

Introduction

It is the stranger details that stick in the mind: corpses on a beach being ‘eaten by yellow crabs’; a penitent soul huddled in a cold field ‘between the horses’ feet’; a red-eyed fiend clinging to the burning spire of Quimper cathedral, boiling lead dripping down on terrified spectators. The world of the Breton *gwerz* is peculiar and tormented; it dramatises events that are shocking or sorrowful, retaining all the while a kind of dignified restraint. It brings the past alive in familiar, highly specific landscapes – *this* road, *that* cottage, *that* church, still there, still bearing witness. Events and characters in these songs may be intensely local but the stories, and the manner of telling them, speak compellingly beyond the immediate borders of language, time and place.

Our aim in this volume is to make the Breton-language ballad tradition better known. One of the richest and most unusual song traditions in Europe, it received some attention for a period in the mid-19th century, when the first enthusiastic collectors of the ‘voices of the people’ began engaging with folk song and other ‘national’ traditions. The earliest published collection, Théodore Hersart de La Villemarqué’s *Barzaz-Breiz* of 1839, offered the French-speaking public a literary and highly mediated version of the tradition which made some astonishing claims for the ballads’ antiquity. The controversy that followed gave Breton ballads a certain notoriety, but despite more ‘scientific’ collections appearing later in the century, and work in the field continuing to this day, knowledge of the actual tradition has remained restricted, especially in the anglophone world.¹

This is not particularly surprising. The literatures of the Celtic languages are poorly known in the English-speaking world; even rich written literary traditions such as Irish and Welsh still have little place in the study of ‘British’ literature, and a language like Breton, with a flourishing oral tradition but a relatively sparse written record and few translations, is especially hard to access. We hope, though, to show in our collection of ballads just how much this material has to offer, not only for the scholar of comparative folk song, but for the Celtic linguist looking for new texts, the historian interested in how memories of past events are preserved and constructed in oral genres, the ethnomusicologist exploring performance contexts, and any reader with an appetite for dramatic stories and striking detail.

Breton is a Celtic language currently spoken by some 170,000 people in the far north-western corner of France. It belongs to the Brittonic branch of Celtic, and is thus a sister language to Welsh

1 For the best studies on the context and content of the *Barzaz-Breiz*, see Donatien Laurent, *Aux sources du Barzaz-Breiz: La mémoire d’un peuple* (Douarnenez: ArMen, 1989) and Nelly Blanchard, *Barzaz-Breiz. Une fiction pour s’inventer* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2006).

and Cornish (Irish, Scots Gaelic and Manx form the Goidelic branch, and are more distantly related). The Brittonic languages (along with Cumbric in the north-west of Britain) would once have been part of a single more or less intelligible west-coast linguistic continuum, rather like the Scandinavian languages today. Modern surviving Brittonic languages (basically Welsh and Breton, with Cornish as a recently revived addition) share many important features of vocabulary and syntax but have been much influenced by their more powerful neighbours, English and French, and are no longer mutually comprehensible at any sustained level of conversation.²

The last decades of the 20th century saw a dramatic collapse in the numbers of people speaking Breton. Just after the Second World War, however, there were still over a million speakers in the western part of the country known as *Breiz-Izel* (Basse-Bretagne, Lower Brittany). Within *Breiz-Izel*, Breton is traditionally divided into four distinct dialect areas linked to the four bishoprics (though in truth the nature and range of linguistic variety is much more complex): *Leon* (Léon), *Treger* (Trégor), *Kerne* (Cornouaille) and *Gwened* (Vannetais).³ The linguistic border dividing Upper and Lower Brittany (see Figure 1) is centuries old, and has shifted relatively little; the fact that important cities such as Rennes and Nantes have always stood outside the Breton-speaking zone has had an impact on the social status and uses (and non-uses) of Breton, for example in matters of jurisdiction, education and printing.⁴ Though printed texts (often religious tracts) did circulate among the Breton-speaking population,⁵ Breton was and has remained very much the spoken language of a rural community used to receiving its written infrastructure through French (and, earlier, Latin). And although in the long term this has not helped the survival of the language, it may well be that the inventiveness and variety of Breton oral literary forms and musical traditions are a result of this sociolinguistic situation.⁶

The mid-19th century flowering of interest in the Breton song tradition stimulated by the romanticised versions of the *Barzaz-Breiz* led to more reliable collections, many with translations into French. Research into individual ballads, ballad clusters and singers' repertoires has also grown substantially over the past century and a half, and, as new methodologies have developed in disciplines often resistant to orality, *gwerzioù* are now no longer only the preserve of folklorists.⁷

2 Martin J. Ball and James Fife (eds), *The Celtic Languages* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1993). For a wide-ranging introduction to Breton language and literature see Jean Balcou and Yves Le Gallo (eds), *Histoire littéraire et culturelle de la Bretagne*, 3 vols (Brest, Paris and Geneva: Champion, Slatkine, 1987). For broad historical context see Sharif Gemie, *Brittany 1750–1950: The Invisible Nation* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007) and Gwenno Piette, *Brittany: A Concise History* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008).

3 The form and orthography of Breton place names is a politically sensitive subject; please see our Editorial Policy, which follows this Introduction.

4 Fañch Broudic, *La pratique du breton de l'Ancien Régime à nos jours* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 1995); Fañch Broudic, *Parler breton au XXI^e siècle* (Brest: Emgleo Breiz, 2009); Caroline Brett examines the use (and non-use) of Breton in the Middle Ages in 'Breton Latin literature as Evidence for Literature in the Vernacular AD 800–1300', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 18 (1989), 1–25.

5 Yves Le Berre, *La littérature de langue bretonne. Livres et brochures entre 1790 et 1918* (Brest: Ar Skol Vreiz, 1994); Yves Le Berre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature bretonne? Essais de critique littéraire XVI^e–XX^e siècle* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2006).

6 Association Buhez (ed.), *Parlons du breton* (Rennes: Ouest-France, 2001).

7 Historians, for example, have increasingly explored the possibilities of the *gwerz*: see Alain Croix, *La Bretagne aux 16^e et 17^e siècles: La vie, la mort, la foi* (Paris: Maloine, 1981); Michel Nassiet, 'La littérature orale bretonne et l'histoire', *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l'Ouest*, 106 (1999), 35–64. Éva Guillourel, *La Complainte et la Plainte: Chanson, justice, cultures en Bretagne, XVI^e–XVIII^e siècles* (Rennes and

Many of these works appeared in local antiquarian journals or short-lived periodicals, and remain difficult to track down. English-language translations and discussions of the tradition remain both restricted and rare.⁸

The selection of ballads in this volume aims to offer a flavour of the great richness and diversity of the *gwerz* tradition in terms of form, narrative content and music. It contains ballads from different dialectal regions, and from different periods of collection, from the earliest 19th-century manuscripts to the most recent field recordings. The Breton texts are accompanied by English translations, which attempt (although folk songs are always remarkably resistant to capture in another language) to preserve something of the poetry and beauty of the originals, while remaining close enough to the texture and idioms of the Breton to offer a guide to those interested in the language. They are accompanied by brief commentaries which, often through comparison with other versions, explore the dramatic force of each song, its narrative technique and its historical context, summarising previous scholarship and providing references for further reading. These short case studies also provide, where known, details of the singers and the circumstances under which the songs were collected or performed. The accompanying CD offers a selection of ballads taken from field recordings. Actual voices, the human presence required for all oral tradition to survive, need not be entirely lost from the experience; these recordings, we hope, will allow listeners to appreciate some of the melodies, and the wide range of singing styles, intonations and dialects encompassed by the *gwerziou*.

I: Song collecting in Brittany: from the early 19th century to the present day

France came relatively late to the Europe-wide ‘rediscovery’ of popular traditions in the Romantic period.⁹ Long after the 1760s, when the Ossianic poems of James Macpherson, the ballads of Thomas Percy and the enthusiastic responses of J. G. Herder had stirred imaginations with the creative, historical – and political – possibilities of folk song as the ‘voice of the people’, the more classically-inclined French began to search for their own vernacular traditions for potentially ancient narrative songs. An initial call by scholars, notably Pierre-Antoine La Place in 1785, for more research into narrative song-cycles or ‘romances’ produced few results.¹⁰ Focus shifted to Brittany, where the presence of a Celtic language (which could be associated with France’s

Brest: Presses universitaires de Rennes, Centre de recherche bretonne et celtique, Dastum, 2010).

8 Modern English translations include nine pieces in Mary-Ann Constantine, *Breton Ballads* (Aberystwyth: Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies, 1996) and a few examples in Mary-Ann Constantine and Gerald Porter, *Fragments and Meaning in Traditional Song: from the Blues to the Baltic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) and Natalie Franz, *Breton Song Traditions and the Case of the Gwerziou: Women’s Voices, Women’s Lives* (Rennes: Tir, 2011).

9 Fañch Postic (ed.), *La Bretagne et la littérature orale en Europe* (Mellac and Brest: Centre de recherche bretonne et celtique, Centre de recherche et de documentation sur la littérature orale, Centre international de rencontres des cultures de tradition orale, 1995). For a wider view see the ambitious online project directed by Joep Leerssen, *Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe*: <http://romanticnationalism.net>.

