

Essay One – Representations of Brittany (HPCS6014) - Heidi Wyldewood (2100492)

Discuss the relationship between humans and the natural environment in literature or art about Brittany. You should illustrate your answer with detailed analysis of at least two of the representations of Brittany studied.

After the French Revolution, depictions of Brittany reached the wider world via collections of folklore, novels, poetry, travel writing, and art.¹ From the pages and paint it is apparent that the landscape and the Breton way of life was deeply entwined. On further examination it also appears that between the end of the eighteenth century and the end of the nineteenth, the overall perception and narration of this theme underwent a makeover. That relationship between Bretons and their environment did originally fall foul of some disgust and derision that tarnished the positive observations, but by the beginning of the twentieth century that stereotypical connection to the natural world had been permanently reimagined as the magnetic draw for a new type of trade. This paper primarily examines two portrayals of Brittany, Balzac's novel 'Les Chouans' and Trollope's account of his 'Summer in Brittany', to find this relationship conveyed by outsiders looking in. Offered too, by way of corroboration or counterpoint, is material from the works of their contemporaries: poets, artists, and travel writers. Additionally, this piece is framed at the margins by the Breton economy, so linked as it was, and is, to the land and the sea.

First to consider is the lived reality of the Breton people in their environment during the time frame discussed here. Balzac's counter-revolutionary action, set in 1799, was inspired by a visit to Brittany in 1828.² Trollope's work was written up from notes made during two trips to Brittany, in 1837 and 1839.³ In the centuries prior to the revolution, Brittany's livelihood was reliant on grain production, especially hemp and flax; vineyards; fishing; the rearing of animals; and profits from their busy ports and foreign trade, with the primary exports being linen, sails, dried fish, wine, and salt.⁴

However, the diverse economy was no longer booming by the mid-eighteenth century, and by the time the revolution came and went, the Breton *paysans* had been reduced to poverty

¹ The French Revolution lasted from 1789 to 1799, see Barry Cunliffe, *Bretons & Britons: The Fight For Identity*, (US: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 337. For folklore, see Ellen Badone, 'Folk Literature And The Invention Of Tradition: The Case Of The Barzaz Breiz Collections', *The Journal Of American Folklore*, 130.516 (2017), 204-218 (p. 204). For poetry, see Jacqueline Gibson and Gwyn Griffiths, *The Turn Of The Ermine: An Anthology Of Breton Literature*, ed. and trans. by Jacqueline Gibson and Gwyn Griffiths, (London: Francis Boutle Publishers, 2006), pp. 15-17. For art, see Musée Des Beaux-Arts De Quimper, 'Works Inspired By Brittany', *Musée Des Beaux-Arts De Quimper*, <<https://www.mbaq.fr/en/collections/our-collections/works-inspired-by-brittany-230.html>> [accessed 4th November 2023].

² Honoré de Balzac, 'The Chouans - I. An Ambuscade (Les Chouans)', trans. by Katherine Prescott Wormeley, *Project Gutenberg* <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1921/1921-h/1921-h.htm>> [accessed 5th November 2023]. For Balzac's six-week trip to Brittany, see Andrew Watts, *Preserving The Provinces: Small Town And Countryside In The Work Of Honoré De Balzac*, (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 78-79.

³ T. Adolphus Trollope, *A Summer In Brittany*, ed. by Frances Trollope, (London: Henry Colbury, 1840), pp. 1-3.

⁴ Cunliffe, *Bretons & Britons*, pp. 306-315. For wine and foreign trade, see James B. Collins, *Classes, Estates And Order In Early-Modern Brittany*, rev. edn. (Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 22.

for various reasons.⁵ Newer methods of farming and fabric production had not been implemented by the nineteenth century, and rural living was generally hard won, eked out of the land and sea, in close proximity to cycles of life and death.⁶ Undoubtedly, the seasons dictated much of the activity, and the 'villages and hamlets' remained isolated during the winter months.⁷ Up until the mid-nineteenth century the nobility dominated farming communities, and 'agricultural labourers, farm-hands, rural artisans, itinerant tradesman and beggars' sat at the bottom of the social order in 'semi-nomadic existence'.⁸ Although the area around St Malo was wealthier and literate, the poverty and illiteracy increased greatly across the region in a south-westerly direction.⁹

