

# BRO NEVEZ

INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR THE DEFENSE OF THE BRETON LANGUAGE  
NEWSLETTER OF THE U.S. BRANCH



Pour que vivent nos langues  
So that our languages may live

*Gure Hizkuntzak bizi ditén*

*Evit ma vevo hor yezhoù*

**Pour que vivent nos langues**

**Perqué visquin les nostres**

**Pór veir nos laungg vesqiczant**

Damit unsere sprachen leben

**Pè fâre vivrè nutrè lingùe**

**Per far viure nostras lengas**

**I wakken ad idirent tutlayin nney**

**Da ch'el'le cãpinu e nostre lingue**

**KUZUL ETREVROADEL EVIT KENDALC'H AR BREZHONEG**

**No. 152**

**Dec. 2019**

# Bro Nevez 152

December 2019

ISSN 0895 3074

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The U.S. Branch of the International Committee for the Defense of the Breton Language (U.S. ICDBL) was incorporated as a not-for-profit corporation on October 20, 1981. Bro Nevez ("new country" in the Breton language) is the newsletter produced by the U.S. ICDBL. It is published quarterly. Contributions, letters to the editor, corrections, and ideas are welcome from all readers and will be printed at the discretion of the Editor.

The U.S. ICDBL provides Bro Nevez on a complimentary basis to a number of language and cultural organizations in Brittany to show our support for their work. Your Membership/Subscription allows us to mail print copies. Membership (which includes subscription) for one year is \$20. Checks should be in U.S. dollars, made payable to "U.S. ICDBL" and mailed to Lois Kuter at the address above.

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Back issues of Bro Nevez can be found on the U.S. ICDBL website

*Ideas expressed within this newsletter are those of the individual authors, and do not necessarily represent ICDBL philosophy or policy.*



## Editorial

Nedeleg laouen – Merry Christmas  
Bloavezh mat 2020 – Happy New Year 2020

May the new year bring renewed hope and action for the future of the Breton language.

Lois Kuter



## Regional Languages of France and the French Education System

Some 600 to 800 people gathered in Paris on November 30 to protest educational reforms that are viewed to be detrimental to the presence and expansion of regional languages in schools. They came from Brittany, Corsica, Occitania, Alsace, the Basque country and the part of Catalonia that is within France at the call of "Pour que vivent nos langues" ([www.viventnoslangues.free.fr](http://www.viventnoslangues.free.fr)). They were protesting reforms at the high school and college levels where learning a regional language has a lesser value toward graduation than the study of French, foreign languages or dead languages (like Latin).

Also at issue in the Education reform is the requirement that children start school at 3 (instead of 6). This is viewed as a means of indoctrinating children at an even earlier age to a French-centered curriculum, taking them from a family and community setting where they can be exposed to their regional language.

A delegation of five met with the Minister of Education Jean-Michel Le Blanquer to present their grievances. This is not the first time that speakers of different languages within France have joined forces, and joint efforts to promote regional languages will continue.

## Open letter to the President of the Regional Council of Brittany

From the Collecif des Artistes, Auteurs  
Morlaix, November 6, 2019

The following is my translation of a letter sent to the Regional Council of Brittany by the Collective of Artists and Authors – LK

To: M. Loïg Chesnais-Girard, President of the Regional Council of Brittany, with copies to: M. Jean-Michel Le Boulanger, First Vice-President in charge of culture and democracy, Mme. Lena Louarn, Vice-President in charge of languages of Brittany, and Mme. Kaourintine Hulaud, Regional Councilor for Gallo

Mr. President,

Recently you were alerted to the Call of Authors and Artists, and University Professionals opposed to the Frenchification of Breton and Gallo place-names. The demonstration in Telgruc-sur-Mer which responded to this call gathered over 600 people. Since this event we have received hundreds of signatures from individuals who join this opposition.

In this context, you took the initiative to write to the president of the postal system to ask him for clarifications, for which we thank you.

But beyond those timely actions which reached a wide public and drew media attention, the question posed by these artists, authors and university professionals is that of the linguistic policy of the Regional Council of Brittany.

In fact, they are concerned by the catastrophic situation found today for the languages of Brittany and their teaching. Lacking rights and consistent support, and in the absence of an energetic reaction, our hopes will soon be over to see our languages saved – this treasure which is ours to bequeath to future generations.

Only 3% of our children are taught in bilingual classes while the situation is much more favorable elsewhere: 50% of young Basques of the north [in France] are learning their language. We cannot accept this failure and it is difficult to not see a lack of political will.

How many generations will we have of sacrificed children deprived of their language, of their culture and history? Must we add new ones?

It is time to elevate linguistic policy to a level of higher priority in public action of Brittany, and to increase tenfold agreed-upon efforts. Well less than 1% of the Region's budget, this policy remains secondary, which is not tolerable.

We solemnly ask the Regional Council of Brittany to put the protection of our languages at a level of highest priority:

- To commit to a linguistic policy, a budget dignified of a principle public policy.
- To put into place a relationship of political forces with state services to allow a streamlined training of several hundred teachers of our languages, as was done in Corsica, to lead to a timely generalization of their teaching.

This resolute action must bring with it the creation of a teaching degree in each university of Brittany as well as significant assistance to students who wish to invest in this training.

The introduction of English or a third language could be done as early as the elementary school level according to new pedagogy. Lacking that, the development of bilingual French/English teaching will be done to the detriment of our languages.

The academic success of our children will equally be at risk since it has been established that early bilingualism is one of the keys in building the child and developing his intelligence. For now, this is no coincidence: it is in Paris that bilingual education is being developed.

We are at a crucial moment in our collective Breton history.

A veritable Marshal Plan is needed for our languages. To do nothing or so little, to avoid action any longer, will lead to the blotting out and disappearance of our history and our languages – the pillars of our collective existence.

It is a historical responsibility which weighs on the shoulders of our elected officials of the Regional Council and the President of the Region of Brittany.

A failure in this matter, for whatever reasons, will no longer be tolerable. The survival of our languages is at stake.

The signers of this letter ask that you accept to meet with them to discuss this question which is fundamental for our collective future.

This letter, taking account of the critical situation in which our languages are found, will be an open letter provided to the press.

We ask you to accept, Mr. President, the assurance of our high regard,

Signed by over 60 musicians, authors, artists, university professionals and leaders of Breton cultural federations and organizations:

## Some Numbers for Breton in Schools of Brittany

The following information is from the website of Ofis Publik ar Brezhoneg / Office Publique de la Langue Bretonne

Number of active Breton speakers 225,000  
 Number of passive Breton speakers 125,000  
 (based on the TMO-Régions survey of 2018 and Ofis ar Brezhoneg estimates)

Number of children in bilingual school programs  
 18,890

(2019 school year)

By school types:

Public Schools	9,120
Catholic Schools	5,463
Diwan	4,307

By Departments

Finistère	8,789
Morbihan	4,892
Côtes d'Armor	2,625
Ille-et-Vilaine	1,786
Loire-Atlantique	798

Number of students at the secondary level  
 (2018 school year)

Middle School	4,282
High School	598



### Fañch – ñ still under attack

When the family of Fañch Bernard, born in May 2017 finally won the right to record his name as Fañch in the courts of Quimper after two years of battle, we thought this ridiculous affront against the right to give a child a long-recognized name might be over. But no ... another case has come up with the birth of a baby Fañch in November 2019 in the area of Morlaix. The public prosecutor in Brest, Jean-Philippe Récapapé, decided to follow the Justice Minister's guidelines for writing first names which excludes the tilde from legal use. Thus the parents were told that they could not have the ñ recorded.

This family, like that of Fañch Bernard will once again be supported by Skoazell Breizh (see below) in their decision to fight this in court.

Despite demands to revise the July 2014 guidelines on the part of Breton cultural organizations, the Cultural Council of Brittany, mayors, senators, town and departmental officials, and now also the president of the Regional Council of Brittany, there have been

no changes to this document which makes Fañch illegal. How many more parents must be forced to go to court to name their baby Fañch?