10 Paul Bénichou, *Nerval et la chanson folklorique* (Paris: José Corti, 1970), 47.

ancestral Gauls) seemed to assure the cultural antiquity and continuity necessary for the survival of epic folk poetry.¹¹ In 1794, the Lorient-born Jacques Cambry, Commissioner for Science and Arts in the Revolutionary government, undertook a journey through Brittany. His principal aim was to survey the property confiscated from the nobility and the clergy, but his account of the tour, published as *Voyage dans le Finistère* (1797–8), included ethnographical description of the ‘customs and manners’ of the people, and made some note of the folk tales and songs he encountered on his travels.¹² The keynote in that respect, however, was disappointment:

Les grands morceaux de l’antiquité se sont perdus à la chute des Bardes: quelques recherches que j’aie faites, je n’ai pu trouver dans la mémoire ou dans les manuscrits des tems passés, ces chants majestueux qui conduisoient nos pères à la victoire, ces hymnes sublimes, chantés au milieu des combats, sur l’Océan, sur les rivages de la mer, entonnés par un peuple invincible, et dont l’effet étoit semblable à celui du tonnerre ou des mers en fureurs, au rapport des écrivains grecs et romains. La poésie a dû s’anéantir en Bretagne ...¹³

[The great songs of antiquity have perished with the fall of the Bards; no matter how much I searched, neither memory nor ancient manuscripts could furnish me with those majestic songs which led our fathers to victory, those sublime hymns, sung in the midst of combat, on the Ocean, at the sea’s edge, chanted by an invincible people, the effect of which was like thunder or like the raging seas, as the Greek and Roman authors tell us. Poetry must have died out altogether in Brittany ...]

Cambry would go on to be a founder member (and first president) of the Académie Celtique in 1805, and it is clear from this quotation that, like other antiquarians who saw popular tradition as a potential time capsule, his gaze was fixed on the deep past.¹⁴ As would often prove the case, too clear a sense of the kind of song that *ought* to exist in Brittany – be it Gaulish war chant, or medieval Breton *lai* – rendered the actual tradition inadequate, if not inaudible.

The first collections of Breton traditional song did not really begin, then, until the first decades of the 19th century; and they were relatively restricted in scope. An early enthusiast was the Morlaix printer Alexandre Lédan, whose notebook of traditional songs dates from 1815, but who preferred to publish and sell mainly ‘feuilles volantes’, the more sensational printed broadside ballads.¹⁵ Other private collections were left by a small network of aristocratic amateurs (at least two of them women), who collected songs from the rural communities in the vicinity of

11 Bernard Tanguy, *Aux origines du nationalisme breton* (Paris: Union générale d’éditions, 1977).

12 Fañch Postic, ‘Écrire “l’histoire de l’imagination”: Cambry face au paysan breton’, in Anne de Mathan (ed.), *Jacques Cambry (1749–1807): Un Breton des Lumières au service de la construction nationale* (Brest: Centre de recherche bretonne et celtique, 2008), pp. 73–83.

13 Jacques Cambry, *Voyage dans le Finistère, ou Etat de ce département en 1794 et 1795* (Paris, 1797–98), vol. I, p. 189.

14 Nicole Belmont (ed.), *Aux sources de l’ethnologie française. L’académie celtique* (Paris: Comité des travaux scientifiques et historiques, 1995).

15 Hervé Peaudecerf, *Alexandre-Louis-Marie Lédan (1777–1855): Un imprimeur breton au XIXe siècle (1805–1855)*, unpublished doctoral thesis, 3 vols (Université de Rennes, 2002).

their manors. Aymar de Blois de La Calande, Barbe-Émilie de Saint-Prix and Ursule Feydeau de Vaugien all left manuscripts containing song texts taken down from local people. Although in 1828 Aymar de Blois published a groundbreaking study of the *gwerz* of the ‘Heiress of Keroulas’ (no. 13), linking it to the marriage of Marie de Keroulas with Francois de Chastel in 1565, none of this group seems to have had the intention of making their song collections public.¹⁶

In 1834 the author Émile Souvestre, a native of Morlaix, published an article in the influential Paris-based journal *Revue des Deux Mondes* entitled ‘Poésies populaires de la Basse-Bretagne’.¹⁷ This was the first comprehensive discussion of Breton oral tradition, and for many it came as a revelation; indeed, Souvestre’s various articles on Breton life and customs, which appeared in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* and the *Revue de Bretagne* and were brought together in 1836 as *Les Derniers Bretons*, played an important role in countering the prevalent idea of Brittany as an uncultured, superstitious society with an ugly, awkward language. Along with other French-language works such as Auguste Brizeux’s poetic collection *Marie* (1840), Souvestre’s highly romanticised accounts of peasant life effectively reversed the polarities of the primitivism which still coloured perceptions of all the Celtic-speaking countries at this time.¹⁸ Just as the Ossianic poems of Macpherson had invested a long-despised Scots Gaelic culture with the glamour of the antique, so too did the works of these French-language romantic writers claim a special place for Brittany, and especially its song traditions, within France as a whole. During the first half of the 19th century Brittany would, in short, become France’s mysterious other: a repository for all things attractively irrational, ancient and wild, securely contained within the framework of a modern, enlightened state.¹⁹

La Villemarqué and the Barzaz-Breiz (1839)

It was this changing cultural environment that made possible the success of Brittany’s most influential collection of folk songs, the *Barzaz-Breiz*, published in two volumes in Paris in 1839.²⁰

16 Patrick Malrieu, *Histoire de la chanson populaire bretonne* (Rennes: Dastum, Skol, 1983); Donatien Laurent, Fañch Postic and Pierre Prat, *Les passeurs de mémoire* (Mellac: Association du manoir de Kernault, 1996); Donatien Laurent, ‘Aymar I de Blois (1760–1852) et “L’héritière de Keroulas”’, in Gwennolé Le Menn and Jean-Yves Le Moign (eds), *Bretagne et pays celtiques. Langues, histoire, civilisation. Mélanges offerts à la mémoire de Léon Fleuriot* (Saint-Brieuc and Rennes: Skol, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 1992), pp. 415–43; Yvon Le Röl, *La langue des ‘gwerzioù’ à travers l’étude des manuscrits inédits de Mme de Saint-Prix (1789–1869)*, unpublished doctoral thesis (Université de Rennes, 2013), 229–44: <https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-00854190>.

17 Émile Souvestre, ‘Poésies populaires de la Basse-Bretagne’, *Revue des deux mondes* (1 December 1834), 489–537. See Fañch Postic, ‘Le rôle d’Émile Souvestre dans le développement du mouvement d’intérêt pour les traditions orales’, in Bärbel Plötner-Le Lay and Nelly Blanchard (eds), *Émile Souvestre: Écrivain breton porté par l’utopie sociale* (Brest: Centre de recherche bretonne et celtique, 2007), pp. 117–36.

18 For the changing fortunes of the Celtic countries in the Romantic period see Patrick Sims-Williams, ‘The visionary Celt: the construction of an “ethnic preconception”’, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 11 (1986), 71–96; Patrick Sims-Williams, ‘Celtomania and Celtoscepticism’, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 36 (1998), 1–36; Brown, Terence (ed.), *Celticism* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996).

19 For the ‘invention’ of Romantic Brittany in the works of authors such as Brizeux, Balzac, Chateaubriand and Renan see Heather Williams, *Postcolonial Brittany: Literature between Languages* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007).

20 Théodore Hersart de La Villemarqué, *Barzas-Breiz. Chants populaires de la Bretagne* (Paris, 1839). The commonly used spelling *Barzaz-Breiz* comes from the modification of the title in subsequent editions.

Its author, a 24-year-old viscount, Théodore Hersart de La Villemarqué, came from Nizon, near Quimperlé, in the Breton-speaking region of Cornouaille; he was the youngest child of Ursule de Vaugien, who had herself noted down songs from labourers and servants on their estate, as well as from itinerant pedlars who called at the manor. From 1833 La Villemarqué attended classes at the École des Chartes in Paris, and it was in the imaginative space between his home territory of Nizon (where he, too, had begun noting down pieces from local singers) and this metropolitan climate of literary salons and new publications, combined with the energetic intellectual revival of interest in the Celtic and medieval past, that his ideas for the collection crystallised.²¹

One particular stimulus was the *Recherches sur les ouvrages des bardes de la Bretagne Armoricaïne*, published in 1815 by the abbé Gervais de La Rue, a work which had suggested the possibility of a lost or undiscovered literature in Breton corresponding to the famed Breton *lais* cited in the middle-French romances of Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France.²² La Rue had urged further research into manuscript sources, and as a student La Villemarqué had taken this seriously enough to undertake more than one expedition into the Breton hinterland in search of ancient texts.²³ A journey to south Wales in 1838 (at which, during an elaborate *eisteddfod* ceremony in Abergavenny, he was made a Welsh Bard) was also partly undertaken with the aim of finding manuscripts.²⁴ What emerged, however, from this intense period of engagement with the earliest literatures of France and the Celtic countries was not in fact a lost medieval text, but a collection bearing the subtitle ‘Chants populaires de la Basse-Bretagne’. Contemporary Breton oral tradition could, it seemed, be the key to the missing material.

The *Barzaz-Breiz* offered its readers a selection of 30 or so ballads (titled ‘*Gwerz’éennou*’, ‘Chants historiques’), most of them located in historical periods and events, and presented in chronological order from the earliest time of the Bards up to the revolution of 1789. These were followed by a number of more lyrical love songs (‘*Sounennou*’, ‘Chants d’amour’) and a handful of religious pieces. It had facing-page translations into French and detailed historical commentaries, which often stressed the protagonists’ attachment to their native land and language, and their resistance to the French. It was a huge success. Critical responses were enthusiastic, and throughout the 19th century selections from the work were translated into several languages, including three into English.²⁵ The writer George Sand was delighted by the ‘diamonds’ of the *Barzaz-Breiz* and found

21 Francis Gourvil, *Théodore-Claude-Henri Hersart de La Villemarqué (1815–1895) et le ‘Barzaz-Breiz’ (1839–1845–1867)* (Rennes: Oberthur, 1960); Laurent, *Aux sources du Barzaz-Breiz*, 20–41; Michael Glencross, *Reconstructing Camelot: French Romantic Medievalism and the Arthurian Tradition* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1995), pp. 130–43.

22 Gwenael Le Duc, ‘Les lais de Marie de France’, *Regards étonnés: De l’expression de l’altérité ... à la construction de l’identité. Mélanges offerts au professeur Gaël Milin* (Brest: Centre de recherche bretonne et celtique, 2002), 299–316.

