

To What Extent Should Brittany be Considered as the Invention of the nineteenth-Century?

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This essay will attempt an evaluation of the question ‘to what extent should Brittany be considered the invention of the nineteenth-century?’ The piece will begin with a brief overview and background of the historical period in question, highlighting important events from the time as well as ideologies and attitudes that effected Brittany and its various depictions. A detailed analysis will follow of two texts relating to Brittany. Firstly, *Les Chouans*¹ by Honoré de Balzac, one of his early novels that is set in Brittany during the revolutionary wars. Secondly, ‘*L’Intersigne*’ by Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, a short story from his collection, *Contes Cruels*.²

When discussing Brittany and its various representations, the dating of the sources examined is imperative. The sources selected for analysis provide a reflection of Brittany’s representations through time and it is for this reason that these selections have been made. The findings of the analysis relating to the essay title will be discussed in conclusion along with exploring the idea of how the perception of Brittany has evolved over this period of time, if at all.

The French revolution of 1789³, was in essence a rebirth of French society and this included all facets of life. The ideas of *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité*, liberty, equality and fraternity respectively, were the core principals of the revolution. This in turn meant that everything should be the same for everybody and rural Brittany, somewhat detached from the innovative new France that was being embodied ever more by a reinvigorated Paris did not fit with this model. Brittany, being the peculiar oddity that was different in many ways to Paris and the rest of France, suffered from an attitude of disdain towards it from certain parts of society, namely the upper classes. The revolution brought about a need for France to distance itself from its past as an inevitable consequence of the changes taking place. The old ancestors, the Gaul’s, were looked to as a convenient alternative to the traditional Frankish origins that now proved problematic as they represented the past. The Frank’s represented the aristocracy and the Gaul’s the people of France. Brittany with its Celtic connections was an obvious place to look for such links and started to attract the attention of French writers. These two things combined formed a strange paradox where Brittany is on the one hand vilified and persecuted for its differences, yet at the same time, it is these same distinctions that provided a link to the past desired.⁴ This also coincides with the Celtic revival in other countries with similarities to events in Wales, Scotland and Ireland.⁵

¹ H. Balzac *Les Chouans*, (Bauer Books: 2021).

² Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, ‘*L’Intersigne*’, in *Contes Cruels*, or *Cruel Tales*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963, 1985).

³ Oxford reference, ‘French revolution’

<<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095835115>> [Accessed 05/11/21].

⁴ H.Williams, *Postcolonial Brittany: Literature Between Languages*, (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007)p.80.

⁵ B.Cunliffe, *The Celts: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) pp.122-132.

At a similar period, the romanticism movement was starting to take hold across Europe. France was a little behind other countries in adopting this⁶ but when it did so, Brittany, with its wild coastal settings and rural landscapes along with the nostalgic Celtic links to the past provided the perfect hotbed for Romanticism to flourish. Brittany was the picture-perfect example of an unspoiled, untainted France. This said, Brittany remained considered as a 'primitive backwater of the new French Republic'⁷ for 'several decades'.⁸ It is here against this backdrop that Balzac gives us his novel *Les Chouans*, written in 1829.

Honoré de Balzac was a French realist writer born in 1799⁹. *Les Chouans* was one of his earliest novels and the first that he felt confident enough in to put his own name to. It was written in 1829, within living memory of the revolutionary wars and is set in Brittany during these wars. This analysis will focus, in the main, on the opening to the novel.

From the very outset of the novel, indeed, the very first line Balzac adopts a stance and tone that implies that Brittany and the Breton people are somewhat different and peculiar to his audience. The words 'to conform to our own calendar'(p.4) serve to inform the reader from the beginning that the people so forth described are not of the same as themselves, drawing distinction to the fact that they have their own calendar year.¹⁰ He continues to further alienate the Bretons from the reader by using derogatory terms to describe them, calling them 'peasants,'(p.4) and freely comparing them to animals 'they themselves mistaken at first sight for animals'(p.4) 'had a head like a bull' (p.10) and 'seemed to belong far less to our fine Caucasian race than to a breed of herbivorous animals'(p.10). He even goes so far as to mock their food 'black buckwheat-bread, - a national delicacy, the dismal delights of which none but a Breton can understand' (p.12). This quote is particularly interesting as the use of the word 'national' could insinuate that Bretons are not thought of as part of France. The author also refers to the Bretons as 'semi savages' (p.5) and takes particular care to make the reader aware that not all are peasants, 'a few burgesses were to be seen' (p.5) but reminds his reader quickly that this is due to the 'extremes of civilisation in this region' (p.5). Balzac then continues to ridicule these people as well, by describing their traditional dress 'round hats' (p.5) 'flapping brims' (p.5) and that their attire 'exhibited as many and as remarkable differences as the peasants' (p.5) this would of course not be the case in upper class Parisian society and so is looked down upon.

