

Nature in Brittany is a very powerful thing, both in its physical manifestations and the way in which it has been represented in Breton and French literature. It has been so interwoven into the lives and the culture of the inhabitants that it is possible to envisage the association being as old as the Celtic and Druidic roots of the land. It is impossible to escape nature in Brittany, the very fact that it is a peninsula means that the sea in all its different moods and guises is never far away. The landscape too has been well represented in literature as being hard and difficult to navigate with its heavy forestation, coarse vegetation, granite rocks and sparse roads. As if these tribulations were not enough for the people of Brittany, the literary descriptions of the most inclement weather conditions complete the trifecta. Does the way in which nature is represented in poetry and prose differ if the writer originates from Brittany, an 'insider', from that of someone born elsewhere, an 'outsider'? To discuss this question, it is necessary to look at the work of several writers who have included the theme of Breton nature in their work.

Honoré Balzac (1799 – 1850), was born in Tours, France.¹ He is acknowledged as founder of realism in European literature, being the first writer to use fiction as a way of communicating various aspects of French society at the time. He was also an 'outsider', and it is generally accepted that much of his work disparaged Brittany, its people and its culture. This is particularly true of his early work *Les Chouans*, published in 1829. The book opens with a description of Breton costume which Balzac describes as being 'bizarres' (English: strange), he does not appear to have any respect for the local culture and later in the book describes people as peasants wearing goat skins.² The following extract is also taken from *Les Chouans*.

Having growled these words between his teeth, the commandant cast his eyes in turn from the man to the valley, from the valley to the detachment, from the detachment to the steep acclivities on the right of the road, the ridges of which were covered with the broom and gorse of Brittany; then he suddenly turned them full on the stranger, whom he subjected to a mute interrogation, which he ended at last by roughly demanding, "Where do you come from?"

François-René de Chateaubriand (1768 – 1848) was born in Saint-Malo, a descendant of an ancient Breton aristocratic family, he was an 'insider'.³ He is known and respected as the preeminent literary figure in early 19th century France and for being one of the first Romantic French writers. His life work, *Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe* (English: *Memoirs from Beyond the Grave*) was published posthumously in two volumes in 1849 and 1850. In Book I. *Childhood 1768-1777*, he writes about spring in Brittany and how it is milder and starts significantly earlier than spring in Paris. He describes in detail nature's arrival in Brittany, describing the birds and the proliferation of flowers that appear.

The clearings sprinkle themselves with tall, elegant ferns; the stretches of gorse and broom glow with blossom that one takes for golden butterflies.' ⁴

¹ Notable biographies <<https://www.notablebiographies.com/Ba-Be/Balzac-Honor-de.html>> [Access 10 January 2025].

² Heather, Williams, 'Writing to Paris: Poets, Nobles and Savages in Nineteenth-Century Brittany', *French Studies*, 57.4 (2003), 475–90 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/57.4.475>>

³ Histoire Pour Tous <<https://www.histoire-pour-tous.fr/biographies/4974-francois-rene-de-chateaubriand-1768-1848-biographie.html>> [Access 23 January 2025].

⁴ Poetry In Translation

<<https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Chateaubriand/ChateaubriandMemoirsBookI.php>> [Access 23 January 2025].
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Anatole Le Braz (1859–1926) was born in Saint-Servais, Brittany⁵. He was known as the “Bard of Brittany” and was a very prolific Breton speaking writer. He was very much an ‘insider’. In his book, *Au Pays des Pardons* (published 1902), he records the Breton tradition of ‘Pardons’, religious feasts of the patron saint of a church, that he experienced first-hand. In the Pardon of the Mountains, he describes in detail the best approach to the town of Locronan.

Behind lie the huge blue billows of the country of Quimper; to the right the sacred mountain rises towards the sky, its great hump scored with deep wrinkles, where sprays of broom make one think of yellow flames running over the soil. To the left a green country – luminous green, yellow-green – stretches in undulating verdure away to the ocean. Pine trees border the road, but do not hide the view, which smiles back at one from between the bare trunks; while overhead the aerial sound of their crested tops.⁶

Añjela Duval (1905–1981), was born in Lannion, Brittany⁷. Also an ‘insider’ Duval was a first-language Breton speaker and political eco poet who wrote in Breton about Brittany. Recognized as being one of the most accomplished Breton poets and hailed a national hero, she was self-educated, and did not start writing poetry until she was in her early fifties, having spent all of her life as a peasant farmer. The following are the opening two lines from her 1967 poem *Dibreder* (English: Carefree).

A border of flowering broom

A golden sea gently undulating...⁸

There is a delicate thread that ties these extracts together, it's almost invisible, it's just one word. A word that is synonymous with Brittany and one which appears in the work of all four writers, irrespective of literary genre or movement, irrespective of them being an ‘insider’ or an ‘outsider’ and found in work published over a hundred and fifty-year period. It is a word that is accepted as being a motif of Brittany. That word is ‘Broome’, a common deciduous shrub plant, similar to gorse, that is found on heaths, in open woodland and in coastal regions.⁹ Bright yellow flowers appear in spring and remain until mid-summer. Despite its fine stems, it can grow up to six feet high.