It is no surprise then that social and economic deficit weaves throughout Balzac and Trollope's writing, but while the latter observed the human scene with a privileged curiosity, Balzac judged it harshly, conveying an unkempt, animalistic proximity to the natural world in his descriptions of some of *les chouans*, the anti-revolutionary peasants. Within the first few paragraphs, they are as goats, by means of the skins worn next to their own skin, their hair mingling as one with the goat hair. Further on he describes them like dogs sniffing the air, 'trying to scent ... game'.¹⁰ He renders their leader, Marche a Terre, as a bull with a voice like a horn, and adds that he is coarse, rough, half-savage, stupid and ignorant, remarking that he 'seemed to belong far less to our fine Caucasian race than to a breed of herbivorous animals'. This unsavoury equation that Balzac makes with the 'savages of America, or the 'aboriginal inhabitants of the Cape of Good Hope' reveals his idea of the sub-human Breton peasant.¹¹ Trollope only resorts to degrading the Bretons in this way when he encounters drunkenness after a fair, voicing it as a moral weakness exhibited by those less fortunate than himself. After noting an 'old lady and her sow ... lying very cozily and contentedly together in the ditch', he labels those making their inebriated way home using their animals as support as 'many a human beast'.¹² A similar nuance can be detected when he tells of the 'dealers in hair' and the girls that are shorn like sheep, desperate as they were for money.¹³

Whilst Balzac appears to be actively calling on the trope of the barbaric Celt, the 'noble savage', to push forward his theme of the guerrilla-like troupe, Trollope reveals the ingrained thinking of the time via his introduction when he talks of the 'Celtic race' as a 'perfectly

⁵ Fernand Braudel, *Civilization And Capitalism, 15th-18th Century, Vol. II: The Wheels Of Commerce*, trans. by Sian Reynolds, (California: University of California Press, 1992), p. 297. For the decline of fishing and the use of ports for trade in Brittany, see Cunliffe, *Bretons & Britons*, pp. 306-315. For the lack of advancement in agriculture, see Cunliffe, *Bretons & Britons*, p. 348. For Trollope's comments on spinning using the distaff rather than the wheel and his appraisal of poverty and agriculture, see Trollope, *A Summer In Brittany*, pp. 307 and 309-310.

⁷ Robert Gildea, 'Education In Nineteenth-Century Brittany: Ille-et-Vilaine, 1800-1914', *Oxford Review of Education*, 2.3 (1976), 215-230 (p. 221). <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1050478>> [accessed 10th November 2023].

⁸ Ibid., p. 223.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 217-219.

¹⁰ Balzac, 'The Chouans - I. An Ambouscade (Les Chouans)'.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Trollope, *A Summer In Brittany*, pp. 273-274.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 322-323.

preserved specimen' with 'primeval manners' and later documenting the physiological and temperamental differences between the Normans and the Bretons.¹⁴ He states that the former 'is very far in advance of his backward neighbour - the Celt', and he further compares the coastal and the hill-dwelling Bretons as fair and healthy versus weak and ugly.¹⁵ Both Balzac and Trollope arrive at dehumanising the rural Bretons through slightly different privileged lenses, but the effect on the reader is similar. Trollope bears witness to the Breton relationship to the land as not just a love for it, but an outcome of poverty, whereas Balzac evokes it as a wilful defiance, an untameable connection to the wild. The insinuation by both is that the inhabitants of Brittany are less civilised or evolved even.

Balzac deepens his theme of the people and land being inextricably bound when he goes one stage further than likening the *chouans* to animals, and sees in them the very plants and rocks. He describes their eyes as twinkling like 'dew-drops' in the 'thicket' of their hair; facial features weathered and hard like 'granite'; the more brightly dressed of their number as 'corn-flowers and poppies in a wheatfield'; the clothes of their leader covered in 'thorns, scraps of leaves, and bits of trees and bushes' from making his way through the bog and *bocage*; and the man himself likened to a chopped tree with 'bark still left on him'.¹⁶ Balzac uses the oft used cliché of gorse to characterise the wilderness of Brittany, and reinforces the uncultivated nature of both man and plant, equating one with the other when he says it is left to attain 'the height of a man'.¹⁷ He emphasises the dangerous nature of the *chouans*, moving them with ease in the spikes and thorns, disappearing them 'in a second amongst the tufts of gorse'; seeing in it the 'muzzles of their guns'; and intimates their 'strange forms' moving like 'shadows' amongst it, wherein 'a thousand men might ambush'.¹⁸