## Four 50-Year Anniversaries of Note

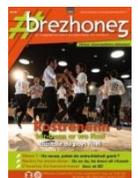


### Skol an Emsav

Skol an Emsav was founded in 1969 and has ever since been active in supporting Breton language education with evening, weekend and more intensive classes for adults. While its main focus has been on supporting Breton learners it has also been outspoken in support of a range of causes – it has organized and co-sponsored demonstrations for the Breton language, and pushed for checks in Breton, for bilingual road signs, the administrative use of Breton, and for more presence for Breton on radio and television. It helped launch the Gouel ar Brezhoneg festival and was part of the demand for expansion of university degrees for the study of Breton and Breton teaching. It has also joined other Breton organizations in supporting environmental causes and the reunification of Brittany.

Skol an Emsav has also been active in publishing books for children, bandes dessinées, posters, stickers and flyers. One of my favorite items is the agenda in Breton which has been produced since 1974. Besides the opportunity to plan your days and weeks in Breton, this day-planner has included lots of useful information with contact information for language and cultural organizations, maps, and a list of Breton-French town name equivalencies.

Since 1980 Skol an Emsav has published a bimonthly magazine called *Bremañ* which will soon reach 500 issues. The 30 to 35pages entirely in Breton is international in scope with news about other countries and languages as well as Breton places, people, and events. In 2014 *#Brezhoneg* was launched. This monthly 20 to 22-page magazine is aimed at Breton learners to practice reading. Along with short articles about Brittany and Bretons it includes some grammatical notes and tips and is loaded with colorful photos and illustrations.



See the website : [www.skolanemsav.bzh](http://www.skolanemsav.bzh)



### Centre de Recherche Bretonne et Celtique

The Center for Breton and Celtic Research was founded in 1969 by Yves Le Gallo and is part of the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences

at the Université de Bretagne Occidentale in Brest with affiliated researchers at the Université de Rennes 2. It has 45 on the faculty, including linguists, historians, Celtic studies scholars, ethnologists, and specialists in literature – all focused on ancient and modern Breton and Celtic areas of research. In addition there are 50-plus doctoral students, 85 associated researchers and 11 administrative and technical staff.

Besides serving as a center for research and teaching, the Center has an important library with some 68,000 works, 2,300 journals, and a rich archives of documents including those of Pierre-Jakez Hélias and Anatole Le Braz, to name just two.

For their 50 years, the Center has hosted exhibits drawing from their library and archives as well as conferences and lectures.

See the website: [www.univ-brest.fr/crbc/](http://www.univ-brest.fr/crbc/)



### **Skoazell Vreizh**

The late 1960s was a period of big demonstrations and labor strikes as well as activity by the Front de Libération de la Bretagne (FLB) which attacked symbols of the French state. While scrupulously avoiding human injuries, the FLB bombed sites such as police garages, statues, and even the Versailles palace. In 1969 fifty-three Bretons were arrested for suspected FLB activity and Skoazell Vreizh was launched by four Bretons then in Paris – historian Erwann Vallerie, student and future lawyer Yann Choucq, journalist-writer Xavier Grall, and medical doctor Gwenc'hlan Le Scouëzec.

The aim was to raise funds for trial expenses. Since that period some 300 to 350 Bretons have been assisted financially and morally, not counting support of families of those imprisoned for their action as Breton militants. The latest beneficiaries for court costs were the families of two babies named Fañch whose parents fought (and are now fighting) for the right to have ñ and not just n in his name. The fight goes on ...

Resolutely rejecting extreme-rightists and anyone accused of xenophobic, racist or anti-Semitic acts, Skoazell Vreizh has been important in supporting those facing court battles or risking jail for their action in support of Brittany and its languages and culture.

See the website: [www.skoazell-vreizh.bzh](http://www.skoazell-vreizh.bzh)



### **Eau et Rivières de Bretagne**

This organization was initiated in 1969 by two fishermen concerned about preserving rivers and streams of Brittany being polluted by the industrialization of agriculture. It was originally called “Comité pour le protection et la multiplication du saumon dans le Finistère” (Committee for the production and increase of salmon in Finistère). The focus on fish expanded to water quality more generally and the organization became “Eau & Rivières de Bretagne” (Water & Rivers of Brittany).

It would collaborate with the “Société pour l’Étude et la Protection de la Nature” (SEPNB) founded in 1959 which would become “Bretagne Vivante” which had a wider environmental range of action and research. But Eau et Rivières would keep its focus on fighting projects and development which imperiled the streams and rivers of Brittany.

Today this organization has a paid staff of nineteen with a hundred or so regular volunteers. The organization has 1,134 individual members and 103 affiliated associations. Beside working to protect Brittany’s waters from destructive development, Eau et Rivières provides hundreds of workshops and education programs for schools and communities and it also publishes a quarterly magazine and pedagogical materials.

See the website: [www.eau-et-rivieres.org](http://www.eau-et-rivieres.org)

[information for this short note was gleaned from articles featuring Eau et Rivières in *Ar Men* 232, Sept-Oct 2019]

### **Brittany Loses its “Atomic Clown” Jean Kergrist (1940-2019)**

Jean Hamon was born in the small town of Kergrist in central western Brittany in 1940. He would enter a Dominican seminary in the Rhône region of France but gave up plans for a priesthood in 1966 to join the theater in Lyon, taking on the name Jean Kergrist. From 1967 to 1975 he would be a creative part of the Centre dramatique national de Lyon.

In 1975 the Atomic Clown was created and Jean Kergrist portrayed him at protests of nuclear power plant development throughout France and Europe and later in Brittany at Plogoff in the late 1970s. Kergrist’s humorous and satirical theater of one was a success and he created the Théâtre National Portatif. Besides taking on nuclear power, this traveling portable theater would confront uranium mining, pollution from the industrialization of agriculture, algae tides, climate

change, the medical industry, militarization, corrupt (and less corrupt) politicians, and the church, among other institutions. He would champion human rights and especially environmental protection.

Jean Kergrist was active for over forty years with the organization Eau et Rivières de Bretagne (see above) as well as the Goupe d'Action Locale du Centre Ouest Bretagne which addressed needs of communities of central western Brittany.

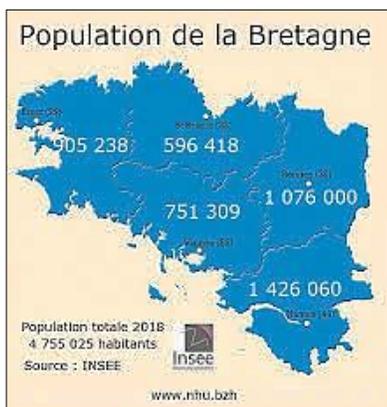
Kergrist was the author of some twenty works of history, stories, novels and essays. In 2003 he published *Les Bagnards du Canal de Nantes à Brest* (The Convicts of the Canal from Nantes to Brest) based on extensive historical research of the use of prison inmates to dig this canal which traverses the length of Brittany. This was grueling work under the worst of conditions which sometimes led to deaths. This book would be the basis for theater productions (on the canal banks themselves) and a film documentary.

Jean Kergrist was not afraid of offending the powers-that-be, but he made an impact by making people laugh. His creativity, theatrical and literary talent, and his determination to expose and fight against the evils of society – especially the attack on the natural environment – will be missed.

## A Few Statistics

### The Population of Brittany

The following map was produced by Ni Hon-Unan (“Ourselves”) an online media resource covering all five Breton departments and a range of subjects (nhu.bzh). The statistics have been drawn from the INSEE (Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques) but if you visit their website and look for statistics on Brittany, you will find numbers for the Region of Brittany (4 departments of Finistère, Côtes d’Armor, Morbihan and Ille-et-Vilaine).



### 2018 population

Finistère	905,238
Côtes du Nord	596,418
Morbihan	751,309
Ille-et-Vilaine	1,076,000
Loire-Atlantique	1,426,060

## The Sea and the Breton Economy

A study by the Observatoire de l'économie maritime de Bretagne on maritime activity in Brittany was conducted in 2018. This concerned only the Region of Brittany – the four departments of Finistère, Côtes d’Armor, Morbihan and Ille et Vilaine, with a population of 3,328,965. This showed that 65,650 people are employed directly in maritime activity (not including tourism). This represents 5.1% of jobs in the Region of Brittany and 7,170 businesses and enterprises where at least 25% of work is related to the sea.