23 Francis Gourvil, ‘“Voleur sans le savoir”: Prosper Mérimée et Gwenc’hlan en 1835’, *Nouvelle Revue de Bretagne* (1949/2), 104–15; (1949/3), 211–23; (1949/4), 299–306.

24 Fañch Postic, ‘Premiers échanges interceltiques: Le voyage de La Villemarqué au pays de Galles’, *Armen*, 125 (2001), 34–43; Mary-Ann Constantine, ‘“Impertinent structures”: a Breton’s Adventures in Neo-Gothic Wales’, *Studies in Travel Writing*, 18 (2014), 134–47; and for a detailed discussion of La Villemarqué’s complex relationship with Wales and Welsh see Mary-Ann Constantine, *The Truth Against the World: Iolo Morganwg and Romantic Forgery* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), pp. 145–98.

25 Louisa Stuart Costello, *A Summer Amongst the Bocages and the Vines* (London: Richard Bentley, 1840); Tom Taylor, *Ballads and Songs of Brittany* (London: Macmillan and co, 1865); Henry Carrington, *Breton Ballads Translated from the Barzaz-Breiz* (Edinburgh: Turnbull and Spears, 1886). See the entertaining chapter by Jean-Yves Le Dizez, ‘Miss Costello, ou la Bretagne vue du *Barzaz-Breiz*’ in his

the collection ‘plus complet, plus beau, plus parfait qu’aucun chef-d’œuvre sorti de l’esprit humain’.²⁶ A substantially expanded second edition in 1845 revised many of the texts and translations, strengthened its patriotic stance, and included over 30 new pieces; a third edition in 1867 added another three.

The *Barzaz-Breiz* became a new motivating force in the quest for traditional songs across France; it was taken as the model for an initiative led by the Ministry of Public Instruction, known as the ‘Ampère-Fortoul Enquiry’, which attempted a survey of popular song across all the French regions in the years 1840–50.²⁷ But the effects of the volume were felt particularly in Brittany, where a new generation of enthusiasts was inspired to go searching for further examples of these evocative survivals of the past. The findings of major collectors such as Jean-Marie de Penguern, Gabriel Milin, François-Marie Luzel and Anatole Le Braz would, in time, form the basis for a critique of the claims and the methodology of the *Barzaz-Breiz*, but the initial impulse was one of curiosity and excitement.²⁸

Alongside the collecting and the publication of new songs came a wave of articles and essays from scholars such as Louis Le Guennec, Gaston de Carné and Arthur de La Borderie exploring their origins, authenticity and potential historical value. Folk song – oral, ephemeral and protean though it was – became the object of serious scholarly endeavour, with studies published in a range of academic journals which came into being around this time, such as the *Bulletin de la Société Archéologique du Finistère*, the *Revue de l’Histoire de l’Ouest* and the *Annales de Bretagne*.²⁹

Inevitably, the body of evidence produced by dozens of new song collections showed the historical claims of the *Barzaz-Breiz* in a new light. In vain the new generation of collectors hunted for fragments relating to a supposedly 5th-century prophetic bard, Gwenc’hlan. Songs about Merlin, or the Breton prototype for the Arthurian Perceval, also proved elusive. Variants and fragments of the later songs suggested, as often as not, that names and locations had been misconstrued (wilfully or otherwise) to link local ballads to key events in Brittany’s turbulent

Étrange Bretagne: Récits de voyageurs britanniques en Bretagne (1830–1900) (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2002), pp. 356–73.

26 ‘More complete, more beautiful and more perfect than any masterpiece yet sprung from the human mind’. George Sand, ‘Les visions de la nuit dans les campagnes’, *L’Illustration*, 504 (1852), 267–8.

27 Laurence Berthou-Bécam and Didier Bécam, *L’enquête Fortoul (1852–1876). Chansons populaires de Haute et Basse-Bretagne*, 2 vols (Paris and Rennes: Comité des travaux scientifiques et historiques, Dastum, 2010).

28 Nelly Blanchard (ed.), *Jean-Marie de Penguern (1807–1856): Collecteur et collectionneur breton* (Brest: Centre de recherche bretonne et celtique, 2008); Laurence Berthou-Bécam, ‘Après Luzel et La Villemarqué ... Gabriel Milin’, *Musique Bretonne*, 139 (1996), 14–19; Françoise Morvan, *François-Marie Luzel: Enquête sur une expérience de collectage folklorique en Bretagne au XIXe siècle* (Rennes: Terre de Brume, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 1999); Alain Tanguy, *Anatole Le Braz (1859–1926) et la tradition populaire en Bretagne – analyse de quatre carnets d’enquêtes inédits – (1890–1895)*, unpublished doctoral thesis, 5 vols (Brest: Université Occidentale de Bretagne, 1997). Of these major collections much remained unpublished during the collectors’ life-times, with the important exception of François-Marie Luzel, *Gwerziou-Breiz Izel: Chants et chansons populaires de la Basse-Bretagne. Gwerziou*, 2 vols (Lorient: Corfinat, 1868 and 1874) and François-Marie Luzel, *Soniou Breiz-Izel: Chants et chansons populaires de la Basse-Bretagne*, 2 vols (Paris: Bouillon, 1890). More recent publications include Gabriel Milin, *Gwerin*, vols 1–3 (Lesneven: Hor Yezh, 1961–2); Jean-Marie de Penguern, *Gwerin*, vols 4–6 and 8–10 (Lesneven: Hor Yezh, 1963–5 and 1997–8); Dastumad Penwern, *Chants populaires bretons de la collection de Penguern* (Rennes: Dastum, 1983).

29 For example, an article published in 1888 by Gaston de Carné, based on a piece from the *Barzaz-Breiz*, resulted in a lively debate over several decades concerning the historicity of the events: see, e.g., Gaston Paris, ‘L’élégie de Monsieur de Nèvet’, *Revue de l’Histoire de l’Ouest*, 4 (1888), 5–28; Louis Le Guennec, ‘“L’élégie de Monsieur de Nèvet” et “Le Baron Huet”’, *Bulletin de la Société Archéologique du Finistère*, 48 (1921), 112–21.

history. Breton ballad heroes were more likely to die for their sweetheart or their honour than for their country; nor, indeed, were all Breton ballad heroines as well behaved and as meekly long-suffering as the *Barzaz-Breiz* depicted them. La Villemarqué could quite readily be accused of having invented or heavily rewritten many of the songs, giving them an antique patina and ‘celticising’ them by replacing French loanwords with neologisms drawn from Welsh.³⁰

Yet a great deal was at stake; anyone daring to criticise a book that had gained Breton culture so much prestige across France, and indeed across Europe, could (and would) be branded as ‘unpatriotic’. In a pattern repeated all over Europe from Macpherson’s *Ossian* to the Czech manuscripts of Dvůr Králové and the Finnish *Kalevala*, and from Antoine Fabre d’Olivet’s Occitan troubadours to Iolo Morganwg’s Welsh bards, this work of intense cultural significance and debatable authenticity left a legacy as complex and as damaging as it was inspiring.³¹

Luzel and the Gwerziou Breiz-Izel (1868)

The *Barzaz-Breiz* controversy (which is still capable of stirring strong opinions today) tends to be framed, not entirely helpfully, as a clash between La Villemarqué and Luzel. It is true that when the ‘showdown’ came, during the Celtic Congress at Saint-Brieuc in 1867, it was organised by a group of Luzel’s supporters keen to bring La Villemarqué down in public. But in the brief, non-confrontational (and disingenuous) introduction to his own collection of ballads, *Gwerziou Breiz-Izel*, published the following year, Luzel contented himself with pointing out the very different aims of the two works. Whereas the *Barzaz-Breiz* was conceived as ‘une œuvre plus littéraire qu’historique’ which aimed to please its readership, his own more modest desire was to present the song texts:

tels absolument que je les ai trouvés dans nos campagnes armoricaines, et qu’on peut les y retrouver encore; souvent incomplets, altérés, interpolés, irréguliers, bizarres; mélange singulier de beauté et de trivialités, de fautes de goût, de grossièretés qui sentent un peu leur barbarie, et poésie simple et naturelle, tendre et sentimentale, humaine toujours, et qui va droit au cœur, qui nous intéresse et nous émeut, par je ne sais quels secrets, quel mystère, bien mieux que la poésie d’art. C’est réellement le cœur du peuple breton qui bat en ces chants spontanés.³²

30 Henri d’Arbois de Jubainville, ‘Note sur une chanson bretonne intitulée *Le Retour d’Angleterre* et qu’on croit supposée’, *Revue Archéologique*, 17 (1868), 227–40; François-Marie Luzel, *De l’authenticité des chants du Barzaz-Breiz* (Saint-Brieuc: Guyon, 1872); Gourvil, *Théodore-Claude-Henri Hersart de La Villemarqué*.

31 See Joep Leerssen, ‘Ossian and the Rise of Literary Historicism’ in Howard Gaskill (ed.), *The Reception of Ossian in Europe* (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004), pp. 109–25; Gaela Keryell, ‘The *Kalevala* and the *Barzaz-Breiz*: The Relativity of the Concept of “Forgery”’ in Anders Ahlqvist et al. (eds), *Celtica Helsingiensia*, 107 (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1996), pp. 57–103. Constantine, *The Truth Against the World* explores ideas of textual and oral authenticity in this period and discusses a number of other European forgery debates.

32 Luzel, *Gwerziou I*, iii.

[exactly as I found them in our Armorican countryside, and exactly as you may still find them there; often incomplete, altered, interrupted, irregular, bizarre; a strange mixture of the beautiful and the inconsequential, where errors of taste and crude vulgarities combine with a poetry both simple and natural, tender and full of feeling, a poetry which speaks directly to the heart, and which intrigues and moves us by I know not what secrets, what mystery, far more than the poetry of art. In these spontaneous songs the heart of the Breton people truly beats.]