Trollope does not use the same kind of plant associations as Balzac, but he does focus on the earthiness of the people, noting the bare feet and bare legs; the near nakedness of children playing in the dirt with the chickens; the unhewn stone of a fireplace and an earthen floor; homes made of 'unmortared stone' and 'sods of earth'.¹⁹ He portrays rural Bretons as low to the ground in their living arrangements, and at times in the damp and muck. However, almost in the reverse of Balzac's device by which he creates 'fusions of figures and landscape', Trollope projects a ghostly humanity onto a standing stone, contemplating it as

¹⁴ Barry Cunliffe, *The Celts: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 1-17. For Trollope's comparisons see *Summer In Brittany*, pp. 178-179.

¹⁵ Trollope, *Summer In Brittany*, pp. 179 and 310.

¹⁶ Balzac, 'The Chouans - I. An Ambuscade (Les Chouans)'. For *bocage* as the hedge and field system in Brittany, see Agforward, 'Bocage Agroforestry In Brittany, France', *Agforward*, (2023) <<https://www.agforward.eu/bocage-agroforestry-in-brittany-france.html>> [accessed 20th November 2023].

¹⁷ Balzac, 'The Chouans - I. An Ambuscade (Les Chouans)' and 'II. One Of Fouche's Ideas (Les Chouans)'. For other writers' use of gorse as a cliché, see Heather Williams, 'Brittany Through Balzac's Eyes (Conference Paper)', *Academia* (2023) <https://www.academia.edu/19692149/Brittany_through_Balzacs_eyes_conference_paper_> [accessed 23rd November 2023].

¹⁸ Balzac, 'The Chouans - I. An Ambuscade (Les Chouans)' and 'II. One Of Fouche's Ideas (Les Chouans)'.

¹⁹ Trollope, *Summer In Brittany*, p. 307-308 and 315.

an ancestor, fixed and unchanging 'while all around has changed'.²⁰ Trollope appears to think the Bretons are static too, while France and other parts of Europe move forward, when he pens words that echo those about the menhir. This time it is 'the Celt' who has 'remained stationary and unchanged, amid the onward progress of all around them', having preserved their 'language, character, physiognomy, and habits'.²¹ Additionally, an admiration for them is possibly revealed: 'any thing – a mere stone - which changes not, operates powerfully on the imagination, and inspires a sort of awe and respect, as for something specially privileged and exempted from the common course of nature'.²²

It has been argued that Balzac saw the Breton failure to modernise caused by their living in the 'backward countryside' and that the landscape had a 'pernicious influence' on its inhabitants.²³ Perhaps Francine's return to Brittany to raise cattle in the epilogue of the novel, and the rejection of her new life in Paris as a lady's maid, illustrates this.²⁴ He also flips the idea of the land's hold over the people when he talks of the 'nature of the land, broken by ravines, mountain torrents, lakes, and marshes, and bristling with hedges or earth-works' being the result of Breton 'inflexibility' and that it is at 'the mercy of prejudices which scorn our modern agriculture'.²⁵ He alludes to a soul-like connection, the Breton longing for Brittany, when his *chouans* turn back at the border to gaze at the scenery, absorbing what might be their last view of their homeland.²⁶ This same yearning can be seen in the works of Breton poets, Yann-Vari Yann, who described the virtues of the Breton landscape as 'miracles', and Añjela Duval, who expressed her sentiment for the 'lovely fields of Brittany' by acclaiming their worth to be far more than the love of a man or 'earthly treasures'.²⁷ Even the abject poverty noted by Trollope and corroborated in the childhood memories of Charlez Rolant, the being 'dressed in rags, bare-footed, bare-headed' and the 'disappointments, cold, hunger, deprivation, distress and sadness', did not taint that same poet's love for the 'hemp, rye and buckwheat' or the 'broom, gorse and heather'.²⁸ This passion for the land even runs through the works of Bretons who created lives beyond Brittany.²⁹

