form a trade union of Cornish miners within Cornwall during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There were two clear reasons for this. The first was the collapse of the industry that began in the 1860s. Labour organisation could not be sustained on a falling market and subsequent industrial action mirrored the peaks and troughs of the industry within the context of its overall decline. Secondly, the long established practice of migration offered an alternative to attempting to ‘build the New Jerusalem’ in Cornwall. Migration was not solely coincidental with the depressions in the Cornish industry, since throughout most of the nineteenth century the Cornish miner had a skill in world demand. Changes at home and abroad changed the nature of that demand and effectively de-skilled the Cornish miners but migration, either temporary or permanent, continued to offer an escape route for a considerable while. So it was that large-scale labour organisation did not become established in Cornwall until the outbreak of war in 1914 when migration was no longer possible.

During the war years the antagonisms between mine labour and capital in Cornwall became clearly expressed and conflict of interest could no longer be masked. There were a series of long and bitter disputes, including a three-month lock-out at Levant mine in 1918. These involved both underground and surface workers, and were concerned with both wage levels and union recognition. During this period the majority of
mineworkers in Cornwall joined either the Dockers’ or the Workers’ Unions, whose officials had first become involved in Cornwall during the strike of the china clay workers in 1913. In their turn the mine companies combined to form the Cornish Mines Employers Federation. Both sides were represented on the Joint Industrial Council for the Tin Mining Industry established in 1919, but this did not initially achieve much success in raising wage levels for the mine workers, which by now were among the lowest in the country.66 By 1920 a general strike by all Cornish mineworkers seemed imminent, and was only averted by a last ditch wage offer from the Employers.

The crisis in the industry was heightened by the post-war decontrol of food prices, and there were riots in several parts of Cornwall in which farmers who had raised the price of their butter, milk, and eggs had their produce smashed as they brought it to market. The Unions organised protest demonstrations at which clear class antagonisms were expressed:

Mr Behenna (WU organiser) said ... There were thousands of babies dying in the country and at inquests the coroners returned verdicts of ‘natural causes’. A truer verdict would be ‘capitalism’. ... 

Mr J.H. Bennets (WU) said ... the Government were to blame for the present plight. Instead of treating all classes alike they had only studied one class — the capitalist. A bigger output was urged, but how could men on a C3 diet do A1 work? ... 

Mr Robinson (Carmarth) stated that he had six children but was only in receipt of 7/- per shift. ... he wanted to see butter brought to the alleys of the workers as well as to Albany Road and the people in the principal streets of Redruth.57

By this time, however, the mine companies were experiencing the consequences of years of profit taking at the expense of underground development, culminating in the short-term demands of the war economy. When the price of tin fell yet again, with the onset of the post-war depression, it was not surprising that the mines, with no reserves to fall back on, were in crisis. As the Cornish capitalists rationalised their assets and turned to their more profitable ventures overseas, all save two of the remaining Cornish mines closed, thus rendering hundreds unemployed and labour organisation academic. By this time there were few overseas opportunities for the migrating Cornish miner; the escape route had closed.

IV

In addition to an apparent reputation for non-militancy, the Cornish
men went north, that is compared to the numbers who went abroad, and a possible explanation may lie in the Cornish miners contempt for coal-mining, regarded as mere unskilled hewing. In fact, as Harris has pointed out, coal-mining did contain a body of skills and ‘knacks’ and a hierarchy of skills existed between borers, sinkers, hewers, and drawers. Most of these skills would, however, have been familiar to the Cornish, except possibly that of testing for fire-damp, and in the early 1870s the Cornish miner had additional skills to offer. For the collier, as Harrison has noted, the main problem was that his skills were expendable. The work could be done and coal produced — less well perhaps and with more accidents, but produced nonetheless — by the unskilled labour of agricultural workers. This tension, between ‘honourable men’ and ‘degraded slaves’ Harrison suggests, was what determined the nature of coal-mining trade unionism between 1850 and 1888. In Cornwall there does not appear to have been any such tension. On only two occasions was any attempt made to introduce unskilled labour into Cornish mines and then on a very limited scale. In contrast to the coal-fields where demand for labour grew, it was technological innovation — particularly the introduction of rock drills after 1875, decreased demand for labour, and the growth of professional trained mining experts, that de-skilled the Cornish miner and moved him from honourable man to degraded slave. In the early 1870s, although deskilling was about to begin, a Cornish miner stood to gain more by working in a metal mine overseas than in a coal-mine in Britain. With an established pattern of autonomous migration, only those men who were unable to raise the fare to Nevada or elsewhere would be likely to ‘take the bosses’ shilling’ and go north on contract, with their fares paid, to the coalfields.