The debate over the authenticity of the *Barzaz-Breiz* hinged on two different approaches to the editing of song texts. The differences are often framed as generational, with La Villemarqué following the more ‘Romantic’ criteria of an earlier period, and Luzel representing the modern ‘scientific’ approach. The former saw in the raw material of the song tradition degenerate forms of perfect originals recoverable through careful reconstitution. In a passage echoing Walter Scott’s views on the ‘perverted alchemy’ of orality, La Villemarqué explains:

Pour avoir des textes aussi complets et aussi purs que possible, je me les suis fait répéter, souvent jusqu’à quinze et vingt fois par différentes personnes. Les versions les plus détaillées ont toujours fixé mon choix; car la pauvreté ne me semble pas le caractère des chants populaires originaux; je crois au contraire qu’ils sont riches et ornés dans le principe, et que le temps seul les dépouille.³³

[In order to have texts that were as complete and as unadulterated as possible I had them repeated, sometimes up to fifteen or twenty times, by different people. I always chose the most detailed versions; spareness does not seem to me to be the true nature of folk songs in their original state; I believe, rather, that they are rich and intricate in essence, and that they are merely stripped down by the passage of time.]

The editor’s task, therefore, was to recover that rich complexity of form. In the immediate archaeological context of Jean-François Champollion’s work on the Rosetta Stone – the key to unlocking the secrets of the Egyptian hieroglyphs – it was not too difficult to believe that a part might give access to the whole, that a song fragment might be extrapolated to its original complete beauty.³⁴ Luzel, a generation later, adopted an approach far closer to the type of ethnographic methodology accepted as standard today, an approach which set aside interpretation of the texts in favour of their presentation in as ‘natural’ a state as possible, provenanced, with the name of the singer and the date of the recording.

But drawing a neat historical watershed between ‘romantic’ and ‘scientific’ approaches does not quite explain everything. By 1839 (and more so by the second and third editions of 1845 and 1867) La Villemarqué’s heavily manipulated collection of songs entered a world of European

33 La Villemarqué, *Barzas-Breiz* (1839), iii. Scott famously described tradition as ‘a sort of perverted alchemy, which converts gold to lead’, *Quarterly Review*, 1 (1809), 30.

34 Blanchard, *Barzas-Breiz. Une fiction pour s’inventer*, pp. 28–73. For an exploration of different notions of ‘completeness’ in songs see Constantine and Porter, *Fragments and Meaning in Traditional Song*.

letters which had been vexed by issues of textual presentation and the authenticity of oral material since at least the *Ossian* controversy over 70 years earlier.³⁵ France in the 1820s and 1830s was hardly innocent of such issues, which were aired over various literary hoaxes, the most relevant in this context being Prosper Mérimée's anonymously published collection of invented Serbo-Croat epic folk songs, *La Guzla*, in 1827.³⁶ It is hard to believe that, even for a fastidiously literary French readership, there were no acceptable editorial options beyond the Romantic paradigm of 'renovation' and the '*poésie d'art*'. Indeed, in his *Chants populaires de la Grèce moderne*, itself a model for the *Barzaz-Breiz*, Claude Fauriel had written at length and with some passion of a not dissimilar cultural situation – a modern, despised people, treated as the decayed remnant of a former glorious civilisation – but, apparently, had not felt the need to rework his actual texts to prove his point as La Villemarqué undoubtedly did with his.³⁷ Viewed in the broader European context, La Villemarqué's cavalier treatment of the *gwerz* tradition does look, at best, extremely belated.

The principal biography of La Villemarqué, published by Francis Gourvil in 1960, takes a more unforgiving stance on the question of fidelity to the tradition, and treats the *Barzaz-Breiz* as an extended 'imposture', whose texts – measured against the benchmark of Luzel's *Gwerziou* – range from tidied-up versions of actual songs to pieces wholly invented for the occasion. Donatien Laurent's rediscovery and publication of La Villemarqué's collecting notebooks, however, have allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the processes involved in creating the *Barzaz-Breiz*, and there have been some surprises, not least the discovery that one of the least plausible-looking pieces in the collection, the highly 'Celtic' and medieval *Merlin-Barde*, has an identifiable, oral, provenanced source.³⁸

The differences between the collections of La Villemarqué and Luzel stem not only from methodology but from the very different sociocultural backgrounds of the two collectors, and their experiences in the field. Born into a farming family which gained material benefits during the period of the Revolution, a teacher and a convinced republican, Luzel collected almost exclusively in the northern Trégor region (the 'Attica' of Brittany, as he put it) and from a high proportion of women, many of them travelling beggars and artisans. La Villemarqué, an aristocrat, was from the south of Brittany, and collected from a higher proportion of men, some of them former Chouans who had fought against the French Republic in the 1790s. Unsurprisingly, the world views of the two collections do not exactly overlap.

35 Leerssen, 'Ossian and the rise of literary historicism', 116.

36 Ludmila Charles-Wurtz, 'Le lyrisme de *La Guzla*', in Antonia Fonyi (ed.), *Prosper Mérimée: Écrivain, Archéologue, Historien* (Genève: Droz, 1999), pp. 99–110.

37 Claude Fauriel, *Chants populaires de la Grèce moderne*, 2 vols (Paris: Didot, 1824–5).

38 For the extraordinary Merlin text (included in the 1845 edition) see Laurent, *Aux sources du Barzaz-Breiz*, 287–96; and the discussion in Mary-Ann Constantine, 'Neither flesh nor fowl: Merlin as bird-man in Breton folk tradition', *Arthurian Literature*, XXI (2004), 95–114.

A broadening repertoire: later collectors

No one collection or collector, then, could properly represent the dialectal, stylistic and narrative variety of the Breton ballad tradition, but Luzel's approach formed the model for various other song collections around the end of the 19th century. Though not all were published at the time, these collections helped to fill in some of the gaps in areas which had been previously little explored. The long-neglected Vannetais saw important work undertaken by Yves Le Diberder, Augustin Guillevic, François and Jean-Mathurin Cadic, Loeiz Herrieu, and other collectors, many of them involved with the church, who constitute what has been called the 'Vannetais school'.³⁹ Other 'priest-collectors' had a similar impact in Léon, grouped around the charismatic figure of Jean-Marie Perrot who, on the eve of the First World War, collected nearly a thousand Breton songs by organising a competition aimed at displaying the richness and variety of a hitherto little-explored tradition in the north-west.⁴⁰ At the same time, Anatole Le Braz continued to collect in the Trégor region, while Constance Le Mézer privately filled some 30 notebooks of songs from around Lannion – her collection has only recently been published, and is particularly valuable for its musical transcriptions, rarely noted down during this period.⁴¹ Henri Guillermin collected and published songs in Cornouaille.⁴²

Song collecting slowed down in the difficult period between the two world wars, with the exception of a valuable ethnographic enquiry launched in 1939 by the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires, but then interrupted by the Second World War.⁴³ From the late 1950s to the 1980s (partly in response to the rapid decline of the language itself), there was renewed interest in all aspects of Breton folk tradition. A series of high-quality recordings was made just after the war by Claudine Mazéas, and the work of ethnologists and researchers Donatien Laurent and Daniel Giraudon resulted in important collections and studies. Song collection was also carried out by practising performers such as Yann-Fañch Kemener, Ifig Troadeg and Jorj Belz in the context of a broader cultural revival which took singing and the social gatherings of the *fest-noz* very

39 Loeiz Herrieu, *Guerzenneu ha soñnenneu Bro-Guened. Chansons populaires du pays de Vannes* (Paris: Rouard, Lerolle, 1911); François Cadic, *Chansons populaires de Bretagne publiées dans la Paroisse bretonne de Paris (1899–1929)* (Rennes, Brest: Presses universitaires de Rennes, Dastum, Centre de recherche bretonne et celtique, 2010); Augustin Guillevic and Jean-Mathurin Cadic, *Chants et airs traditionnels du pays vannetais* (Pontivy and Vannes: Dastum Bro-Ereg, Archives départementales du Morbihan, 2007); Yves Le Diberder, *Chansons traditionnelles du pays vannetais (1910–1915)*, 2 vols (Vannes: Archives départementales du Morbihan, 2010); Jean-Louis Larboulette, *Chants traditionnels vannetais (1902–1905)* (Pontivy: Dastum Bro-Ereg, 2005); Mathurin Buléon, *Chansons traditionnelles du pays vannetais* (Vannes: Archives départementales du Morbihan, Dastum Bro-Ereg, 2012). Studies on this extremely fertile Vannetais fieldwork include Michel Oiry, 'L'école vannetaise (1825–1916) et les collectes d'Yves Le Diberder (1910–1916)' in Postic, *La Bretagne et la littérature orale en Europe*, pp. 177–89; and Fañch Postic, (ed.), *François Cadic (1864–1929), Un collecteur vannetais "recteur" des Bretons de Paris* (Brest: Centre de recherche bretonne et celtique, 2012).

40 Éva Guillorel, *Barzaz Bro-Leon: Une expérience inédite de collecte en Bretagne* (Rennes and Brest: Presses universitaires de Rennes, Centre de recherche bretonne et celtique, 2012); Jean-Pierre Pichette (ed.), *L'apport des prêtres et des religieux au patrimoine des minorités: Parcours comparés Bretagne/Canada français*, special issue of *Port-Acadie. Revue internationale en études acadiennes*, 24–25–26 (2014).

41 Constance Le Mézer, *Une collecte de chants populaires dans le pays de Lannion*. Textes et musiques présentés par Bernard Lasbleiz & Daniel Giraudon (Lannion: Dastum Bro-Dreger, 2015).

42 Henri Guillermin, *Recueil de chants populaires bretons du pays de Cornouailles* (Rennes: François Simon, 1905).

43 Marie-Barbara Le Gonidec, *Les archives de la Mission de folklore musical en Basse-Bretagne de 1939 du Musée national des arts et traditions populaires* (Rennes and Paris: Dastum, Comité des travaux scientifiques et historiques, 2009).

much to its heart.⁴⁴ Organisations such as Dastum (the name means ‘Collect’) have both encouraged people to record songs and begun the complex task of coordinating and cataloguing sound recordings and text versions.⁴⁵ As a result, Brittany remains pre-eminent within France in the richness and variety of its song collections.