Balzac, pioneer of the realist novel, and Trollope, an early tourist and writer, both endeavoured to portray an authentic Brittany. However, Balzac deliberately set out to pen a primitive people at war in the vein of Fenimore Cooper, and had only visited Brittany briefly, preferring to 'glean information on his settings from books, maps and plans, or from friends

²⁰ E. Preston Dargan, 'Balzac And Cooper: "Les Chouans"', *Modern Philology*, 13.4 (1915) 193-213 (p. 197) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/432881>> [accessed 22nd November 2023]. For the standing stone, see Trollope, *Summer In Brittany*, pp.184-185.

²¹ Trollope, *Summer In Brittany*, p. 363.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 185-186.

²³ Watts, *Preserving The Provinces*, p. 181.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 181-182.

²⁵ Balzac, 'The Chouans - I. An Ambuscade (Les Chouans)'.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Yann-Vari Yann, 'Burzudo Breiz, c. 1860 (Lodenn) – Breton Miracles, c. 1860 (Extract)', *The Turn Of The Ermine*, pp. 354-356 and 498. For Añjela Duval, see Añjela Duval 'Karantez-vro, 1963 – For The Love Of My Country, 1963', *The Turn Of The Ermine*, pp. 365-367.

²⁸ Charlez Rolant, 'Paotr Breiz, c. 1885 – Breton Boy, c. 1885', *The Turn Of The Ermine*, pp. 420-423.

²⁹ Yann-Vari ar Joubiouz, 'Karanté Er Vretonned Doh Ou Bro, 1844 – Love Of Bretons For Their Country, 1844', *The Turn Of The Ermine*, pp. 371-374.

and relatives'.³⁰ Trollope's outlook was more open minded, his background being of good social standing but slightly eccentric and forward thinking.³¹ Therefore, with a preconceived agenda, Balzac portrayed an uneducated and dangerous primitiveness in its people, and Trollope often experienced them as an intriguing curiosity, a poor people living simple lives in a beautiful landscape. Their works are in agreement in positing them at one with their natural environment, either as prickly as the furze and as hard the rock or at ease with barefoot 'rambling over the common' and 'skipping from stone to stone'.³² Additionally, both spoke fondly of that environment. Balzac called it a 'beautiful assemblage of fields and meadows and groves and brooks', and Trollope waxed lyrical with 'such intricate and multiplied combinations of forms, and such subtle effects of light atmosphere and colour', peppering his scenes with adjectives like 'romantic'; 'picturesque'; 'perfection'; and 'delightful'.³³

These types of representations of Bretons living close to the land in the 'rural fringe', counter to all that is centre and modern within France, ultimately cemented Brittany's standing as a holiday destination for future generations.³⁴ Even Trollope observed that St Malo was already full of tourists that had no time for the scenery, and that Dinan offered 'morning promenades and pic-nics, with sketching parties, and exploring parties', and that it was 'sufficiently cheap'.³⁵ In his mind it was the landscape and people that should interest the traveller and the sketcher, not the affordable activities, and as he made his way across Brittany he was accompanied by the artist Auguste Hervieu.³⁶ Hervieu captured domestic scenes, like the 'village drinking-shop' in Juvat, which Trollope described over several pages as a single-living space jam-packed with various accoutrements and foodstuffs hanging from the ceiling.³⁷

Whilst accounts like Trollope's painted pictures, the visual image was key to the rebrand of Brittany. Artists created communes and painted *La Vie Sauvage*.³⁸ When the railway arrived in Brittany in the 1860s, outsiders were beckoned to the coast with brightly coloured posters showing pink granite rocks, sandy bays, windswept vistas, barefoot paddling and coquettish smiles.³⁹ When the French 'craze for postcards' became a 'remarkable phenomenon' from the late nineteenth century onwards it was scenes of Breton domesticity, similar to those etched by Hervieu, people with their animals; making butter; spinning; collecting wood and

³⁰ Dargan, 'Balzac And Cooper: "Les Chouans"' pp. 193-197. For Balzac and his experience of Brittany, see Watts, *Preserving The Provinces*, pp. 75-77.

