



FROM MY DIARY

Happy new year, everybody, in a few hours.

I've acquired some volumes of "The Saints of Cornwall", by G. Doble. I think there may be six in all. Canon Doble was a Cornish antiquarian of the first half of the 20th century. He issued individual pamphlets on Cornish saints - I think there might have been 48 of these or more. These were then collected into volumes after his death.

I read through volume one last night, the saints of the Land's End district. It's clear that the good canon was extremely learned. Unfortunately his book is unreadable. Each entry is a wodge of verbiage, full of information of various sorts, but the eyes just close.

We all remember the university textbooks with which we had to struggle! I owned quite a lot of textbooks, some out of print, but I read many fewer. Doble's volume brought back memories of these. I'm not sure quite why they are so bad, but bad they are.

It seems very clear that the history of Cornwall is largely lost. It is obscure in the Roman period, and altogether vague in the sub-Roman and dark ages period. All we have to work with is place-names, and largely later saints' *Lives*. These *Lives* are often late, stuffed with padding - Mr Doble is not hesitant in condemning this - and in many cases entirely fictional.

Some of this must be owing to the small population of Cornwall. The county is long and thin and must always have been sparsely populated.

An old college friend of mine is a vicar in the west of Cornwall. On my last visit to him, many years ago, he took me for a drive around the Land's End district. Everywhere there were deserted houses and villages. This is something unthinkable in England. But there is no work. The tin mines are closed, and only so many can work in the tourism industry. So the young people must leave, and the population remains thin even today in some areas.

This must have been far worse in the sub-Roman period. If nobody lives there, then no history will be written, for history is largely about kings and cities and peoples.

However a couple of factors come to our aid. It seems that many of the local Cornish saints are also recorded in Brittany. Indeed often their cults are larger and more important there. The *Lives* of these saints, and the presence of their cult, confirm the movement of people from Cornwall into Armorica at the end of the Roman period. So there is information there, of sorts.

There are also links with Welsh legends, although less important, and even Irish legends.

All the same, it's a poor record to have to sift through for something resembling real history.

It's clear that Mr Doble was very well informed on all these sources. It is a pity that he had no editor, and was obliged to self-publish. All the same, his volumes are still an important source.

Fortunately Nicholas Orme published in 2000 *The Saints of Cornwall* through Oxford, which is a modern handbook of great value. Less fortunately it is out of print and can only be

obtained for hundreds of dollars. Oh well.