The exploitation of ocean products – fishing, seaweed use and product development, seafood sales ... represents 25% of maritime jobs (16,570).

Naval/military activity and construction makes up the largest portion of employment with over 30,000 jobs. Some 2,136 businesses employ 6,250 people in boating/shipping – ports for boats, instruction in nautical skills, and shipping services. Brest and Lorient employ the most people – 26,900 and 12,300 respectively – primarily in the area of naval defense.

With the history and presence today of maritime activity in Saint-Nazaire and the Nantes area, one can wonder what the numbers would show if the department of Loire-Atlantique was included in this study. Unless clearly stated, one can never assume that statistical reports about “Brittany” include the Loire-Atlantique.

(numbers for this short report were gleaned from a note in Ar Men 232, septembre-octobre 2019 – shame on them for not clarifying that the statistics were just for the Region of Brittany)

## Book Readers and Brittany

A study by Livre et Lecture en Bretagne shows some interesting results about the strong level of readership in Brittany. Their website (livrelecturebretagne.fr) is full of information including the study conducted in 2019. Here too, the numbers are restricted to the official Region of Brittany and excludes the Loire-Atlantique. Nevertheless here are some statistics readers may find interesting.

650 authors make a living by writing in the Region of Brittany. Some 200 are novelists, 100 focus on children's books and the rest are divided into authorship of works of poetry, theater, bandes dessinées, art books and scientific/historical works. Nearly 1 in 5 Bretons of the Region of Brittany has a membership in a public library. For France as a whole it is 12.4%. Brittany has some 1,000 libraries where four out of five workers are volunteers.

Also outstanding in the Region of Brittany is the number of literary events – some 76 festivals and book expositions in 2018 took place. 33 of those have been going on for ten or more year; 7 for thirty-plus years. 84 publishers are based in the Region of Brittany and published 1,276 books in 2018. Despite competition by online sales 146 independent book stores operate in the Region of Brittany.

(numbers for this short report were gleaned from a note in *Ar Men* 232, septembre-octobre 2019 – in this case *Ar Men* did clarify that the numbers were for the four departments of the Region of Brittany)

## Youenn Drezen, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Breton Language Author, to be Erased from Public Memory?

*The following short biography is my translation of "Youenn Drezen, Breton Language Writer and Singer of the Bigouden Pays" which appeared in Bernard Le Nail's l'Almanach de la Bretagne (Editions Marseille-Larousse, 2003). LK*

Born September 14, 1899, in Pont l'Abbé, Yves Le Drézen was chosen at the age of 12 by the Fathers of the Sacré-Coeur de Picpus congregation to be sent to their seminary in Hondarribia, southern Basque country, to train him for missionary work.

Passionately attached to the Breton language, he worked with a wine merchant in Guilvinec before starting military service in 1920 and came into contact with young people who had just created the Breton nationalist movement Breiz Atao in Rennes. He became a journalist in February 1924 for the *Courrier du Finistère*. His friend Jakez Riou joined him there in 1928 and when Youenn Drezen was dismissed at the beginning of 1931, Jakez Riou immediately put in his resignation. The two shortly joined the daily newspaper *Ouest-Journal* which had just been created to compete with *Ouest-Éclair*. Jakez Riou was named to Brest and Youenn Drezen got a post in Vannes where he remained until the war.

In the first issue of the Breton language literary review *Gwalarn* which came out in March 1925, Youenn Drezen had an article appear, and he and would be

one of its most faithful contributors for nearly 20 years. During the war he participated in the production of *L'Heure bretonne*, the newspaper of the Parti Nationalist Breton and headed the weekly review *Arvor* in 1943-1944 which earned him arrest and numerous months of imprisonment at the Liberation. Acquitted by the court and freed, he went to live in Nantes where he opened a café while continuing to write in Breton. Then he retired to Lorient where he died February 16, 1972.



It was in 1941 that his great novel *Itron Varia Garmez* (Notre-Dame-des-Carmes) appeared, considered to be his masterpiece. Another great work by him was published a short time after his death – *Skol-Louarn Veig Trebern*, L'école buissonnière du petit

Hervé Trébern. Besides numerous articles, he is also credited with stories for children, original theater pieces and translations of Greek theater. Translation of his two great novels would appear later in French: *Notre-Dame Bigoudène* and *L'École du renard*.

See also *Bro Nevez* 143, October 2017, for my translation of notes about Youenn Drezen and Jakez Riou from Jean-Loup Avril's *Mille Bretons – Dictionnaire Biographique*, 2002.

## Youenn Drezen to disappear in Pont-L'Abbé

As *Bro Nevez* readers have learned, there has been outrage on the part of Bretons with mayors' decisions to opt for innocuous French language street and place names instead of identifying historically and culturally meaningful names in the Breton language (See *Bro Nevez* 151). This "Frenchification" of Breton place names has not gone unnoticed. Nor has the decision by the mayor of Pont l'Abbé to change a street named for the Breton language writer Youenn Drezen to honor instead police officer Arnaud Beltrame.

Colonel Beltrame was killed in 2018 when he traded places with hostages in a supermarket in southern France taken siege by an Islamist gunman. Certainly, it is fine to honor this brave man (who is not Breton or associated with Pont l'Abbé in any way) but it need not be done at the expense of obliterating the name of a major Breton language author. There are other more visible streets in Pont-Aven that could be renamed Colonel Beltrane.

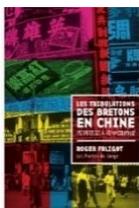
An argument given for the removal of a Youenn Drezen street name is that he was active during World War II in the Breton nationalist movement and wrote some anti-Semitic articles during that period. This is true enough, but if presumed collaboration with Nazi Germany or the expression of anti-Semitism were enough to blot out the presence of famous writers or

politicians In French history, there would be need for extensive renaming of streets!

This would not be the first time that a history of “collaboration” was used in recent years to target Breton language writers – the name Roparz Hemon seems to remain taboo for public presence, although his Breton language research and learning materials and his extensive body of literature are well appreciated. The problem seems to be that it is only the names of Breton language authors who raise alarm when they are honored for their considerable linguistic and literary achievements in public signage. Those who contributed to French literature who expressed the same or even more virulent hatreds seem to be quite acceptable.

History is important. It is important to face the ugliness of anti-Semitism and racism that was widespread in earlier decades and centuries and understand it in the context of its times. The history of Breton nationalists during World War II is complex. Some of those active in the Breton nationalist movement in the 1930s and 40s were anti-Semitic and collaborated with Germany with the hope of gaining independence or at least more autonomy for Brittany. But, others were certainly not, and some served in the French Resistance. Honoring Youenn Drezen for his significant contribution to Breton language literature is not equivalent to accepting his anti-Semitic thoughts or ignoring that both French and Bretons actively collaborated with Germany during World War II.

Here in the U.S. there is considerable debate over the naming of streets and buildings for those who were slaveholders. It is important to recognize that many of our heroes – like George Washington – held beliefs about human beings that are abhorrent to us today, although not unusual for their times.



### A New Book From Brittany

Reviewed by Lois Kuter

**Roger Faligot. Les tribulations des Bretons en Chine.** Les Portes du Large (Rennes). 2019. ISBN 978-2-

914612-32-6. 568 pages.

Reviewed by Lois Kuter

I have long been accustomed to the fact that when French or American media and writers talk about the “French” doing this or that – today or longer ago – there is little effort to distinguish the “French” from Bretons, Basques, Corsicans or other distinctive peoples within France. When it comes to world

exploration, Bretons have played a dominant role and in this book about Bretons in China, it is clear that Bretons were in the forefront of “French” presence in that country.

The earliest Breton to explore China was Pierre Malherbe (1570-1637) from Vitré who landed at Macao, Canton and Hongzhou in 1596 at the age of 26. This was after a stay in Mexico, Peru and then the Philippines. This was an expedition where Malherbe was looking for trading opportunities and he also put his expertise in mining to work. He would not be in China for a long time but left rich documentation of his travels and impressions of this country which he found beautiful.