II: The nature of the *gwerz* tradition

What makes a *gwerz*? As with most areas of popular tradition issues of taxonomy are often more fluid on the ground than in the critical works devoted to them; different regions, individual singers and scholars have all shown differing perceptions of what kinds of song the word might or should cover. The word itself, a feminine noun in Breton (pl. *gwerziou*), derives from the Latin *versus* (a line of poetry or a poem) and appears in the earliest Breton-language dictionaries. In the *Catholicon* of Jehan Lagadeuc (1499) it is translated as ‘*vers*’, ‘*petit vers*’ or ‘*chanczon*’, but also more specifically as a ‘*chanczon quo[n] cha[n]te aux enfans pour leur faire dormir*’, ‘*cha[n]czon faite sur le mort*’ or ‘*chanczon vilaine*’.⁴⁶ In the Latin–French–Breton *Nomenclator* of Guillaume Quiquer of Roscoff (1633), and in the dictionary of the Jesuit missionary Julien Maunoir (1659), *gwerz* is simply associated with songs and verses. In Dom Le Pelletier’s dictionary of 1716 the term seems also to cover a wide spectrum: ‘*vers, cantique, chanson, poème*’.⁴⁷

It is not until we reach the folklorists of the 19th century, however, that the term really enters academic discourse and more precise definitions are developed and contested. Émile Souvestre was the first to use ‘*gwerz*’ in his 1834 article for the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, defining it as a ‘grande complainte’, or ballad, reflecting events of significance in the lives of the Breton peasantry (love, death, suffering and miracles).⁴⁸ As classification became increasingly important, the Breton song tradition (like many other folk song traditions) was perceived in terms of a major, and enduring, division between lyric and narrative genres. This was most influentially evoked by François-Marie Luzel, for whom the *gwerziou* were essentially in the latter category and included all kinds of ‘dark, fantastic and tragic songs telling of supernatural apparitions, murders, infanticides, duels to the death, betrayals, kidnappings and all manner of violent events’.⁴⁹ The lyric songs, or *soniou*, ‘*plus tendres et plus humains*’, included love songs, elegies, dance songs, games, and songs for children.⁵⁰

44 Yann-Fañh Kemener, *Carnets de route. Kanaouennoù Kalon Vreizh, Chants profonds de Bretagne* (Morlaix: Skol Vreizh, 1996); Ifig Troadeg, *Carnets de route* (Lannion: Dastum Bro Dreger, 2005); Jorj Belz and Fañh Desbordes, *Sonamb get en Drouzerion. 100 sonenn a vro-Gwened*, 2 vols (Lesneven: Hor Yezh, 1985).

45 Since 1972 Dastum has assembled an oral archive of some 90,000 items, recorded from 5,000 informants by some 400 collectors, far exceeding anything comparable in the field of oral tradition in the rest of France. Many of these recordings are accessible through their data-base ‘Archives du patrimoine oral’: www.dastum.net. For more information see the introduction to our accompanying CD.

46 ‘A song sung to children to get them to sleep’; ‘song about death’; ‘common song’: Jehan Lagadeuc, *Le Catholicon armoricain* [1499] (Mayenne: J. Floch, 1977), 104–5.

47 For the lexicographical works of Quiquer, Le Maunoir and Le Pelletier see Guillorel, *La complainte et la plainte*, pp. 66–9.

48 Souvestre, ‘Poésies populaires de la Basse-Bretagne’.

49 ‘[C]hants sombres, fantastiques, tragiques, racontant des apparitions surnaturelles, des assassinats, des infanticides, des duels à mort, des trahisons, des enlèvements et des violences de toute sorte’, Luzel, *Gwerziou II* [1874] (1971), vi.

50 Luzel, *Gwerziou II* [1874] (1971), vi.

The borders between these two major types of song are necessarily more porous than such classifications allow, and even the small selection of ballads chosen for this volume bears witness to the variety of forms the *gwerz* can encompass. By the 20th century the quest for definitions had shifted to the singers themselves, with collectors and ethnographers discovering a repeated claim that the *gwerzioù* were ‘long songs’ which ‘told a true story’ (or a story believed to be true).⁵¹ That link between the *gwerz* and a particular conception of ‘truth’ can be found as far back as 1845, when La Villemarqué noted that when a Breton peasant wishes to praise an example of the genre ‘il ne dit pas: *c’est beau*; il dit: *c’est vrai*.’⁵² Singers have offered similar comments to later collectors, including Donatien Laurent, who notes:

On comprend dès lors l’importance de ce type de chansons, censées porter la Vérité du groupe, dans une société orale où la parole a un prix très supérieur à celui qu’elle a dans nos civilisations de l’écrit. On comprend la responsabilité de l’auteur de la chanson – qui doit n’y mettre que ce qu’il sait être ‘vrai’ – comme celle du transmetteur qui, sous le contrôle de la communauté, doit rester fidèle à cette ‘vérité’. Le sentiment de respect qui s’attache à de telles compositions les différencie d’emblée de tout ce qui est rumeur, bruit commun, légende ou récit en prose qui n’ont pas les mêmes prétentions.⁵³

[It is easy, then, to understand the importance of this type of song, believed to convey the Truth of the group in an oral society where the spoken word is valued far higher than in our writing-based culture. Easy, too, to grasp the burden of responsibility carried by the song’s author – who may only include what he knows to be ‘true’ – as well as by the song-bearer who, under the watchful eye of the community, must remain faithful to this ‘truth’. The sense of respect surrounding these sorts of compositions clearly marks them out from mere rumour, hearsay, legend or prose account, none of which makes the same kind of claim.]

The notion of the *gwerz* thus goes beyond mere formal characteristics to include other more indefinable elements, including a traditional sense of importance, lending it a kind of aura of solemnity. For the purposes of this volume, then, a brief synopsis of how we define the genre should give the reader some sense of where to situate these songs in a rich and often confusing field – one that could in its broadest manifestations include printed ballads, manuscript lyrics, hymns and many other types of song.

Our *gwerzioù* are Breton-language songs collected from oral tradition, between the early decades of the 19th century and the present day. They are narrative songs, though their story-telling techniques are far from uniform and sometimes indirect. For reasons of space we have often chosen relatively succinct versions in this volume, but *gwerzioù* may be very long, many

51 See Daniel Giraudon, *Chansons de langue bretonne sur feuilles volantes et compositeurs populaires: Un chanteur-chansonnier du Trégor*, Yann ar Gwenn, doctoral thesis (Brest: 1982), p. 19.

52 ‘He does not say *It’s beautiful*; he says *It’s true*’, *Barzaz-Breiz 1845*, xxviii.

53 Donatien Laurent, ‘Histoire et poésie chantée: l’exemple de la Bretagne’, *Historiens-Géographes*, 318 (1988), 111; Kemener, *Carnets de route*, 19.

dozens of couplets in length, with some exceeding 80 couplets (the performance of such pieces may take well over half an hour). They are songs with a distinctive metrical pattern and lexis, different from the various dialectal forms of Breton used in everyday speech, but different, too, from the literary language.⁵⁴

The stories they tell are serious, often tragic, and frequently relate to events which can be located in precise local and historical detail. There are also a number of songs drawing on more imaginative sources, often anchored in Christian miracle and legend. Though dating orally transmitted ballads is not possible in the way that one might date a literary text or a historical document, their narrative material is generally ‘old’, sometimes with strong medieval parallels, but by and large deriving from the 16th to the 18th centuries and reflecting Brittany under the *ancien régime*. The more commercial, and often more sensational, printed ballads (*feuilles volantes*), which flourished in the 19th century and have clear affinities with similar traditions across Europe, offer another fascinating repository of events and stories, but fall beyond the scope of this collection.⁵⁵

From scraps and couplets scribbled in roughly bound notebooks to the latest digital technology, the songs collected in Brittany over two centuries number in their thousands. For the first 70 or 80 years, of course, they are resolutely mute, but in 1900 the school teacher François Vallée recorded on wax cylinders the voice of one of Luzel and Le Braz’s most significant informants, Marc’harit Fulup (Marguerite Philippe).⁵⁶ As different types of recording spread rapidly after the Second World War, so more and more actual performances could be captured along with contextual, conversational material adding depth and meaning to the songs. Above all, these recordings ensured that text and tunes were no longer recorded separately, with one or the other frequently ignored, as was particularly the case for the earlier period when words were privileged considerably above music (a gap partially filled by certain musicologists, such as Maurice Duhamel, who early in the 20th century deliberately set out to cover territories collected by Luzel).⁵⁷

Shaping the repertoire

In assessing the nature of the repertoire that has come down to us, it is important to consider some of the inherent, often unconscious, biases of the collectors, which led them to seek out certain types of informants, and select certain types of song.⁵⁸ The *gwerziou* were undoubtedly

54 Le Rol, *La langue des ‘gwerziou’*.

55 Joseph Ollivier, *La chanson populaire sur feuilles volantes: Catalogue bibliographique* (Quimper: Le Goaziou, 1942); Daniel Giraudon, *Chansons populaires de Basse-Bretagne sur feuilles volantes* (Morlaix: Skol Vreizh, 1985).

56 For Breton/French personal names see our Editorial Policy below. A short recording of Marc’harit Fulup can be heard on the accompanying CD. François Vallée, ‘Une exploration musicale en Basse-Bretagne! Les airs des Gwerziou de Luzel retrouvés et phonographiés’, *Annales de Bretagne*, 16 (1/1900), 130–5; Bernard Lasbleiz, ‘Marc’harit Fulup: Les enregistrements de François Vallée’, *Musique bretonne*, 173 (2002) 33–5. See also Patrick Malrieu’s newly available and comprehensive catalogue for the Breton broadside ballads: <http://www.kan.bzh>.