Balzac continues to alienate the audience from the Bretons throughout the novel via the use of over description, perhaps to disorientate the reader and make them feel like an outsider to Brittany.¹¹ A good example of this over description can be found (p.132-p.133) and the position of the audience is summed up pertinently in this quote taken from D. Kadish:

'what is constant is his being an outsider – his being like the Republican soldiers in never really understanding the Chouan viewpoint from within. It is interesting to note regarding

⁶ M. Constantine 'Romanticism, Celtic [4] Brittany' in *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. By John T. Koch (Santa Barbara, Denver and Oxford: ABC-CLIO 2006) pp.1537-1538.

⁷ Ibid p.1537.

⁸ Ibid p.1537.

⁹ Britannica Encyclopaedia, 'Honoré de Balzac' < <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Honore-de-Balzac> > [Accessed 07/11/21].

¹⁰ D.Kadish, 'Landscape, Ideology And Plot in Balzac's *Les Chouans*' *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, Vol. 12/13, No. 4/1 Summer-Fall (1984) p.45.

¹¹ D.Kadish, *Landscape, Ideology And Plot* p.48.

point of view that the reader is 'with' the Republican, not the Chouan characters throughout most of the novel and indeed all the landscapes.'¹²

Within the text there are references to the Gaul's, connections with them and to the past was required post revolution as discussed above. 'Sayon of the Gaul's' (p.10) 'The 'Gais' was the principal weapon of the Gaul's' (p.13) 'Brittany is the region in all of France where the manners and customs of the Gaul's have left their strongest imprint' (p.13). This last line can be viewed as grudging acceptance of the fact that the Bretons were the closest link to the Gaul's that was extant. As insulting and deprecating as he evidently was towards the Bretons, Balzac still sees fit to insert these links for the reader which at first glance may seem surprising but when taken in context along with the date at which the novel was written, we get a glimpse at what Balzac's own personal motives may be. Further clues of these can be seen in the quotes 'nothing that was distinctive of the new order of civilisation' (p.4) which hints at Balzac's disapproval of post-revolution Brittany. Balzac also seems to give a subtle gesture to romanticism, seen in the quote 'In order to give this history the vivid local coloring to which so much value is attached in these days' (p.4) it could also be argued as an indication of France's craving for a new history.

Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's '*L'Intersigne*' is part of a short story collection, *Contes Cruels* from 1883. It represents a step forward in time from *Les Chouans*, which was written in 1829 and along with it a shift in attitudes towards Brittany. Unlike Balzac, Villiers was a native Breton although mixed in Parisian circles and the story is written by an insider from an outsider's viewpoint so to speak.

Villiers sets the opening of his story at a similar time of year to Balzac's '*Vendemiaire*' 'the autumn solstice'(p.183) both situated around the time of Samain, a well-documented Celtic festival thought to mark the beginning of winter¹³ and a time when 'super-natural beings were more likely to be encountered.'¹⁴ This is no coincidence and in the case of *The Sign*, it is the first indication of the otherworldly aspects ahead in this story and a representation of Brittany intertwined with the dark and macabre that is also associated today.

We can also see a clear display of romanticism 'to leave Paris, to go and take a nature cure far away' (p.183) unlike the subtle waves of Balzac the sentiments to the romanticism movement are in this piece much starker. Again on (p.184) 'filled one with ideas of meditation, health and profound peace', the romanticism ties appear deep rooted as one would expect of the time of writing.