Many other Bretons would follow Malherbe, both to explore the establishment of privileged trade status for Brittany and France and to serve as missionaries. It was part of colonial strategy, but Bretons also served to defend China in its wars with Japan and Korea and to support different powers within China who fought for dominance to protect their country from western take-over. Faligot presents the Breton presence in China chronologically, demonstrating the complex and often difficult relationship Bretons established.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century Breton Jesuit mathematicians and astronomers were part of an expedition sent to Emperor Kang Xi by Louis XIV. The Jesuit missionaries would be in competition with other Catholic and Protestant missions. The scientific knowledge and tools they brought were welcome; their religious efforts less so. The 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries would also find Bretons active in developing sea trade, and Europeans developed a taste for the silk, tea, spices and porcelain brought back from China.

Missionaries would continue to travel to China, to convert new Catholics, but also created hospitals and schools. They were not always welcome. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain would engage in military action to protect and expand access to ports in China. Bretons would also be involved in France’s military action to protect economic expansion and the missionaries who were a force in introducing the French language and culture. A remarkable figure – among others – was Prosper Giquel (1835-1886) who would build a military arsenal and naval flotilla for the Chinese, and would insure that students had access to naval and military training.

Also of this period was Jules Verne (1828-1905) who was born in Nantes. While he never visited many of the exotic sites found in his novels – including China – he gleaned details about them from travel accounts, geographical studies and other documents. His novel *Les Tribulations d’un Chinois en Chine* (*Tribulations of*

a *Chinaman in China*) (1879) was famous, and Phileas Fogg (*Around the World in 80 Days*) was one of a number of Verne characters to travel to China.

Roger Faligot's book tells the story of a number of Bretons who would travel to China – not just as tourists, but as people on a religious or secular "mission." In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century you have the brothers Gérard and Joel Mesny who would fight epidemics and set up medical training and hospitals. Also a doctor but perhaps better known was poet and novelist Victor Segalen (1878-1919).

Another colorful Breton of this period was Jean Cremet (1892-1973) who was active in the Communist Party of Brittany and France in the 1920s and served as a spy for Russia. He had the mission to travel to China where he worked with Hô Chi Min, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xioping to build Communism there. Believed assassinated in the early 1930s in China he in fact escaped using a string of aliases and fake IDs. André Malraux and his wife assisted him in clandestinely returning to Europe to live in Belgium. Cremet would figure as a character in Malraux's novel *The Human Condition*.

Missionaries, military and naval officers, commercial traders, teachers, doctors, diplomats, businessmen, scientists, engineers, artists and writers ... Bretons have had a varied role in China's history and China has had an influence on Bretons since the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. Sometimes Bretons have been part of an imperialist agenda and other times they have supported China in its own political ambitions and changes. Sometimes their engagement has been welcomed, other times they have been expelled from China or even met their death there. It is a long and complex history and readers of this book will not only learn about the international reach of a number of extraordinary Bretons, but a great deal about the history of China.

Enhancing the text are some 200 illustrations and photos (color and black and white) of people, archival documents, objects, and very helpful maps. One can find the 214 keys of Chinese characters translated into French and Breton as an appendix as well as an extensive index to names.

Roger Faligot has authored some 50 historical studies and historical novels. His works with a focus on China include:

*L'Empire invisible – Les Mafias chinoises* (1996)  
*L'Hermine Rouge de Shanghai* (2005) which features Jean Cremet  
*Brest l'insoumis* (2016) which features the Mesny brothers and Victor Segalen

*Les Services secrets chinois de Mao à Xi Jinping* (2015) – published in English as *Chinese Spies, from Mao to Xi Jinping* (2019)

## Les Portes du Large Publishers

Portesdularge.com

This publishing company was founded in 2001 by Bernard Le Nail (1946-2010) with the aim to highlight the international orientation of Brittany its people throughout history. Many of the publications feature explorers who went to every corner of the world from the 16<sup>th</sup> century through the present day. While some books focus on a particular individual most focus on the larger presence of Bretons in places such as the China – as in the book reviewed above – Brazil, Mexico, the Philippines, Australia and the Pacific seas ... and North America.

One of my favorite books is Bernard Le Nail's *Explorateurs et grand voyageurs Bretons* – a dictionary of hundreds of Breton explorers. While not published by Portes du Large, Bernard Le Nail and his wife Jacqueline Le Nail who carries on the work of this publishing house have also published several wonderful dictionaries of authors of Brittany.

The Portes du Large books that might be of most interest to American and Canadian readers of *Bro Nevez* are the following. These are available for ordering on the Portes du Large website: [www.portesdularge.com](http://www.portesdularge.com).

*Noms de lieux bretons à travers le monde*, by Bernard Le Nail (reviewed in *Bro Nevez* 81, February 2002)

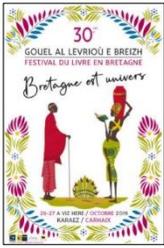
*Le chevalier de Kerlérec (1704-1770), L'affaire de la Louisiane*, Hervé Gourmelon (reviewed in *Bro Nevez* 91, August 2004)

*La Bretagne et la guerre d'indépendance américaine*, Philippe Carrer, 2012

*Les Bretons en Amérique française 1504-2004*, Marcel Fournier (reviewed in *Bro Nevez* 99, August 2006)

*Les Bretons dans la ruée vers l'or de Californie*, Olivier Le Dour et Grégoire Le Clech (reviewed in *Bro Nevez* 105, February 2008)

*Les huguenots bretons en Amérique du Nord, volume 1 & 2*. Olivier Le Dour et Grégoire Le Clech (reviewed in *Bro Nevez* 125, February/March 2013 and 128, November 2013.



## Festival du Livre en Bretagne

Carhaix, October 26-27, 2019

[www.festivaldulivre-carhaix.bzh/](http://www.festivaldulivre-carhaix.bzh/)

Each year at the end of October the town of Carhaix hosts a book festival which allows authors and publishers to display their work. Besides the presence of dozens of Breton writers, there are workshops, presentations, and activities for children.

For it's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary the festival chose as its theme "Brittany is universal" and the following is an eloquent presentation of this choice (my translation):

*The theme chosen by the organizers will be in all its simplicity the famous phrase of the writer Saint-Pol-Roux: "Bretagne est univers!" As everyone knows the Breton diaspora is found worldwide. That is what Saint-Pol-Roux expressed in these terms: "one of its fellows on every plot of the earth, one of its fellows on every wave of the sea."*

*In bringing to its side the splendors of other peoples and cultures, other languages ... Brittany has built a solid identity, open to the world, formed by a tolerance of and curiosity about diversity. In these times of confusion and withdrawal with notions of exclusion, "fear of the other" and flattery of the basest instincts of man, the Festival opens widely its doors and windows on authors from peoples sometimes living on the edge or confronted by conflicts likely to threaten their fundamental liberties.*

*Culture in general and literature in particular can no doubt also serve as bridges for unity between peoples. They must allow us to better know each other, to better appreciate each other and to fight against wishes for exclusion wherever they come from. This opening on the world in no way prevents a solid rooting in the Breton culture as has been shown every year in the thirty editions of the book festival of Carhaix. This is what the thirty-year anniversary will try to show at its modest level.*

A much-anticipated celebration of books from Brittany and the world, the Carhaix festival is also the opportunity to recognize authors who have made outstanding contributions to the book world. This October the following were recognized.

The Carhaix Prize for a Novel was established in 1991 and this year recognized Frank Darcel for his novel *Vilaine Blessure*.

The Carhaix Prize for a short story in Breton was created in 2010 and this year recognized

Mai-Ewen for *Begad avel ebet*.

The Prix Xavier de Langlais was created in 1976 and recognizes a work in prose or poetry in the Breton language. This year the prize was awarded to Pierrette Kermaol for all her Breton language works.



## ABER and Pierrette Kermaol

Learning Breton as a young adult Pierrette Kermaol came to appreciate the rich body of Breton language literature.