Despite having included a common motif, broome, in their work, each of the above writers has used it in a different way and for a different purpose. Balzac, who was an outsider, was writing using realism. He had no childhood or romantic relationship with Brittany, in fact when he wrote *Les Chouans* he didn't have anything good to say about the area or the people. It is therefore no surprise that he uses broome in a very straightforward and unadorned way. There is no mention of colour or movement, nothing that brings it to life for a reader. There is an implication that the reader will be aware of the harsh conditions in which the plant can survive, echoing the harsh words used in the sentence, ‘growled’, ‘mute interrogation’ and ‘roughly demanding’.

⁵ Lapoesie <<https://www.lapoesie.org/poete/anatole-le-braz/>> [Access 15 January 2025].

⁶ Anatole, Le Braz, Goetling, Frances (Translator) *The Land of Pardons* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1906), p221. < <Access 15 January 2025><https://archive.org/details/TheLandOfPardons/page/n13/mode/2up?view=theater> > [Access 10 January 2025].

⁷ <<https://www.anjela.org/oberenn/?lang=en>> [Access 10 January 2025].

⁸ Duval, Anjela, and Leonora A Timm, *A Modern Breton Political Poet-Anjela Duval: A Biography and an Anthology* (Lewiston, N.Y.; Mellen, 1990), p. 160.

⁹ Wild Life Trust <<https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/wildlife-explorer/trees-and-shrubs/broom>> [Access 17 January 2025].

Published just twenty years later, but written earlier, Chateaubriand's *Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe*, has a much softer tone. It belongs to the Romantic movement which highly valued nature and its connection to earlier times, along with believing that natural lifestyles, i.e. rural life, were superior to urban life. He embellishes his description of the broom blossom by saying that it 'glows' and comparing it to 'golden butterflies', which evokes images of delicate, shimmering movement. This type of literature was very popular, almost de facto for the time and certainly why Chateaubriand would have chosen to write in this style but his actual description of the broome may have been inspired by experiences from his native Brittany.

Half a century later than *Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe*, Le Braz published *Au Pays des Pardons* in French. Le Braz was a folklore collector, this book recorded and described in much detail several traditional 'Pardons'. Alongside its objective to record a series of religious events it also achieves a lot more. Le Braz writes from the viewpoint of an observer but one that understands and can relate to the Pardons. He has a true writer's eye for detail, and this can clearly be seen in his descriptions of people and also in the way that he paints the simplest of scenes in such detail and colour that they conjure up images in the mind. This is exactly what he did when describing the approach to Locronan and more specifically the broome he encounters on his journey describing it as 'yellow flames running over the soil', creating the image of flames that flicker and move.¹⁰

Añjela Duval wrote her short poem *Dibreded* in Breton a little over fifty years after *Au Pays des Pardons* was published. A radical shift occurred during this period that moved representations of Brittany away from the Romantic descriptions first developed in the 19th century. There was a rejection of the picturesque images of Brittany and all things Romantic, so strong it was described as a backlash against Romanticism. This fracture was due, in part, to the founding of a Breton-language journal, *Gwalarn*, by Roparz Hemon (born Louis P. Nemo) in 1925¹¹. It was into this literary world that Duval first made her debut, starting writing after the death of her parents and as a way of coping with the loneliness she felt. She was greatly influenced by a collection of books and journals, mostly Breton writing, that she received in 1961. This was a corpus of work mostly created by the *Gwalarn* school. In her writing, Duval laments what she sees as the decline of Breton civilization and the rise of French hegemony. It is her treatment of the decline of the Breton language and the predominance of French that is perhaps the most overtly political voice in her work. Using her life experience as a peasant farmer in Brittany she wrote of a world that had almost disappeared, a loss that she felt very strongly. It could be said that here there are parallels with the work of the Romantic writers. Her life on a farm with its daily close connection to the land meant that nature was predominantly a key theme of her work and her intimate knowledge and love of nature shines through in her work.

In *Dibreded*, Duval describes 'flowering broom' and uses 'a golden sea gently undulating' to convey an image of the broome and its movement. The idea of the broome moving is common to the extracts from Chateaubriand, Le Braz and Duval, all of whom are 'insiders'. It is noticeably absent from the extract of Balzac's work. The three 'insiders' had fundamental differences from each other, such as gender, education, motivation for writing, period in which they wrote, and the predominant literary movement of the time. All

¹⁰ Anatole, Le Braz,, Goetling, Frances (Translator) *The Land of Pardons* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1906), p221.
<<https://archive.org/details/TheLandOfPardons/page/n13/mode/2up?view=theater> > [Access 10 January 2025].

