In Memoriam Albert Bock

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A tribute to Albert Bock, co-founder of Brennos – Verein für Keltologie and Keltische Forschungen, with a publication list.


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In Memoriam Albert Bock

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I still remember vividly my first encounter with Albert Bock in 1993. I know the precise spot where I was sitting in the Berggasse lecture hall of the Department of Linguistics while our lecturer in morphology, who was manifestly unburdened by any familiarity with the Welsh language, discussed examples of possessive constructions in Welsh. I corrected the lecturer’s imprecisions and in this way revealed myself as a Celtophile. After the lecture, I was suddenly approached by a long-haired fellow student, with whom I had never talked before, and who addressed me in Welsh. From this encounter sprang a friendship of many years between Albert Bock and me. The present recollections, by necessity random, arbitrary and subjective, are nothing but a small tribute to Albert’s academic achievements.

Our collaboration was fuelled by our common interest in languages, especially Celtic languages, and our desire to establish a Celtic Studies programme at the University of Vienna. We were of course not alone in this endeavour. Together with Raimund Karl and other friends and colleagues, we spent a large part of the 1990s pushing for this goal, inside and outside the University. One crucial step was establishing the Austrian Celtic society ‘Brennos – Verein für Keltologie’. Albert was one of its founding members and for many years he played an integrative role in Brennos. The members of the society, those who were there from the start and those who joined in subsequent years, are grateful for our time with him and for many long evenings of spirited discussions.

One of our first activities was setting up a journal with the same name as the society – Brennos. It was a photocopied and hand-stapled journal, and the fact that the series started with issue -1 and that we managed to misspell the name of the journal in the footer was a dead giveaway of our insecurity and inexperience. Albert not only contributed articles about Breton and sociolinguistics, but for its first incarnation in 1995 he also created his alter ego of the Esoterikinquistor, an alter ego that perfectly encapsulated
Albert’s multifaceted inner persona: a compelling blend of cutting-edge Celtic scholarship with a dash of Viennese burlesque comedy, and scientific rigour coupled with missionary zeal. The journal did not make it past issue 2, but the experience we gained proved invaluable a decade later when we embarked on a much more serious undertaking. In 2006, Albert was a member of the constituent editorial board (from 2010, a member of the review board) of our new and more professional journal *Keltische Forschungen*, to which he was also a regular contributor.

In the late 1990s, it was not all just pure academic interest. It is a less well-known episode that around 1998/9 Albert and I developed the idea of writing a guide to Austrian spas. We even had a meeting with the Falter Verlag, but the publishers ultimately found the topic too niche. Only a few years later the big spa boom started. If our timing had been a tiny bit more fortunate – or had we been better at marketing ourselves – we could have become wellness gurus. At another time, we experimented with brewing malt whiskey in the house of Albert’s parents (suffice it to say that while a career as spa critics may have been a reasonably realistic option, one as whiskey brewers was not). Instead, we had to continue with linguistics and Celtic Studies.

In hindsight, it is astonishing how much fun we had in doing all this. At the same time, from today’s perspective, it is almost unimaginable how a group of students, not anchored in university hierarchy, could get a study programme going, but in the more open atmosphere of the nineties this was still possible. In 1999, our efforts bore fruit and a trial phase for Celtic Studies started in Vienna. Albert left his indelible mark on the Wiener Keltologie as a captivating teacher of Breton, which he had taught himself while still at school, of Celtic sociolinguistics, and of the modern reception of Celtic culture. In his classes and in extramural activities he inspired his students through his openness and his commitment, as for instance by organising field trips and language courses in Brittany.