She mastered Breton to a level where she could write and contribute articles to Breton journals and in 2000 she created ABER, a literary review in Breton which provides a critical look at Breton literature and publishes original works, translations and essays in this quarterly magazine as well as in book form. Readers of *Bro Nevez* have been able to enjoy some of the English language abstracts that staff of Aber have sent to me for *Bro Nevez* and, although very short, these provide a glimpse of Brittany's literary richness.

In March 2019 Aber organized a conference on the Breton language author Yeun ar Gow (1897-1966). While a number of presenters at the conference shed light on this important figure in Breton literature, I am reprinting below two short contributions in English by Pierrette Kermaol.

### ***Yeun ar Gow en hon lennegezh / Yeun ar Gow in our literature***

Pierrette Kermaol

Yeun ar Gow, who was born at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, lived in the Breton speaking traditional society throughout his childhood and adolescence. He saw this world collapse after World War I: the beginning of the modern urbanized society in the 50-60's, the abandonment of the religion – an important thing to him – and above all the Breton language losing ground in the daily life and at home. But he also witnessed the revival in Breton literature with Tangi Malmanche and Yann-Bêr Kalloc'h's work at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Gwalarn, that propelled the modern Breton literature, was founded in 1925 and Yeun ar Gow was one of those who collaborated with the magazine.

In fact, he stood between two very different worlds and this situation had a profound impact on his literary work, and gave him a special place in our literature.

As a political activist and writer he devoted his whole life to the struggle for the future of Brittany and the Breton language.

At the age of 16, he discovered the *Barzhaz Breizh*. Reading this work was a turning point in his life: with the Breton literature he discovered Brittany's history.

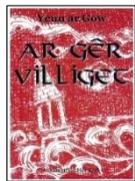
Yeun ar Gow started to write in the 1930s, probably from 1934 onward and wrote his whole life though he gradually lost his eyesight.

His work is abundant and diverse. In his most famous work, *E skeud Tour Bras Jermen (In the shade of Saint Germain's tower)*, he tells his childhood and adolescence. Besides its literary value, this work has an ethnographic aspect. Yeun ar Gow tried many literary genres: plays, tales, poems, songs, translation (*Robinson Crusoe, Treasure Island*), many articles, and a novel: *The Cursed City*.

He wrote the most part of his texts after World War II: the persecutions he suffered, as did many other political activists, didn't put an end to his activism, nor to his work as a writer. He was willing to integrate tradition and modernism. He collaborated with the magazine *Gwalarn*, where he published folk tales. He didn't praise the past: he made known a rich but endangered heritage, and he fed, in his own way, the new literature that had just been born.

There are significant differences between Yeun ar Gow's work and *Gwalarn*: Yeun ar Gow's motto is *integration*, while one of *Gwalarn*'s major inputs is *the concept of break*. Another difference: Yeun ar Gow tried to prove something, to propose principles of life: Brittany, religion, etc... while the masterpieces published in *Gwalarn* ask questions; the authors write to seek to understand the problems they have to face.

Nevertheless, Yeun ar Gow is an important writer in Breton literature.



**Ar Gêr Villiget: Penaos e voe savet ur vroad kristen war zouar Arvorig / The Cursed City: How was set a Christian nation in Armorica.**

Pierrette Kermoal

*The Cursed City*, written and published in 1962, is the only novel and last work by the Breton writer Yeun ar Gow (1897-1966).

Subtitled "The Wonderful Story of the Bretons" by the author himself, this novel is based on the legend of the mythical Kêr-Iz, the sunken city on the Douarnenez Bay.

*The Cursed City* shows how Brittany was founded, a Celtic and Christian nation, in Armorica. In fact, this novel tells the origins of Brittany. The writer refers to the legends – Kêr Iz, King Gradlon, saint Gwennole, – the history, and on the oral and written tradition for that. During the 5<sup>th</sup> century, a lot of Britons forced to leave Britain invaded by the Angles and Saxons, landed in Armorica, guided by monks, who played a major role in their passage and settlement on the other side of the Channel. Yeun ar Gow shows how Armorica was conquered both by the Britons and the Christian faith, to become what is today: Brittany.

The story shows that this passage was not a break: on the contrary, the links between the new country, Brittany, and the other Celtic countries are pointed out: the saints, a lot in the novel, among them five out of the seven holy Founders, come from Ireland or Wales.

In some respect, *The Cursed City* has been written in the same spirit as the *Barzhaz Breizh*: La Villemarqué's work, whose aim was to ensure the existence of Brittany as an historical, geographical and linguistical unity, while it has disappeared as a nation in 1789. On its part, the novel explains the origins of the nation.

This novel is also the prolongation of the writer's activist activities: the building of a new Brittany.



**Deep inside a Breton skull  
N° 61 - Did Merlin, our  
prophet, exist?**

Jean Pierre Le Mat

Merlin, our old prophet, has all the gifts: He is a wise guy, very knowledgeable. He has a gift of ubiquity and he moves at the speed of light. Despite his incalculable age, a beautiful young woman, Viviana, fell in love with him. He lacks only one quality: to be real.

Sure?... Could the myth infiltrate our world of plain reality?

During centuries, English scholars denied any authenticity to the ancient documents coming from their colonies or provinces. French scholars have the same irritating habit regarding the Breton texts. When they are written in a Celtic language, our venerable texts are indecipherable for them. When they become readable, they have no literary value. When they have a literary value, they are unauthentic. When their genuineness is proven, they have no historical value.

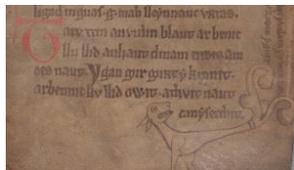
In these devaluations of Celtic heritages, the claw of the foreign master is obvious. And the narrowness of his culture appears. Times are changing. It is our duty now to make his arrogance and ignorance visible to the world. Merlin, trapped in inoffensive myths, escaped.

During the 19th century, British academics Pinkerton and Laing challenged the existence and authenticity of all the poems attributed to Merlin. They could not believe that such a character existed. Their claims were tempered by more learned and more vigilant scholars, such as Turner and Stephens. In Brittany, La Villemarqué remained cautious. He avoided talking about Merlin's poems.

In Wales, William F. Skene carried out a thorough investigation and accumulated the evidence. In 1863 he published the old texts in *The Four Ancient Books of Wales*, including poems from an historical Merlin. Twenty years later, Arthur de la Borderie published in Brittany *The True Prophecies of Merlin*.

No one could challenge the authenticity of at least two of the poems, *Yr Affelennau* (the apple trees) and *Ymddiddan Myrddin a Thaliesin* (the conversation between Merlin and Taliesin). These poems, composed in a very archaic form, are unquestionably Merlin's. Other poems, like *Yr Oianau* (the pigs), or *Cyfoesi Myrddin a Gwenddydd ei Chwaer* (the dialogue between Merlin and his sister Gwendyz), first composed by Merlin, have been overloaded and modified by followers. The other more than sixty poems attributed to Merlin, despite their value, are questionable. Merlin probably wrote the first version. But add-ons and alterations distorted the original poem, like the ivy that covers and at the end kills the tree on which it develops. Oh well! I claim them too. Even though the last version is not Merlin's, these poems are part of my Celtic heritage. Merlin goes ahead masked, which is in his very character.

Merlin's poems can be found in the *Black Book of Caermarthen*, which is part of Skene's compilation. This book is a manuscript dating back to the 12th century, perhaps a little later. Deep in my Breton skull, I imagine the situation. Anglo-Norman scholars like Geoffrey of Monmouth translated old Celtic texts into Latin. It was a literary success, a kind of medieval best seller. It awakened Welsh scholars to the value of their literature. Patiently, silently, they searched their old archives, questioned old people, invited wandering poets to their table. They wrote down their inheritance, which the bards had preserved in words that were handed down from generation to generation. Unfortunately, too, the scribes



transformed some pearls they saved from oblivion, bringing them up to date. Old poems are burdened with false prophecies or considerations about the events of the twelfth century.