57 Maurice Duhamel, *Gwerziou ha soniou Breiz-Izel: Musiques bretonnes: Airs et variantes mélodiques des ‘chants et chansons populaires de la Basse-Bretagne’ publiés par F.M. Luzel et A. Le Braz* (Paris: Lerolle, 1913, repr. Dastum, 1997).

58 Guillorel, *La complainte et la plainte*, pp. 81–98.

the beneficiaries of a general Romantic-era interest in ballad-style narratives across Europe, and felt to be more 'noble' as a genre, and certainly linguistically 'purer' than the printed ballads. They seemed, too, to offer a direct window on to the past, and, as La Villemarqué discovered, could be readily adapted to suit a broader cultural agenda. There is, then, already a large element of prior selection in the song repertoire as it appears today, but not only because collectors focused on the more 'valuable' genres. Singers, too, might operate a form of self-censoring, withholding songs that felt awkward in particular social contexts, because of gender, politics or class (racy or scatological repertoires are inevitably under-represented).

A further selection process often takes place during publication – as when Luzel, republican by conviction, nevertheless held back from including anticlerical songs in his collection after receiving threats. The first volume of *Gwerziou* (1868) contained a ballad about the brutal activities of the bishop of Penarstank, a débauché and serial rapist; this was judged to be both obscene and anticlerical by some of the Trégor clergy, who attempted to block sales of the book. Preparing the second volume for publication some five years later, Luzel sought advice from the bishop of Saint-Brieuc, who made his feelings on the subject extremely clear:

Vous interrogez ma conscience, elle vous répond: non! au nom du ciel, ne publiez pas ces pièces de poésie où le prêtre est livré à la malédiction et au mépris des honnêtes gens; où le poète le charge de crimes monstrueux dont la seule expression est une flétrissure pour l'âme des simples. Dans quel intérêt les publieriez-vous? Dans un intérêt moral? non évidemment. Dans un intérêt historique? Mais il faudrait d'abord prouver que ces légendes sont de l'histoire. [...] Dans un intérêt littéraire? je ne le vois pas. Je vous en prie, ne les publiez pas. Ceux qui à la rigueur peuvent être édités demandent au moins des points dans les endroits scabreux.⁵⁹

[You appeal to my conscience, and my conscience replies: no! In heaven's name, do not publish those pieces in which the priest is exposed to the curses and disdain of honest people; where the poet accuses him of crimes the very mention of which stains the souls of the innocent. To what end would you publish them? In the interests of morality? Of course not. In the interests of history? But you would first have to prove that these fables are historical. [...] In the interests of literature? That I cannot see. I beg of you, do not publish them. Those susceptible of being edited should at the very least substitute dots for the improper sections.]

Luzel accepted this position, which was also supported by his friend Ernest Renan and by several other important names in ethnographical research at the time.⁶⁰

59 Letter from Mgr David to François-Marie Luzel, 29 June 1873, Bibliothèque municipale de Rennes, fonds Ollivier, mns. 958, f°123r. Cited in Laurence Berthou-Bécam, *Enquête officielle sur les poésies populaires de la France*, doctoral thesis (Rennes, 1998), I, p. 346. Some of these 'suppressed' ballads have since been published in Bécam and Berthou-Bécam, *L'enquête Fortoul (1852–1876). Chansons populaires de Haute et Basse-Bretagne*, vol. 2, 986–1005.

60 François-Marie Luzel, *Correspondance Luzel-Renan*. Texte établi et présenté par Françoise Morvan (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, Terre de Brume, 1995), pp. 145, 209 and 213.

Another factor shaping the tradition as we have it is the work of editing, of preparing songs for publication; even the most scrupulous of collectors tends to correct irregular lines, or alter occasional words to make the sense clearer. Musicians likewise often could not help but transpose awkward or ‘barbarous’-sounding tunes to something more readily recognisable, as the collector Louis-Albert Bourgault-Ducoudray readily admitted:

J’ai essayé dans mon voyage bien des averses de fausses notes, bien des avalanches de voix calleuses et nasillardes. Les Bretons ont ceci de singulier, que pour eux, chanter du nez n’est point un défaut ; c’est, au contraire, une qualité indispensable pour que l’exécution soit véritablement fine et raffinée. Ce goût bizarre leur est commun avec les Orientaux. [...] Pas plus en Bretagne qu’en Orient, je n’ai pu me faire à ce genre de beauté.⁶¹

[I have, along the way, wiped up whole showers of false notes, whole avalanches of harsh and nasal voices. The Bretons are odd in this respect, in that for them singing through the nose is not a fault; on the contrary, it is completely indispensable to a fine and polished performance. They share this peculiar taste with the Orientals. [...] Neither in the Orient, nor in Brittany have I been able to make much of this kind of beauty.]

Geographical bias also plays its part. Most collectors worked intensively in a fairly restricted area, usually around their home, where they had access to a known community and the support of family and friends; here, they could easily revisit their singers, and they were familiar with the local dialect. Penguern collected most of his songs in the Morlaix region; La Villemarqué drew on the area around his native Quimperlé. Dialect difference was also a reason for the relative lack of interest in songs from the Vannetais region, and it is striking how certain areas, especially Luzel’s northern Trégor, remained consistently the focus of collection over successive generations – Ifig Troadeg recorded hundreds of songs in Luzel’s home territory almost a 150 years later.

In addition to all this, certain types of singer tended to be privileged in the search for songs. There was a general presumption that the best singers would be rural, labouring-class, illiterate and female. Particular vocations – tailor, seamstress – were more readily visible and indeed more sociable than others: tailors would travel from farm to farm, bringing new songs and stories, as well as local news, with them. Professional beggars and ‘hired pilgrims’ such as Marc’harit Fulup (who would visit churches, pray and do penance on behalf of other people) moved in regular circuits and had access to a rich repertoire of traditional material. The end result of these different, often unconscious ‘filters’ was a relatively homogeneous published repertoire that did not reflect the variety of songs circulating among Breton-speakers at any given time.

61 Louis Bourgault-Ducoudray, *Trente Mélodies populaires de Basse-Bretagne* (Paris, Bruxelles: Lemoine, 1885), 7.

The ‘matière’ of the gwerziou: from legends to local events

The *gwerziou* offer a rich and distinctive body of material within the wider corpus of Breton popular literature. Like other narrative song traditions they draw on a wide range of sources, and share various themes and stylistic features with ballads and songs across Europe and (through migration and colonisation) well beyond. Donatien Laurent has outlined four main types of source material feeding into the ballad tradition: a strand of themes and motifs derived from a shared Celtic heritage (e.g. nos 2 and 3); Europe-wide texts in medieval Latin drawing on a widely dispersed body of Christian legend, such as the account of the crippled Saint Brigit (no.7), the misadventures and miraculous rescue of travellers to Compostella (no. 5) and the story of the cock that crows after its death (no. 4); French-language sources (including printed broadsheets, discussed below); and finally, and by far the largest category, local events – shipwrecks, murders, natural disasters.⁶² This rich and varied mix of raw material is then homogenised by the process of transmission; even songs with recognisably international themes adapt their material thoroughly to the form and style of the *gwerz*, creating a body of songs with a highly distinctive aesthetic.

When the Welsh scholar and clergyman Thomas Price visited Brittany in 1829 he was less than impressed by the songs he heard, finding them monotonous and musically uninteresting. His comments, though negative, are interestingly perceptive:

if the tunes are short, the words seem interminable. When I had listened to this Chevy Chase style of singing for some time, I would occasionally ask if they had no other sort of song, and was always answered, that they had a great number; and, upon my requesting to be favoured with one, they would strike up Chevy Chase again with the greatest composure, always appearing to estimate the singing according to the merits of the words, the air being a very secondary consideration.⁶³

Gwerziou do tend to be long, and (for those who understand them) rich in details – place names, personal names – which can help identify actual historical events behind the narrative. Characterisation is often marked and intensely local, and even ballads with international parallels feel deeply rooted in place. If a young girl encounters a mysterious rider at a well, the Breton version will tell us her family name and the name of her native parish, and often that of her murderer (such encounters rarely have a positive outcome). In these cases, local memory of a real event has usually been reshaped by the form and demands of the ballad genre.

These songs are indeed versions of history, but they need to be read in a particular way, embedded, ideally, in a context of other forms of documentation (parish registers, legal records or genealogies) and in as many different versions as possible. Case studies such as those of the

62 Donatien Laurent, ‘Breton Orally Transmitted Folk Poetry’, in Otto Holzapfel (ed.), *The European Medieval Ballad: A Symposium* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1978), pp. 16–25.

63 Jane Williams, *The Literary Remains of the Rev. Thomas Price, Carnhuanawc* (2 vols, Llandoverly and London: W. Rees and Longman, 1855), I, p. 21. ‘Chevy Chase’ (Child no. 162) is an old and much-cited border ballad about a hunting party in the Cheviots. It is found in many early ballad collections, including the Pepys Collection and the *Reliques* of Thomas Percy.

murder of Loeiz Er Ravalleg (no. 31) or Lord Penanger (no. 23) show how these distinctive forms of memorialisation can enrich, and occasionally illuminate, our understanding of the past.⁶⁴ Their rich evocation of the details of everyday life offer a rare window onto aspects of prerevolutionary Brittany from a non-elite perspective. Again, one should note important regional differences; the dialect of the Vannetais in southern Brittany is notably closer to a French style of singing, far less detailed, more lyrical and often with much shorter songs. The detailed *gwerz* of the death of Toussaint de Kerguezec (no. 29) in Trégor becomes in its Vannetais version a brief, impersonal lyric about a young man out shooting ducks.⁶⁵ This brevity of form is another reason for the relatively poor representation of the Vannetais in 19th-century collections.⁶⁶

The longevity and richness of the narrative song tradition in Breton are in no doubt, since a relatively short period of collecting – some two and half centuries – has resulted in hundreds of song types expressed through thousands of versions. And it remains, in spite of social change and a dramatic crash in the number of Breton speakers in the course of the 20th century, a living tradition. Several of the songs in this collection were widely collected in the 1970s and 1980s, and can still be heard in the traditional ‘veillées’ or evening social events, whose singers and audiences come from overlapping worlds of amateurs and professionals, some of whom will have learned their repertoire from family members, others from recordings. (In Brittany as elsewhere the notion of a ‘pure’ or ‘authentic’ song tradition preserved by indigenous tightly knit communities is not especially helpful.)