Whenever there were two alternatives towards a goal, Albert could be relied on to choose the third path. It is little surprise, then, that the one subject within Celtic Studies that lay closest to his heart was the Cornish language. For mainstream Celtic scholars, Cornish may seem little more than the smaller sibling of the much more popular pair Welsh and Breton, and occupying oneself with it suggests a somewhat nerdy attitude. For Albert it was a congenial field of activity. Among his many profound and lasting contributions to the research on Middle and Late Cornish, it should be noted that he was one of the first to publish on the play *Bewnans Ke* (Bock 2007a, and the

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1 The three volumes of *Brennos* have been digitised and are openly available at [http://www.brennos.at/de-at/keltischeforschungen/archiv](http://www.brennos.at/de-at/keltischeforschungen/archiv).
reviews BOCK 2006 and BOCK & WEISS 2008) shortly after the unexpected discovery of its 16th-century manuscript in 1999: an article about code-switching, a topic of intrinsically general linguistic relevance. His master’s thesis from 2008 was dedicated to vowel and consonant quantity in Cornish. It is a pity that he never finished his PhD on Cornish phonology, which he had been working on for several years after 2008.

Albert was a brilliant phonetician with an ear that was as perceptive to the subtle sounds of the human voice as it was to music. This proved crucially beneficial in what became his most important project. Albert’s unique, linguistically grounded expertise in Cornish did not go unnoticed. In 2007, Cornwall Council appointed him to the Linguistic Working Group advising the Cornish Language Partnership (Keskowethyans an Taves Kernewek) on the standardisation of Revived Cornish orthography. It was there that he met the American Celticist Benjamin Bruch. At the time, it seemed as if the job of the Commission overseeing the project was to choose between two alternative spelling systems, and it was expected that Albert and Ben would take opposing sides in this debate. Instead, they joined together to find a third way – a way of compromise that ultimately led to the creation of Furv Skrifys Savomek, the new Standard Written Form of Cornish or ‘SWF,’ which was formally adopted in 2008 and which is being taught in schools in Cornwall today.

In the following years, Albert became a prolific publisher and author in Cornish, and was on the team that prepared the first dictionary in the SWF. He helped edit the first Cornish translation of Le Petit Prince and published the satirical series of radio plays Berdh yn Efanvos ‘Bards in Space,’ which he co-wrote and performed with Benjamin Bruch. Albert also created and maintained websites that hosted Cornish language podcasts and made learning materials freely available to students online at a time when Cornish speakers were only starting to realise the potential of the Internet and to take advantage of digital resources for communication and education. He also adapted open-source software for the use in Breton and Cornish.

From the foregoing, no doubt will remain that Albert’s scholarly work was of the first rank. He was never motivated by a desire for fame, wealth, or other accolades. He committed his prime years to supporting and preserving an endangered language, even though his specialisation in an ostensibly obscure niche within Celtic Studies did nothing to advance his career. Albert worked hard to ensure that after he had completed his work for the Cornish Language Partnership, Cornish would belong to the whole community of

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2 The Partnership’s slogan is maga, which means ‘grow, nurture, develop’. I have no doubt that Albert was proud of this, years before those four letters acquired a much less wholesome meaning.
Cornish speakers. Therefore it is for his humility, patience, generosity of spirit, and strength of character, as much as for his linguistic talent and academic prowess, that Albert’s contributions to Cornish scholarship and to the Cornish Revival deserve to be remembered as equal to those who started the process at the beginning of the 20th century. In recognition of his services to the language, Albert was made a Bard of Gorsedh Kernow in 2011.

But Albert’s deep-rooted commitment to linguistic diversity did not end with Celtic. Among the many other languages, which he studied, Hebrew and Yiddish must be mentioned. For a time, he was editor of the Jewish cultural magazine David. He was also familiar with Japanese, and one evening he instructed me about the dialectal relationships of Lakota/Nakota/Dakota. There are so many other unforgettable facets of Albert that I can only mention in passing here: his gift for music, his outstanding excellence as a cook, and his humanitarian convictions that found their most conspicuous expression in his work for the charity Licht für die Welt. He was a teacher to me in many respects.