Let's dive into these Welsh texts. They keep track of a high Bardic poetry from the sixth-century. At this time, the languages of the Welsh and Armorican Breton were not clearly differentiated from an old Celtic language. These texts can be legitimately claimed by us, the Bretons of the continent, without impoverishing the Welsh. Unite, unite, Celtic cousins!

Through these sources, we know the real Merlin. He was at once a prophet, a warrior during a fatal battle and a madman taking refuge in a forest. His poems tell us more about him than later legends and all comments from academics. They reveal that he fought for King Gwendoleu at the Battle of Arderydd, that historians date 573. Gwendoleu was defeated. The king was probably killed there.

The dialogue between Taliesin and Merlin evokes the battle of Arderydd. The poem *Yr Afalennau* reviews the event. Merlin feels responsible for the death of Gwendoleu, Gwendyz's son. Gwendyz was Merlin's sister and wife of Rydderch. This misfortune has made Merlin crazy. But among the apple trees, he finds one that brings him consolation. It embodies the race of Gwendoleu, and the hope of Merlin.

The old poems prove that Merlin is a real historical character and an authentic prophet. The long debates between nineteenth century scholars consecrated Merlin as the author of these masterpieces. But it also gives back to Merlin his flesh and blood. Deep inside my Breton skull, I see farther than the scrivener who found, not the heir, but the one who created the inheritance. I am not a scholar with a dry heart, an academic who has become himself an authentication document because he lives among old documents. As I read the poem, I feel that the prophecy grips my brain, I feel it is true. I cannot interpret it. It evokes probably facts and men who are foreign to me. But the vision is too strong, the violence too close, the colors too bright for it to be a mere literary invention:

5. Sweet apple tree in the glade,  
The men of Rhydderch saw me not,  
Trodden is the earth round its base:  
These untamed crowds were so plenty.  
Gwendydd no longer loves nor greets me  
I am hated by Rhydderch's strongest scion.  
I have despoiled both his son and daughter:  
Death visits them all - why not me?  
After Gwenddoleu no one shall honour me,  
No diversions attend me. No fair women visit me.  
Though at Arderydd (Arthuret) I wore a golden  
torque

*The swan-white woman despises me now.*

6. *Sweet apple tree, growing by the river,  
Who will thrive on its wondrous fruit?  
When my reason was intact, I used to lie at its  
foot  
With a fair wanton maid, of slender form.  
Fifty years the plaything of lawless end  
I have wandered in gloom among spirits  
After great wealth, and gregarious minstrels,  
I have been here so long not even sprites  
Can lead me astray. I never sleep, but tremble at  
the thought  
Of my Lord Gwenddoleu, and my own native  
people.  
After enduring sickness and grief in the Forest of  
Celyddon  
May I be received into bliss by the Lord of Hosts.*



## Heard of but not heard – 15 New CDs from Brittany

Information for these short notes has been gleaned from Musique bretonne 260 (juillet-août-septembre 2019), Ar Men 232 (septembre-octobre 2019) and the Coop Breizh and Tamm Kreiz websites.



### **Konogan an Habask & Bernard Bizien. *Dre ar vro.***

This duo is comprised of Konogan an Habask on uilleann pipes and tin whistles and Bernard Bizien on guitar and bodhran. While the instruments might suggest an Irish repertoire, the twelve selections of this CD are from various areas of Brittany – three melodies, a march, and eight dance tunes. Roughly half are arrangements of traditional tunes and half are compositions by Konogan an Habask.



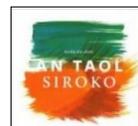
### **Roland Becker. *Musique bretonne aux confins du 18è siècle – d'après le Manuscrit de Joseph Mahé (1760-1831) et l'œuvre d'Olivier Perron (1761-1832).***

Roland Becker is a master bombard player and jazzman, but also a scholar of Breton music. Here he draws from a musical manuscript published in 1802 by Joseph Mahé to present twelve melodies and dances. Becker plays bombarde in a variety of key and is joined by a host of singers and instrumentalists (biniou, bombarde, fiddle, cello, percussions...) to recreate a soundscape of music as it might have sounded in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when it was collected by Mahé and depicted in paintings and drawings by Olivier Perrin.



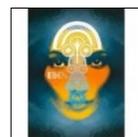
### **Mélaine Chauvel & Wenceslas Hervieux. *Dis-moi ou dis-moi non.***

This is the first album by this (married) couple who pair up here on voice and piano. Both have been immersed in the traditional music of Upper Brittany – in particular the area rich in song of Redon. They arrange traditional songs they have collected and learned through a still thriving oral tradition, and these are arranged with a jazzy, cabaret feel which takes nothing away from the spirit of Breton dances. There are thirteen selections of ridée, hanter-dro, suite de Loudéac, mazurka, scottish, polka and rond de Saint-Vincent.



### **Dañs er Jeko. *An Taol Siroko.***

This is the second CD by the group Dañs er Jeko which is composed of Jañlug er Mouel who sings in Vannetais Breton, guitarist Tito Niobé, percussionist Marcelo Costa, and bass player Gwylan Meneghin.. This CD evokes the sea and travel to tropical areas of Brazil the African coasts, and Cuba with a swing that supports the Breton texts sung by Jañlug er Mouel.



### **Eben. *Eben.***

At the heart of this group is a trio of three young singers – Sterenn Le Guillou, Enora Jegou and Marine Lavigne – who sing in Breton. They got a solid grounding in kan ha diskan style traditional song with Louise Ebrel, but here they compose their own texts on contemporary life. Also in this group are Jonathan Dour (fiddle and cello), Antoine Lahay (electric and 12-string guitar) and Julien Stevenin (bass fiddle). The CD includes ten dance selections – polka plinn, a gavotte suite, rond Landeda, kas a barh, a plinn suite, and kost ar c'hoad.



### **Fahrenheit. *Fahrenheit.***

This group is composed of Remi Kestman (cello, song), Simon McDonnell (song, acoustic guitar), Antione Morin (flute), and Alexandre Sallet (accordion, percussions). This is their first album which includes compositions by all four members of the group in a traditional-electro-pop style. The eleven dance selections include a pile menu, avant deux, mazurka, gavotte de l'Aven, tricot, hanter dro, suite de Loudia, cercle circassien and scottish.



### **Hamon Martin Quintet. *Clameurs.***

This is the sixth album by this quintet composed of Mathieu Hamon (song), Erwan Hamon (bombarde, flute), Janick Martin (accordion), Ronan Pellen (cistre, cello), and Erwan Volant (bass guitar). These

seasoned musicians provide a selection of traditional ballads from Gallo Brittany as well as interpretations of newer compositions from a variety of sources.



**Élodie Jaffré & Awena Lucas. *Er Vammenn.***

This is a CD of eleven Breton language songs from the Vannetais and central Breton tradition, sung by Élodie Jaffré with Celtic harp accompaniment by Arwena Lucas. Guest musicians are Yann Le Bozec on bass fiddle and Meva Guegen with vocals. Jacket notes include the song texts in Breton with French translations.



**Gwenael Kerleo. *Éternité.***

This is a new solo CD by Celtic harpist Gwenael Kerleo with ten of her own compositions inspired by her residence in the Monts-d'Arrée of central western Brittany. She is one of a number of creative harp players who compose as well as arrange music.



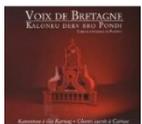
**Marco Lanhouarno. *Chañsonioù evit beilhadegoù.*** Dastum Bro Leon / Ti ar Vro Leon. DB 092.

Marc Paugam (alias Marco Lanhouarno) is an organic farmer in Lanhouarneau (near Lesneven) in the Leon area of northwestern Brittany. And he has regularly performed at veillées of this area – evening gatherings where his songs and stories in the Breton language have been well appreciated. His satirical songs reflect upon the society around him as well as more global topics such as climate change, pollution or French politics. This CD includes 15 selections and a 32-page booklet.



**Yvon Le Men and Hélène Weissenbacher. *Vers son chant.*** Edition Kerig.

Winner of a 2019 Goncourt prize for poetry, Yvon Le Men is well known in the literary world. On this CD his poetry (in French) is set to music by Hélène Weissenbacher and he and other singers perform twenty-two poems/songs.