The similarly vexed question of origins and authorship has preoccupied many writers since the 19th century.⁶⁷ As elsewhere in Europe, many of the early Breton collectors subscribed to the Romantic-era concept of a folk repertoire exclusively composed and transmitted by an idealised peasant population. In reaction, the beginning of the 20th century saw the development of a theory that cast the ‘people’ as passive transmitters or imitators of poetry which originated at the higher end of society. Recent studies have concerned themselves more with questions of the interactions between the peasantry and the elite classes, often focusing on figures (such as clerics) who mediate between the classes. Discussion of the subject, however, is still often ideologically partisan – and reliable facts about the authors of *gwerziou* are extremely rare. We have some direct knowledge of songs composed by minor gentry or rural priests who acted as cultural intermediaries, speaking both French and Breton, and comfortable in oral and written milieux.⁶⁸ Other songs contain self-referential couplets claiming composition by artisans or farmers, and similar authors are mentioned in written archives, especially in the case of the lyrical *soniou* or defamatory songs.⁶⁹ Theories about the composition of these songs are often based solely on analysis of the

64 Donatien Laurent, ‘La gwerz de Louis Le Ravalleg’, *Arts et Traditions Populaires*, 15 (1967), 19–79; Daniel Giraudon, ‘Penanger et de La Lande, Gwerz tragique au XVIIIe siècle en Trégor’, *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l’Ouest*, 112 (2005), 7–42.

65 Daniel Giraudon and Donatien Laurent, ‘Gwerz an Aotrou Kergwezeg’, *Planedenn*, 6 (1980–1), 13–43.

66 Constantine and Porter, *Fragments and Meaning*, pp. 167–83.

67 For discussions about the origins and authors of the *gwerziou*, see Guillourel, *La complainte et la plainte*, pp. 100–7.

68 See for example François-Nicolas Pascal de Kerenveyer, *Ar farvel gôapaer: Le bouffon moqueur*, Texte traduit et présenté par Ronan Calvez (Brest: Centre de recherche bretonne et celtique, 2005).

69 See Charles Chassé, ‘Les charivaris d’Hennebont’, *Le Fureteur breton*, 55 (1919), 12–14.

texts themselves, which can lead to quite incompatible conclusions; in separate studies of the same *gwerz* about a murderous rift between two noblemen in 1707, Daniel Giraudon argues that the author must have been a clergyman, while Ronan Calvez sees it rather as the work of a member of the nobility.⁷⁰

As with most song traditions, the Breton *gwerziou* show interaction between oral and written or printed sources, and between languages. There are some clear cases where French printed sources (ballads, news stories, trial proceedings) have served as raw material for the Breton tradition, as in the *gwerz* based on a printed account of the trial following the murder of the Marquise Dégangé in south-west France in 1667, which reached Brittany through the networks of *colporteurs* (itinerant peddlars selling ballads and broadsheets).⁷¹

Though such material does not seem to be a major source of inspiration for the *gwerziou*, it is perhaps worth, nonetheless, trying to distinguish the orally transmitted narrative songs from the large body of printed broadside ballads or *feuilles volantes* (which also sometimes call themselves *gwerziou*). These latter songs belong to the Europe-wide tradition of ‘news’ ballads, sold in markets and fairs and relaying sensational current events. They begin to appear in significant numbers in Breton from the very end of the 18th century (there is little secular literature of any kind in Breton before then, although hymns and religious pieces circulate much earlier in broadsheet form). They have a different aesthetic from the oral ballads, borrowing more heavily from French and being more sentimental and/or moralistic in tone.⁷² Though more work needs to be done in this area, the printed ballads appear not to have borrowed from or contributed much to the oral *gwerziou* – a situation that contrasts with English-language ballads, where the interaction between oral and printed traditions can be traced much further back in time, and where broadsides played an important part in diffusing song types.⁷³ At the risk of perpetuating preconceptions and prejudices about a ‘classical’ oral tradition corresponding to F.J. Child’s English and Scottish ‘popular ballads’ and a more ephemeral market-based broadside tradition, it does seem that Breton narrative song, for most of the 19th and part of the 20th century, ran in two fairly distinct channels. There are exceptions, of course. The *gwerziou* recounting the murder of a servant girl in Lannion (no. 28) and the fire in Quimper cathedral (no. 21) both have a complex relation to accounts in the printed tradition.⁷⁴

70 Giraudon, ‘Drame sanglant au pardon de Saint-Gildas à Tonquédec en 1707: Gwerz ar c’homt a Goat-Louri hag an otro Porz-Lann’, *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l’Ouest*, 114 (1/2007), 75–77; Ronan Calvez, ‘Du breton mondain’, *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l’Ouest*, 115 (3/2008), 139.

71 Anatole Le Braz, ‘L’origine d’une gwerz bretonne’, in Joseph Loth (ed.), *Mélanges en l’honneur d’Arbois de Jubainville* (Paris: Fontemoing, 1906), pp. 111–28.

72 Giraudon, *Chansons populaires de Basse-Bretagne sur feuilles volantes*; <http://www.kan.bzh>.

73 Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); David Atkinson and Steve Roud (eds), *Street Ballads in Nineteenth-Century Britain, Ireland, and North America: The Interface between Print and Oral Traditions* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014).

74 For other cases where a broadside has clearly influenced oral versions see Daniel Giraudon, ‘Une chanson de conscripts en langue bretonne: Chanson Paotred Plouillio’, *Mémoires de la Société d’Émulation des Côtes-du-Nord*, 116 (1987), 39–63; Daniel Giraudon, ‘Gwerz sant Juluan. De la feuille volante à la tradition orale’, in Blanchard, *Jean-Marie de Penguern*, pp. 139–67.

The *gwerziou* have no very obvious parallels with song traditions in the other Celtic languages – neither in Gaelic (Ireland, Scotland, the Isle of Man) nor in the linguistically closer but culturally quite different Welsh tradition. The most likely Celtic-speaking culture with a similar sociolinguistic background could well have been Cornwall, but so little has survived in Cornish that we can only guess at its lost oral heritage.⁷⁵ Welsh has a rich tradition of printed ballads for the 18th and 19th centuries, often produced by named authors and responding to local events (shipwrecks, court cases, news of the American war, the invasion scare of 1797) and also adapting freely from English broadsides.⁷⁶ These are the productions of a literate and profoundly Protestant society, well versed in the Bible, and with a moral, sometimes decidedly judgemental outlook. The Welsh oral song tradition, though considerably less rich (or dramatically less well recorded) than in other Celtic-speaking countries, is livelier, funnier, more playful – but rarely given to extended narrative. Nothing in Welsh song tradition really corresponds to the world of the *gwerziou* in terms of form, content and style.

Irish and Scots Gaelic have extremely rich and varied song traditions, with songs adapted to different occasions – songs for weddings and funerals, work songs, lullabies, love songs, and some political and prophetic songs that use the very old narrative technique of the dream vision (*aisling*).⁷⁷ Many of these domestic songs could be interestingly paralleled in the Breton *soniou*, but when directly compared to the *gwerziou*, the Gaelic tradition as a whole has a far more lyrical feel. The rich tradition of Ossianic songs, legends and ballads known as *Fianaigheacht* (material dating well back into the Middle Ages, parts of which were used by James Macpherson for his literary *Ossian* in the 1760s) shares with the Breton ballads an insistent quality of localisation, with named landscape features, hills, lochs and streams linked to episodes in the adventures of the legendary band of warriors associated with Fionn Mac Cumhaill.⁷⁸ The overriding concern of the *gwerziou* with ‘true’ local incidents, however, is far less in evidence. Although some songs can be linked to historical events, such as the lament on the death of Gregor MacGregor in 1570 in the context of a feud with the Campbell clan,⁷⁹ these tend to be rare cases.

There are, however, just one or two tantalising threads that appear to stretch directly from the Breton song tradition back to the early literatures of other Celtic-speaking countries. One is the long, strange and unique, rhymed text about ‘Merlin’ collected by La Villemarqué in the 1820s, which formed the inspiration for the some of the Merlin poems in the *Barzaz-Breiz*. It is hard to know quite how such a piece might have been performed in the 19th century, but it clearly

75 See Oliver Padel, ‘Evidence for Oral Tales in Medieval Cornwall’, *Studia Celtica*, XL (2006), 127–53.

76 Ffion Mair Jones, ‘Welsh Balladry and Literacy’, in Atkinson and Roud, *Street Ballads*, pp. 105–26. Mary-Ann Constantine (ed.), *Ballads in Wales-Baledi yng Nghymru* (London: FLS Books, 1999).

77 A good introduction to the variety of this material can be found via the Carmichael Watson project at <http://www.carmichael-watson.lib.ed.ac.uk/cwatson/>.

78 Anja Gunderloch, ‘The Heroic Ballads of Gaelic Scotland’, in Sarah Dunnigan and Suzanne Gilbert (eds), *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Traditional Literatures* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2013), pp. 74–84.

79 Martin MacGregor, ‘“Surely one of the greatest poems ever made in Britain”: The Lament for Griogair Ruadh MacGregor of Glen Strae and its Historical Background, in Edward J. Cowan and Douglas Gifford (eds), *The Polar Twins* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1999), pp. 114–53.

draws on an earlier body of material that might be called ‘Arthurian’.⁸⁰ Another tantalising web of connections can be found in the motif of the woman with the golden breast found in the ballad of ‘Enori’ (no. 2): the story is clearly derived from a Latin life of St Budoc, with analogues in French Arthurian literature, medieval Welsh triads, a Scots ballad and a Scottish-Gaelic folktale, discussed in the commentary to the ballad. As so often with the complex interactions of surviving Arthurian texts, these moments of international connection offer glimpses into a world of lost stories circulating among the medieval cultures of Europe’s western seaboard.