This view is underlined by an examination of the Burnley coal strike of 1874, not least because one of the first actions of the striking colliers’ union (the Amalgamated Association of Miners) was to pay the fares of the incomers back to Cornwall again. Indeed, the Secretary of the AAM, Thomas Halliday, together with seven officers of the Association, faced arrest and imprisonment on a conspiracy charge for financially aiding the Cornish miners. It seems hard to believe that, isolated though Cornwall was, the miners involved had no idea they were to be strike-breakers, although this is what some of them claimed. Others became persuaded of the justice of the colliers’ cause. As four Callington miners stated in a letter home:

We consider it our duty as honourable men to inform you that we have been into Lancashire, and have worked in the coal mines in the neighbourhood of Burnley, but we did not find that ease and comfort which we expected to find, but we found hard work and not seven shillings per eight hours for one or two years which we understood we were to have; but when we were there a short time only our wages were reduced . . . . Although we had been working in the places of the men who were locked out by the employers, the poor men treated us with the greatest kindness and respect, and enabled us to reach home in safety . . . . The poor men are locked out because they wish to belong to a Miners’ Association known as the Amalgamated Association of Miners. They also desire to get coal by weight not by measure or the box. It is right that they should be united with their fellow miners as by the power of combination they would be able to claim demand and obtain their rights according to the Statute Law of this Realm. Fellow men — do not engage with any Agent just now; better days are in store for us. The Amalgamated Association is a noble institution, and it will be our moral redemption in days to come. It is ready to take us in with open arms, to aid in bettering our condition . . . .

The AAM was certainly only too ready to take the Cornish miners in ‘with open arms’ in that it did not limit itself to being a trade union solely for the Lancashire coalfields. In 1873 it numbered men from Wales, Bristol, the Forest of Dean, and Cannock Chase among its 23,676 members as well as having strong links through the Examiner system of local papers with the Potteries and with tin plate, iron, and agricultural workers. The policy of the AAM, resolved in 1872, was the regulation of wages and the use of arbitration to prevent strikes but that strikes, when they did occur, should be funded from levies on the rest of the membership. It was from this fund that the AAM officers paid the fares back to Cornwall of many erstwhile strike-breakers.

It would appear that the AAM was actively campaigning for members among the Cornishmen rather than simply endeavouring to remove troublemakers from Burnley. Officers of the Association visited Cornwall in January 1874, holding public meetings and writing at length in the local press. They urged the justice of the Association’s cause and called on Cornish miners to join them rather than accept the coal companies’ offers of work. Their approach was in marked contrast to that of the Durham miners, who the following May also sent representatives to Cornwall stating: ‘We therefore ask all strangers to keep from Durham until we have settled with our employers as we intend to resist the proposed reduction in wages.’ The Durham union was, in contrast to the AAM, a union purely of colliers, but the AAM itself, despite its broad base could not sustain the pressure of concerted demands for wage reductions from coal companies that occurred with the fall in the price of coal. Thus, although it was claimed that many hundreds of Cornishmen had joined the
International Labour Migration

AAM, their membership was of short duration. The optimism of the Callington men was not realised; ‘better days’ were not at hand for labour in Cornwall; rather, the metal mining industry also moved into depression, with wage reductions, mine closures, and mass unemployment. The migrations of the late 1870s once again eclipsed those of the single roving miner as families, aided by the Country Distress Committee, sailed away. Some 60,000 people left Cornwall during the decade 1871-81. None the less, the example of the Burnley miners’ strike was not unique, and it seems reasonable to suggest that the autonomy of the single roving miner does provide insight into the strike-breaking phenomenon. Both extreme financial straits and family migration limited this autonomy of mobility.

A similar example can be found in 1913, when three Cornishmen, newly arrived in Michigan and believed to have come as strike-breakers in the long strike at Calumet and Hecla, were shot dead by members of the Western Federation of Miners. The reporting of the killings in the Cornish press, together with a discreetly worded advertisement from the Calumet and Hecla company for mine labour, elicited a letter from some Cornish miners in Arizona, not unlike that of the Callington men thirty-nine years before:

... it is our purpose to inform miners of Cornwall what the miners are fighting for in the Copper Country ... That the struggle is a righteous one has been admitted all over the United States, and the working classes of every trade and calling have supported it morally and financially and are continuing to do so ... Thus far the mining companies have not been able to find competent miners to fill the place of the strikers. Consequently they have resorted to advertising in foreign papers that are published in mining districts for men to come and bring their families, as they are well aware that it will cost any miner all he has financially to go to Michigan, and after he gets there he will have to work to sustain them ... 85

In conclusion, I would reiterate that there was an important relationship between long-established patterns of labour migration, and the form of labour relations that occurred within Cornwall. Possibly migration acted as a safety valve for men despairing of change in Cornwall, certainly there was most frequently the coercion of poverty, but the migration of the Cornish mineworkers to the metalliferous mining fields of the world was one whose complexities transcended both safety valve and coercion theory, not least because they migrated as miners to a mine (any mine, anywhere) rather than to a ‘new world’. The Cornish diaspora poses a challenge to individualist perspectives on labour migration. Rather, examination suggests that migration was determined by international development and investment with concomitant shifts in international demand for labour. Furthermore, the history of the Cornish miner and the Cornish mining industry during the nineteenth century poses a challenge to those who interpret labour migration in terms of betterment. The Cornish mining economy was inextricably linked to the economies of the metalliferous mining fields of the world in a dialectic relationship whereby the expansion of the latter inevitably meant ruin for the former. That this expansion and change in world mineral production was assisted — indeed in many cases largely made possible — by the labour of the Cornish miners, while the consequences in terms of social dislocation, poverty, disease, and death subsequently borne by Cornishmen and women both at home and abroad 86 underlines these challenges with bitter irony.