According to an academic adage, first-class people hire first-class staff, and second-class people hire third-class staff. The fact that Albert could not find a foothold in academia says nothing about his quality as a scholar but a lot about the academic environment in which he found himself. The demise of Celtic Studies in Vienna in the early 2010s after a very successful decade meant a bitter personal disappointment that affected Albert close to his heart. This must have been aggravated by the knowledge that there was no academic justification for the demise of the discipline, but that it was ‘collateral damage’ of university and department politics. Albert’s withdrawal from academia in the early 2010s was sorely felt, but my hope was always that it was only temporary. He had the potential to add many more fundamental contributions, especially to the linguistic development in Cornwall – where his loss was met with shock and sadness, so great was the esteem that he enjoyed there – but insights also to the research of Breton and other languages, and to linguistics in general.

Mag. Albert Bock was born on 19 November 1974 and passed away on 17 August 2018. He leaves his wife Julia Weiss, his son Tristan, and his daughter Salome.

Meur ras dhis, Albert, a buptra re wruss’ta.
Gwynn agan bys dha aswon jy ha dyski kemmys genes jy.
Re dhokko dha gemmynro frut.
PUBLICATIONS AND ACADEMIC ACTIVITIES

The following list of publications and academic activities is based on Albert Bock’s personal website,3 with additions in places.

EDITORIAL ACTIVIES

2006–2009 member of the publication board of Keltische Forschungen.
2010–2018 member of the review board of Keltische Forschungen.
2012–2018 member of the orthographic commission of the Cornish Language Partnership.

BOOKS AND BOOKLETS

2008 together with Benjamin Bruch, An Introduction to Standard Written Cornish. A description of the new standard orthography for Revived Cornish, including general principles, spelling rules, and a list of basic vocabulary, Cornish Language Partnership 2008.

3 https://homepage.univie.ac.at/albert.bock/index.html
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ARTICLES


2010 ‘Representation of intervocalic single /l/ and geminate /ll/ in Sacrament an Alter’, self-published 2010. URL: https://www.academia.edu/283409/Representation_of_intervocalic_single_l_and_geminate_ll_in_Sacrament_an_Alter


DAVID STIFTER

REVIEWS

1995

2006

2008

2009

TRANSLATIONS AND EDITORIAL WORK

2003

2010

2015
Wolfgang Meid, The Romance of Froech and Findabair or The Driving of Froech’s Cattle. Táin Bó Froích. Old Irish Text, with Introduction, Translation, Commentary and Glossary, critically edited by Wolfgang Meid, English-language version based on the original German-language edition prepared with the assistance of Albert Bock, Benjamin Bruch and Aaron Griffith. [= Innsbrucker Beiträge zur Kulturwissenschaft, Neue Folge 10], Innsbruck: Institut für Sprachen und Literaturen der Universität Innsbruck 2015.

LECTURES AND PRESENTATIONS

2001

2003

2005

2006
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2008a together with Benjamin Bruch. ‘Nebes Geryow a-dro dhe’n Furry Skrifys Savonek’ [‘A few words about the official Standard Written Form’], Cornwall County Hall, Truro, July 2008.


ARTICLES IN DAILY NEWSPAPERS


EXPLANATIONS, WORKING MATERIALS AND ARTICLES ABOUT THE GRAMMAR OF CORNISH FOR THE FURTHER EDUCATION OF TEACHERS, TOGETHER WITH BENJAMIN BRUCH


2009a Basic Cornish affixes and clitics, April 2009.


2009c Open and Closed Compounds, April 2009.

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2010

The vowels of Cornish (version for KK speakers), August 2010.

SOFTWARE LOCALISATIONS

2003

Contributed to the Breton version of Google’s user interface.

2008a

Songbird plus the most important plug-ins (Windows XP, Windows Vista, Windows 7, Linux, OSX), November 2008.

2008b


2010


unfinished

Ubuntu Linux.

unfinished

Abiword 2.6.

unfinished

VLC.

RADIO PLAYS

2009

together with Benjamin Bruch, Berdhy yn Efanvos [‘Bards in Space’], broadcast on Radyo an Gernewegva from February 2009.

unfinished

Sowjet-Unterzögersdorf.

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