**Kaloneu Derv Bro Pondi. *Kanenneu é iliz Karnag / Chants sacrés à Carnac.***

The men's choir Kaloneu Derv Bro Pondi was founded in 2003 and on this CD features the religious repertoire of the Morbihan. They sing in unison, in Vannetais Breton, at times accompanied by the choir's director Jorj Belz on organ and Dominique Mahé on bombarde. The 18 selections of the CD range in origin from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present with a dominance of compositions from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the CD closes with Brittany's national anthem the Bro Gozh Me Zadeu.



**Bèrtran Ôbrée. *Gherizon papilhon.***

While it is common for storytellers to use the Gallo language, singers of eastern Brittany usually sing in French. Bèrtran Ôbrée brings a unique creativity to his use of Gallo for his song compositions. On this 6<sup>th</sup> CD he is joined by Faben Gillé (oud, saz), Youenn Rohaut (fiddle, piano, alto), Julien Stévenin (bass fiddle) and Gaël Martineau (percussion). The 11 selections of the CD have a Mediterranean flavor.



**Trio dell'Amore / Pacault Tatard. *Musique traditionnelle bretonne.***

Tanguy Pacault (bombard, clarinet) and Damien Tatard (diatonic accordion) have performed as a pair for over fifteen years at festoù noz in eastern Brittany. For four years they have performed as a trio with the addition of singer Anne-Gaëlle Normand who sings both in Breton and French. This double CD presents the Trio dell'Amore on one CD and the duo Pacault-Tatard on the other, and includes traditional songs and tunes as well as newer compositions.



**Valentine Veillet, *Chanteuse du Mené.*** Grands Interprètes de Bretagne 9. Dastum.

Born in 1901 this traditional singer of the Mené area of the Côtes d'Armor grew up with song as an everyday part of rural life. She sang to pass the time while working on her farm and also for family and neighborhood events and gatherings. In the 1970s younger singers of the area created the Magnétothèque du Mené and actively organized veillées and other events for song where they recorded traditional singers. Recordings made between 1975 and 1985 show off the exceptional repertoire and style of Valentine Veillet, making her a logical choice for Dastum's series on "Great interpreters." This CD includes 26 selections recorded at veillées and public events with some songs for dances and marches as well as ballads (in French). An 80-page booklet accompanies the CD.



**Breton Music on the Canal Breizh Website**  
Canalbreizh.bzh

The Canal Breizh website offers the opportunity to listen to a wide variety of Breton singers and musicians via the internet. Music is streamed, but instead of a radio announcer, visual information is on your computer screen as the program rolls on. You get the name of the performer(s), and the selection played as well as the name and image of the CD from which it is drawn. You can also click onto a "Toute l'info" option to learn about the musicians via a link to the Tamm Kreiz directory. The Canal Breizh stie

includes quick links to information from the Dastum, Tamm Kreiz and Noz Breizh websites which multiply the information and opportunities to listen to Breton music of all styles.

## **A Travel Account from 1868 – An Irish Perspective?**

Excerpt from “Peculiarities of Breton life” *Dublin University Magazine*, Volume 73, Number 437, 1868

Editor’s note: The Dublin University Magazine was launched in 1838 by students of Trinity College in Dublin, but had no affiliation with the university. It was modeled after British magazines of the times and was Protestant and Unionist in inclination. Starting with a focus on politics it would shift to a concentration on culture and literature, with an effort to show that Irish history, literature and culture, was not to be monopolized by the Gaelic Catholics.

The following is just part of an article – no author cited – that seems to randomly focus on various locations and different aspects of Breton life. Many travel writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, drew from the work of others or from Breton writers like Emile Souvestre (*Les Derniers Bretons*, 4 volumes from 1835-37 and *Le Foyer Breton*, 1844), incorporating ideas – and sometimes very similarly worded text – from these to add color to their own more limited travel observations.

In this case the account of “Horse traffic with the Normans” and “The Roscoff Market-Gardner” are very similar in wording to the French text found in Volume 4 of Souvestre’s *Les Derniers Bretons* (I did not look for a comparison of “The Breton Farm-house”). *Les Derniers Bretons* was apparently translated into German and from that text into English but I could not find any information as to the date for the English translation. Although one can find complete copies of *Les Derniers Bretons* on the internet, I could not find the English language translation. So the question remains as to whether the author of “Peculiarities of Breton Life” copied the text verbatim from the English translation of *Les Derniers Breton*, or paraphrased it anew, or did his own translation of the French language book. There is no indication in the Dublin University Magazine article that Souvestre’s work was the source for material.

The following is the opening paragraph to the article which seems to imply – to me - that the anonymous writer was Irish - LK

“Some Peculiarities of Breton Life”

The differences that are easily discovered between the two great families of the Celtic race are, in our opinion, the result of climate and condition. Let the dweller of Dinas Bran or Carnac change his Welsh mountains or Breton heaths for the more congenial soil and climate of Kilkenny or Cork, and in the second or third generation his family will be as genuine Gaels as if they came right line from the Macarthy More or the O’Connor Kerry. The Highlanders, who are congenial with the Irish in blood, and who use a dialect of the same language, differ considerably from them in the outward manifestations of character and temperament.

What is going to be told of the inhabitants of Armorica would be equally applicable if the present people of that country were lineal descendants of an Irish colony, who had made a settlement there in the days of Malachi of the Golden Gorget.

### *Horse Traffic with the Normans*

In the interior, considerable business is done in butter and the sale of horses. The last may be said to be the staple of Breton commerce, the country furnishing Norman, Poitou, and Maine with these useful animals. The admired Normandy horses are generally purchased in Brittany at the age of three years, and then fed on the rich pastures of Normandy. Twenty-five thousand of these annually quit three departments of Brittany under the care of Norman horse dealers, and are afterwards sold as native beasts.

As a great fair approaches, the roads will be seen covered with cavaliers clothed in blue blouses and straw hats, a stout cudgel hanging from the wrist by a leather strap, and a small valise behind the saddle. These are Normans distinguished by their blue eyes, their unctuous tones, and the politeness with which they remove their straw hats when accosting or being accosted. The lean, careworn, and gloomy-looking men who never disturb their felt hats, are dwellers in Poitou and Maine, a suspicious and morose race, whose disagreeable probity forms a striking contrast with the merry and social roguery of the Normans.

The two forces coming into presence, the tug of strife begins, the Norman employing a thousand wiles to depreciate the value of the beast, the Breton aware of his cunning, hedging himself sometimes in an apparent fit of drunkenness, in a mood of stupidity or in ignorance of French. This last ruse is to put the purchaser off his guard, so that he may utter his true opinions to the interpreter. His stolid defences are generally impenetrable to the enemy’s brisk attacks, but after all, this war of wits is mere loss of time. The real value of the commodity is thoroughly well known to both parties, and is decided on after a world of trouble. The victory is frequently to the hard-headed

apparently impassible Celt. The following scene was witnessed at the celebrated *Foire de la Martyre* in Finisterre, at the door of a cabaret on the edge of the fair-green, which held about 10,000 horses at the time, the subject being a fine vigorous young horse from the Leonais, the interlocutors, Bervie, an old Breton, assuming deafness, Michel, a fair-haired Norman purchaser, brisk and clever, the inn-keeper, and an interpreter.

'What a pity!' cries the Norman, 'that this beast should have a Breton head. You might as well have a wisp of straw fastened to his neck. Only for it I'd give 500 francs for him: as it is, he's not worth the half.' (The real value of the horse was about 500 francs.)

The owner during this time looked as if he had not heard a word. He gave no sign till the Norman began to pat the beast. Then he said in the tone of deaf men: - 'Do you wish to purchase?'

'What do you want for this horse?' Bervie tranquilly went on plaiting a tress in the mane.

The interpreter repeated the question in Breton, but no response came.

'Ah! What language does the animal understand?' Bervie looked troubled from one to the other as if conscious of their saying something, and at last broke silence.

'*Petra a lavar an aoutrou* (what does Monsieur say)?  
*Me a zo bouzard* (I am deaf)!'

'He is deaf – D. take him! We wont be able to make him understand a word.'