¹¹ Archives Hub<<https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/efd2de98-85eb-34ad-b572-2b0d50fde8a7> > [Access 17 January 2025].
Britannica<<https://www.britannica.com/art/Breton-literature/The-Gwalarn-movement> [Access 17 January 2025].

of these were more likely to produce differences in the work than similarities. Could it be that there is an inherent, subconscious way of thinking which makes it impossible for the 'insiders' to write about Brittany without including a fundamental motif, such as broome. without bestowing upon the motif qualities that enhance and elevate.

In the same way that the essay looked at possible differences between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' representations of nature, it will now repeat that analysis for the theme of the spiritual or other-worldly. Brittany, or more accurately, the people of Brittany, have long been described as having a special association with death and the supernatural, one not found in the rest of France. In Breton folklore, death is associated with the Ankou, which is the personification of death ¹². The word Ankou is cognate with the Welsh *Angau* and the Cornish *Ankow* indicating that it comes from an earlier, shared language, Proto-Celtic ¹³. It most probably pre-dates Christianity and so the representation and the belief in the Ankou is very deeply engrained in Breton culture along with a belief in other-worldliness.

Ernest Renan (1823 – 1892) was born in Tréguier in Brittany, an 'insider'. He is generally thought to be responsible for the entire history of Celtic Studies in modern times. This Celtic association creates a Brittany that is mysterious, spiritual, and other-worldly. In his essay '*La poésie des races celtiques*' (1854), he wrote what later became one of the great clichés of Breton literature,

...une race mystérieuse, ayant le sens de l'avenir, et le secret de la mort [a mysterious race, possessing a sense of the future and the secret of death]

Renan was a Romanic writer who can be seen to have influenced not only his contemporaries but also those that came after him who wrote about Brittany and perpetuated the spiritual cliché. His work shows him to be completely genuine in his writings, he wrote as a scholar with a passion and belief in his subject. He was not motivated by fame or money.

Marie-Henri Beyle (1783–1842), pseudonym Stendhal, was born in Grenoble. Like Balzac, was one of the earliest writers to adopt realism. His lack of connection with Brittany makes him an 'outsider'. He wrote *Mémoires d'un touriste* (English: *Memoirs of a Tourist*), published 1838. According to Alan Seagar, who translated the original into English, Stendhal's motivation to write the book was financial, he was in debt. Stendhal believed that tourist books were popular and therefore would be lucrative. He did not write as though it were his own experience but chose the voice of a commercial traveller to recount his journey ¹⁴. In his book Stendhal refers to sorcerers in Brittany,

There are many sorcerers in Brittany, or at least I am led to believe so by almost universal testimony. A rich man told me yesterday with ill-dissimulated bitterness, ““Why should there be more magicians in Brittany than anywhere else? Who believes in these things now?” It is easy to see how many Bretons whose father did not have a thousand francs a year income when they were born might have some belief in sorcery. The reason for it is that these gentlemen who sell land in an

¹² John, T, Koch, *Celtic Culture : A Historical Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2006), p. 67.

¹³ Ibid, p.67.

¹⁴ Stendhal, *Memoirs of a Tourist*, Translation Alan Seagar, 1985

unknown part of the country are not bothered by the customary beliefs of the neighborhood. Terror renders the common people docile.¹⁵

In some respects, Stendhal and Renan are saying the same thing, that the Breton people collectively have a fundamental belief in unseen things which might be called spiritual, mystical or other-worldly. But this is where the similarity stops. For Renan, these beliefs are true. He believes that Bretons, through their Celtic ancestry, hold some special powers as part of their birth-right. Stendhal dismisses these beliefs; he asks why Brittany should have more magicians than any other place as a way of debunking the idea that Brittany is special in some way. He implies that the beliefs are outdated and not in agreement with the general thinking of the time. This is an interesting point as Stendhal's book predates Renan's essay by almost twenty years, but it is Renan's work that is taken seriously and achieves far greater success. Renan, as the 'insider' acknowledges and accepts something that is intangible, based on his own personal experiences in Brittany. As an 'outsider' Stendhal, was never indoctrinated in the same way as the 'insiders' and therefore he is a cynic. He tries to rationalize why these ideas still survived, suggesting that people may have an ulterior motive to perpetrate the old beliefs and use them as a way of controlling others.

When comparing and contrasting representations of Brittany made by 'outsiders' and 'insiders' it seems that the 'insiders' are more genuine in their writing. They may not write in Breton, they might write for an audience outside of Brittany, they may write with the intention of becoming famous or rich, or maybe even both. What they don't do is portray Brittany in a bad light, they don't sell out the region to reach their own goals. It is almost as if there is something magical or spiritual about Brittany that lives in the subconscious of the 'insiders'. In contrast, 'outsiders' don't seem to feel that they owe a debt to Brittany, to represent it in a good light. In fact, both 'outsider' examples reviewed in the essay were happy to benefit from using the nature and spiritual clichés that are associated with Brittany to add value to their work, but without giving any recognition to what they were doing.

¹⁵ Stendhal, *Memoirs of a Tourist*, Translation Alan Seagar, 1985 p. 165.

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