The reader doesn't have to wait long to receive their first landscape description, again a common theme in literature concerning Brittany, 'the splendour of the long autumn evenings over the wooded heights' (p.184) described in a much more pleasant tone than the harsh landscape of gorse and broom presented by Balzac. There is again a description of a pleasurable landscape (p.185) with mention of 'the rustic house' with 'tea roses climbing the walls' and 'clematis' as the author sets an idyllic scene. This then turns to the total opposite, with 'antiquity', 'cracks' and 'pale leaves' (p.186) perhaps an example of Villiers reigning in personal glorification of his homeland to appeal to the ears of his Parisian audience, whom

¹² Ibid p.48.

¹³ A.Minard 'Samain' in *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. By John T. Koch (Santa Barbara, Denver and Oxford: ABC-CLIO 2006) pp1156-1158.

¹⁴ Ibid p.1557.

the Bretons were still very different to? Indeed, the house now presents itself as having ‘some blood chilling quality’ (p.187) decorated with tomb stones as paving slabs and a door knocker now symbolising a ‘mourning-bell’ (p.187). Although Brittany has escaped from some of the prejudice of Balzac’s day it would appear harder for it to shrug off its association with the dark and the mysterious. Death is a constant theme throughout the story ‘the thought of death occurred to me’ (p.190) and invokes the sense of the Ankou,¹⁵ with subtle hints such as ‘the shrill, terrifying falsetto of the rookery’ (p.197) and the ‘Three sharp, imperious little knocks’ at the door (p.191), analogies maybe, to the screeching cart of the Ankou.¹⁶ The theme continues from beginning to end obviously culminating in the death of the priest.

The *coif* is mentioned by name, ‘her huge coif flapping like a pair of wings’ (p.188) a traditional Breton head dress that often appears in visual images depicting Brittany and is stereotyped in much the same way as the Scottish kilt. Balzac also points out traditional head dress but in a totally different manner.

‘The Brittany train’ (p.184) which has now played a crucial role in opening Brittany to outsiders is revealed in the story. This can also be seen in the many railway posters of this era.¹⁷ These often depict the stereotypical dramatic landscape or ladies in traditional dress, attempting to attract visitors in and by their very nature, are designed to accentuate points of uniqueness.

In conclusion, the Brittany that we think of today is without doubt the invention of the 19th century. The stereotypes and caricatures are there for all to see, made famous by 19th century writers. From the examples given above it is clear to see the change in attitudes towards Brittany over time, from Balzac’s representation, written just after the revolution with its scathing descriptions and at times abusive insults which encapsulate the opinions of his Parisian audience. These harsh sentiments would seem to have softened somewhat by the time of Villiers short story and even though he is a native to Brittany he is reluctant within his writing to totally abandon the established critique of Brittany and some remains, particularly its connections with death and the mysterious. However, attitudes towards Brittany have entirely changed entering the 20th century, tourism has taken hold, hastened by the opening of the railways. Some of the connotations traditionally associated with Brittany in a negative context have now become the positive entities used to entice people to visit the area, in effect we have come full circle in just over one hundred years.

Although it would appear safe to say that Brittany is, to a large extent, the invention of the 19th century, there is more than an element of truth to the stereotypical images that have been publicised. Brittany is indeed a rural location with dramatic natural and coastal settings and this theme runs throughout literature regarding Brittany, including the two pieces examined.

The use of different and unique traditional dress is also something that we are all accustomed to and another consistent theme in representations of Brittany, although these were

¹⁵ A. Minard ‘Ankou’ in *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. By John T. Koch (Santa Barbara, Denver and Oxford: ABC-CLIO 2006) p.67.

¹⁶ Ibid p.67.

¹⁷ For an example of these please see here

<<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/39/32/68/39326865e4eedd7605289c88d3e235bd.jpg>> [Accessed 04/11/21].

exaggerated and caricatured on during the 19th century as an obvious peculiarity, they were already extant.

Given a helping hand from the romanticism movement with whom Brittany and the other Celtic countries seemed to fit perfectly, the wild untamed and pure landscapes providing sanctuaries for unspoiled beauty and lore past down the ages, there has been a transformation in the way that Brittany is viewed. The head gear and traditional dress, once something to be insulted, becomes an asset for tourism. The dramatic landscapes, once harsh and difficult to navigate, become a haven for artists and romantic writers, and the association with death and the macabre, another selling point that can be used for tourism, peculiarities attract people and money and so Brittany as we now know it was born.

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