³¹ Ayres, 'Frances Trollope (1779-1863)'.

³² Trollope, *Summer In Brittany*, pp. 308 and 408.

³³ Balzac, 'The Chouans - I. An Ambuscade (Les Chouans)'. For Trollope, see *Summer In Brittany*, pp. 186, 198, 354 and 404-405.

³⁴ Moya Kneafsey, 'Tourism Images And The Construction Of Celticity In Ireland And Brittany', *Celtic Geographies: Old Culture, New Times*, ed. by David C. Harvey, Rhys Jones, Neil McInroy and Christine Milligan (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) pp. 123-138 (p.126).

³⁵ Trollope, *Summer In Brittany*, pp 206-213.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 220.

³⁷ Cunliffe, *Bretons & Britons*, p. 359. For Juvat, see Trollope, *Summer In Brittany*, pp. 257-262.

³⁸ Cunliffe, *Bretons & Britons*, pp. 368-373.

³⁹ Cunliffe, *Bretons & Britons*, pp. 362-363. See also *Great Western Railway – Brittany Poster*, [JPG] HPCS6014: *Representations Of Brittany*. (University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2023).

peat; and harvesting, that adorned them.⁴⁰ The woman with her pigs was no longer worthy of scorn, but raised up as a quaint souvenir.⁴¹

This oneness with nature and the Celtic mystique is still today 'reinforced by the widespread sale of postcards'.⁴² The 'wild and romantic version of the region' is maintained.⁴³ What was once perceived negatively was slowly transformed into slogans that praised the standing still of time and the escape from modernity.⁴⁴ Even the Brittany of Balzac, so defined within France as a separate and inferior place by him, acquired a positive and poetic spin in his novel, *Béatrix*, a decade later.⁴⁵ By the early twentieth century the idea of this special relationship the Bretons had with nature became celebrated. The inside of a Breton kitchen was no longer considered a hovel but an 'opportunity' to 'experience its hospitality' by traveller and writer Ambrose Bebb.⁴⁶ To him the network of small farms was full of 'excellent crops', 'fertile gardens', and good orchards, due to the industrious nature of the Bretons.⁴⁷ Gone were the earlier judgemental ideas of slovenliness or a backward, ignorant people, and in its place an established stereotype of a Celtic idyll and a growing economy into which visitors were invited to 'let go', and to experience 'getting away from it all' beside the sea.⁴⁸

In conclusion, the writings of Balzac and Trollope helped to create a perception of the Breton people as having a special affinity with the natural environment. Balzac's negativity inadvertently added to the concretisation of Brittany's Celticity and Trollope's detailed account left a trail for others to follow. The spotlight that both writers placed on the connection that the Breton people had with the plants and animals around them eventually became part of the wider call to step into the past; to reclaim lost connections with nature; to find a simpler way of being and perhaps a barefooted freedom - on holiday.

⁴⁰ Yesterday Today, '35 Old Postcards Showing Rural Life in Brittany, France From the 1900s', *Yesterday Today: Bringing You The Wonder Of Yesterday – Today*, (2022) <<https://yesterdaytoday.net/2022/08/10/35-old-postcards-showing-rural-life-in-brittany-france-from-the-1900s/>> [accessed 10th November 2023].

⁴¹ Cunliffe, *Bretons & Britons*, pp. 409. See also Michael D. Garval, 'Visions Of Pork Production, Past And Future, On French Belle Époque Pig Postcards,' *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, 14. 1 (2015), <<http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring15/garval-on-visions-of-pork-production-past-and-futurefrench-belle-epoque-postcards>> [accessed 23rd November 2023].

⁴² Kneafsey, 'Tourism Images And The Construction Of Celticity In Ireland And Brittany', pp. 129-130.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁴⁵ Williams, 'Brittany Through Balzac's Eyes (Conference Paper)', p.9.

⁴⁶ W. Ambrose Bebb, 'Lydaw (Extract)', *The Turn Of The Ermine*, p. 383-385.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Tourisme Bretagne, *Bretagne* (2023) <<https://www.brittanytourism.com/>> [accessed 22nd November 2023].

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