The interpreter approached, made a speaking trumpet out of his palms and roared, 'How much is the horse?'

'A thousand francs,' the answer being in Breton.

'A thousand imps! Your hen lays a twenty sous egg every night, I suppose. A thousand francs for a beast with such a head, you want to make a jest of me, you old rogue!'

Bervie appeared to watch the Norman's gestures, and complacently uttered, 'Good horse, good horse!' He put the horse through his paces, vaunting his good qualities, now in French, now in Breton. To every censure he supplemented an eulogium.

'Offer him three hundred francs.'

The offer was made, but Bervie merely went on with his laudations, still exhibiting the good points of the steed. At last the business grew warm, the interpreter

by dint of bawling and trumpeting, made him comprehend the offers. And every demand and every offer was accompanied by a hearty slap on the palm. When they had come to an understanding with only a few francs of difference, Michel cried, 'How does he carry!' The interpreter was going to repeat the query, but Bervie did not give him an opportunity. He turned the animal's head direct to the purchaser, crying out, "Good eyes," and he began to examine them having omitted to do so before. He then requested the interpreter to get on the animal's back, and see how he carried, but Bervie was all at once galloping and trotting him at the full extent of the halter. When the exercise was concluded, they came to an agreement, and earnest was handed over, and all were going in to ratify the bargain with a drink.

'Who has outwitted the other!' said the innkeeper to Michel. 'Oh faith I have bit him; I have the horse for 152 crowns.' 'A hundred and fifty-five,' was the ready rejoinder of Bervie, whose deafness had miraculously disappeared, 'You said a hundred and fifty-five.'

'Eh, eh! You're not deaf then!' 'Oh, there's no need to be deaf, when you're asked to drink a glass of wine.'

Michel struck his head with his two palms. 'Ah, the wretch has deceived me,' said he, turning to the beast.

'Have you mounted him?' said the host. 'No.' 'Why?' 'A trifling defect which he has. He will neither endure harness nor rider.'

'I'll not take your beast, you old knave,' said he. 'No force, no force. I am satisfied with the earnest. Forty francs will do no harm to a poor Christian.'

The horse-dealer foamed with rage, he raised his whip to strike the Breton across the face, but the host held his arm. 'Don't attempt it,' said he, 'he is the best wrestler in Cornouailles; he has a body of iron. The horse has a fine appearance; you can pass him off as he was passed on yourself.'

The Norman gave way, and it was worth a deal to see Bervie examining the crowns piece by piece, and objecting to three which were a little rubbed. You would have said from his dissatisfied air that he was the cheated instead of the cheater in the affair. Michel went into the inn, and Bervie following stood opposite him as if in expectation. 'What do you want now, brigand?' 'Sure the purchaser always gives a treat.' Out in a rage ran Michel, and all within hearing burst out laughing.

When the Breton was going away, the landlord looked after in profound admiration. 'There's a man,' said he, 'he'd cheat a bailiff, if the thing could be done. He

looks like a saint, but he's a baptized demon. The Norman is beaten; the canvas lining has worn out the fine broad cloth.'

From the circumstances of the early division of Brittany among small tribes or families, and the still occupation of the canton or parish by their descendants, and the unwillingness of the people to leave the place where their forefathers dwelt, and were interred, has arisen a considerable diversity in the disposition and aptitude for business of the dwellers in the different parishes. These peculiarities are maintained and perpetuated by the rarity of marriages between parties of different parishes. In Brittany may be seen adjoining parishes, the inhabitants of one – all cultivators of the earth, the inhabitants of the other following different trades. On this side of a stream will be found an active, strenuous race employed in business, on the other a supine and stationary people. Among the wide-awake folk of Brittany may be classed the Roscovites, the people of some of the districts of Arrez, of the territory of Vannes, and the people of Brehat in the country of Treguier.

#### *The Roscoff Market-Gardener*

The inhabitants of Roscoff, a little maritime colony, might be reasonably supposed devoted to fishing or a seafaring life, but that is not the case. They own a fruitful soil where garden produce of the best kind – scarcely requires cultivation. So the inhabitants to a man are market gardeners, and nearly supply all Brittany with their choice products. Wherever you go, you will see a Roscovite sitting on the shaft of his light car, and borne on swiftly by a stout little horse, while he cheerfully chants a Breton ballad. At Rennes, about fifty French leagues from his native place, the Roscovite is sometimes seen offering for sale his asparagus and his cauliflowers to the epicures of that old city, with as little concern as if he was in the streets of Brest or Morlaix. Nay in 1830, one of them treated himself to a sight of Paris, and the King who ruled there. His stout little horse carried him and a light cargo of choice garden delicacies. Roscoff has a regular trade with Paris by Havre.

On these excursions the Roscovian is arrayed in a loose white linen blouse, confined at the waist by a red girdle of serge. He has probably laid this aside for convenience, and then he appears in his close-fitting green vest, furnished with sleeves of sky blue. His long black hair falls negligently on his neck, and his collarless shirt is secured by a tasty copper brooch, ornamented with studs of colored glass.

This same market-gardener does not display the constitutional seriousness allied to gloom of his countrymen. He is polite in his way, supple, prides

himself on acquaintance with the usages of society, but is not endowed with the sterling worth of the average Breton. He is obsequious, almost servile where he has a point to gain, and arrogant when he thinks he can be so with impunity. If he hopes to induce you into a bargain advantageous to him, no words are too choice, you are his patron, *his poor dear Christian*, his everything; he winds round you a net which you cannot unwind or break, and you are his victim.

With all his enterprise and his success in trade, our leek merchant does not lay aside a competence for a wet day. He has sensual and extravagant tastes, and the money goes as fast as it comes. If you speak to him of the wisdom of making a reserve for old age, he will probably observe that that would be as wise as to reserve all our nuts till we have no teeth to break them.

#### *The Breton Farm-house*

The farms in Brittany are generally small; consequently, there are few large farm-houses. Most of them are only thatched cottages in the shade of large elms or stationed behind thorn hedges. Generally, low and sheltered situations are selected for these farm-houses and gardens. A traveller will frequently have gone over leagues without seeing a roof or a furrow. In vain he looks round; his eye discovers nothing but heaths, copses, or woods. He thinks that all is desert; yet behind the heaths are farm-houses and cultivated fields. On the borders of the copses lie hamlets, ay, and villages in the middle of the woods. In order to judge of the population and agriculture of Brittany you must quit the highways and take those by-paths, which, at short intervals open on the road, by a fountain or a cross. While in other countries the people seek the neighbourhood of the highway for convenience of carriage, in Brittany they keep as far as possible from it, apparently with the fear of any invasion on the old customs of the country by communication with the busy, selfish, sensual world.

The Breton farm-cottage generally consists of one large room, the floor formed of tough clay, well wetted and worked with the naked feet of the boys and girls of the neighbourhood, to whom the making of a new floor affords a holiday, as it did, and perhaps still does, in our own country parts [Ireland]. High closed beds as many as are needful are arranged at convenient points of the walls, and under them are settled chests and boxes, that have probably seen centuries. On the folding doors of the beds are cut in open-work the IHS, surmounted by a cross, to be seen on the front of altars. Rye loaves are on the table opposite the window wrapped in fringed linen cloths and covered with a white osier basket. A chair with a

high and roughly-sculptured back is set on one side of the wide hearth for the master. Bacon flitches hang in the chimney, and the loft is a hurdle, as seen in many Irish farm-houses. Of course the dresser is not absent, and under it are arranged the ordinary copper pans, saucepans, etc., without which the business of a kitchen could not be carried on. Old carved cupboards and bee-hives fill vacant spots.

Round the large hearth the family assemble in the evening, and by the comfort-shedding blaze of the fire

are told an infinity of stories in some of which considerable liberty is taken with sacred personages. The unedifying portion of these stories have been left by the disours and inventors (adapters rather) of the *Fabliaux* ... The Breton narrator and his audience seem unconscious of any overt treason in these legends. They are told to enhance the evening's enjoyment and effect neither good nor evil. The Bretons still cherish a grateful remembrance of the early Irish missionaries.

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