Most teasing of all is the link between the ballad of the penitential figure Iannik Skolvan/Skolan (no. 3) and an enigmatic little poem about a similarly guilt-ridden ‘Ysgolan’ in the Welsh *Black Book of Carmarthen*.⁸¹ The Welsh poem, preserved in a 13th-century manuscript but potentially older, is in the form of an *englyn*: a stanzaic, highly elliptical form of art poetry, which frequently alludes to narratives that are now either lost or partially known from other sources; as Oliver Padel has observed, the *englyn* sequences often voice expressions of loss, regret and guilt.⁸² The connections between the two pieces, clearly related but so far apart in time, are explored further in the case study accompanying the text.

III: One song, many stories: ways of ‘reading’ *gwerziou*

The richness of the *gwerz* repertoire encourages a wide range of critical approaches. In this anthology we have tried to offer, within the relatively restricted confines of individual short commentaries, a variety of different responses to the songs themselves. It is perhaps worth, however, setting out some of these approaches in more detail. They range from a focus on style, narrative technique and musicality to a concern with historicity, and the importance of a broader contextualisation which locates the song text within a wider nexus of performers and listeners.

Language, form and music

The texts themselves are valuable records for anyone interested in language and poetic form. *Gwerziou* almost all conform to a specific metre, with end-rhymed couplets of eight or thirteen stresses. Depending on the tune, these can be also performed as triplets or quatrains; the form when sung is naturally flexible enough to accommodate all manner of ‘irregularities’, and lines do vary considerably in length. Very occasionally, it is possible to detect traces of a more complex internal rhyme system, which is attested in other literary texts in Breton between 1350 and 1650,

80 Laurent, *Aux sources du Barzaz-Breiz*, 289–96; Constantine, ‘Neither flesh nor fowl’.

81 Donatien Laurent, ‘La gwerz de Skolan et la légende de Merlin’, *Ethnologie française*, 1 (1971), 19–54.

82 Oliver Padel, ‘Legendary poetry in *englyn* metre’, unpublished article (pers comm). We are grateful to the author for sharing his ideas on this subject.

and which corresponds to the use of *cynganedd* in Welsh poetry.⁸³ The language of the *gwerziou* is distinctive, it has its own poetic formality and is often rich in archaisms; though many do preserve the dialect forms of their communities, they do not really reflect either the spoken day-to-day Breton of the singers or the *brezoneg beleg* – a form of Breton used by the church in catechisms, hymns and educational material such as printed texts, including songs. Singing may also alter the pronunciation of certain words, shifting the usual spoken stress patterns to fit the shape of the tune.⁸⁴

Gwerziou share some of the well-known narrative techniques of other European ballad traditions – the dramatic ‘leaping and lingering’, sometimes concise to the point of ellipsis, and other times offering detailed, almost ritualised, descriptions. And, again as in other song traditions, *gwerziou* are comprised of familiar phrasal building blocks (ballad commonplaces) which have both a mnemonic and a structuring role. These may be opening verses, readily adaptable to new names and new stories:

[Iannik Kokard] *a lavare*
D’he vamm, d’he zad, un deiz a oe

[Character’s name] *said*
To his mother and father one day

Or (as in nos 12, 21, 23 and 24) they may invoke the listener’s sympathy at a critical moment in the narrative:

Kriz vije ’r galoun na welje
 [En iliz Kemper] *neb a vije*

Cruel the heart that would not have wept
To be [in the church at Quimper]

They may also be smaller units, like the frequently repeated *seiz* (seven), or the *trivec’h* (‘eighteen’) which crops up with baffling regularity (eighteen lovers, eighteen dead soldiers, eighteen blows with a stick) until one realises that its role in ballad coinage is to express ‘a large number’.⁸⁵ The function of these commonplaces in the preservation and renewal of song traditions has been the subject of a vast amount of critical attention, from the Parry–Lord theory of oral-formulaic composition derived from Homeric and South Slavic epic poetry, to more recent print-focused

83 Gwennoù Le Menn, ‘La prosodie des chants en moyen-breton (1350–1650)’, in Jean Quénari (ed.), *Le chant, acteur de l’histoire* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 1999), pp. 13–21.

84 Francis Favereau, ‘Phonologie des rimes et des vers dans la poésie chantée à Poullaouen’, *Klask*, 3 (1996), 35–41.

85 Matthieu Boyd, ‘The Female Jailer: Commonplaces in the *gwerziou*’, in Joseph Harris and Barbara Hillers (eds), *Child’s Children: Ballad Study and Its Legacies* (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2012), pp. 186–204; see also Le Rol, *La langue des ‘gwerziou’*, pp. 108–60.

discussions of the Child ballads.⁸⁶ Traditionally understood as markers of an essentially oral tradition (a view which has been persuasively challenged by David Atkinson),⁸⁷ ballad commonplaces have been perceived both as proof that songs are continually recomposed with each performance,⁸⁸ with every singer reconfiguring the elements to create the ballad anew, and also, apparently to the contrary, as evidence of a mnemonic technique which keeps texts verbally stable generation after generation. Both, in a partial sense, may be true. Perhaps the least contentious way of understanding commonplaces in the *gwerz* context is to think of them as a language within a language, a store of phrases available to singers who, from deep familiarity with the ‘grammar’ of other songs, can extend or adapt certain aspects of the narrative (see, for example, the multiple endings of ballads associated with *gwerz* no. 26, ‘Sea-changes’). Yet they clearly also function mnemonically and help to keep texts stable by structuring the story.

Set-piece endings – a miraculous rescue or, more likely, a good death – allow versions to develop in strikingly different narrative directions, sometimes quite brusquely. The cluster of different versions around a shipwreck ballad relating to St Mathurin Moncontour (no. 26) demonstrates this particularly effectively.⁸⁹ Dialogue occupies a large part of many ballads, and again certain classic dialogues of confrontation or denunciation may drift between versions with interesting narrative results. Above all the *gwerziou* are rich in idioms and expressions that derive from the culture and the language itself. Count Guillou warns his wife that, if she lies to him, she will be ‘*konfontet evel amann rouzet*’ (‘melted like burnt butter’). The terrified bride of a man bitten by a mad dog cries out: ‘*Ma é zeulegad én é ben / Avel guin ru en ur huéren*’ (‘The eyes in his head / are like red wine in a glass’). At another level again is the constant irruption of the miraculous, the surreal – a star speaks, a girl shrivels to a ‘little piece of heart’, three thin-faced women in yellow silk ride past – in a language of symbolism heavily marked by, yet often weirdly subversive of, the Catholic church. Indeed, if one were to single out a stylistic characteristic of the *gwerziou* it might be a gift for *materialising* the miraculous. The bracken standing tall along the north coast is transformed into soldiers (no. 35). A simple gesture of physical contact allows a sceptical ship’s captain to hear impossibly distant bells (no. 33):

– O, ‘me’añ, me na gredan ket se
Klevfes kleier Kawan alese

86 For a stimulating review and discussion of the subject, with particular focus on the Child ballads, see David Atkinson, *The Anglo-Scottish Ballad and its Imaginary Contexts* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2014). See especially Chapter 3, which discusses ‘sources of variance’.

87 ‘Accordingly – seductively – oral tradition comes to be equated with the very engine of ballad variation, that complex of processes involving remembering and forgetting, addition, subtraction and rearrangement, substitution, borrowing and consolidation (to name just a few) that scholars have codified to account for textual and melodic stability and change’, Atkinson, *The Anglo-Scottish Ballad*, p. 49.

88 The theory of oral improvisation was advanced most comprehensively by David Buchan, *The Ballad and the Folk* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), and most strenuously refuted by Albert B. Friedman, ‘The Oral-Formulaic Theory of Balladry – A Re-rebuttal’, in *The Ballad Image: Essays Presented to Bertrand Harris Bronson*, ed. James Porter (Los Angeles: Center for the Study of Comparative Folklore & Mythology, University of California, Los Angeles, 1983), pp. 215–40.

89 Constantine and Porter, *Fragments and Meaning*, pp. 101–11.

Klevfes kleier Kawan alese
Te ve'añ pemp kant lev dioute.

– Lakaet ho troad dehou war ma hini
Ha c'hwi klevo ma mestr kenkoulz ha me.

– Ah, he said, that I do not believe.
That you can hear the bells of Cavan from here

That you can hear the bells of Cavan from here
When you are five hundred leagues away from them.

– Put your right foot on mine
And you will hear, master, as well as I do.⁹⁰

A musicologist would approach these pieces with further questions about the relationship between lyrics and tune; occasionally their findings might surprise. Thomas Price's comments about the primacy of words over tunes are not inappropriate here, in that melodies do tend to be subordinate, and are fairly readily interchangeable (it is difficult to think of any *gwerz* that is consistently sung to one single tune). Certain tunes hold sway over large swathes of the tradition at any given time; the best-known example being the air known as *Ker-Is*, which became very popular during the 19th century (included here with *gwerz* no. 21 and CD track 3).⁹¹ Age and memory can also alter or reduce singers' melodic range. When a *gwerz* is put to a different use, however, the primacy of the narrative can be seriously destabilised. It regularly happens that ballad texts are used for dances – often group dances in the round – and here the rhythm of the piece is paramount, even when, disconcertingly, the story is a tragic one of rape or murder, such as the case of Marivonnik abducted by the English (no. 25 and CD track 15) or Perinaig Ar Mignon, the servant girl from Lannion (no. 28 and CD track 16).

History and memory: renewing the past

Historians are becoming increasingly interested in the nature of historical memory within popular and traditional genres. The Breton *gwerziou* offer many opportunities for such research, provided that the historian understands the internal 'rules' of the genre. Over the last century or so, some 40 separate studies have allowed us to identify specific historical events from the 16th to the

90 *Garan Ar Briz*, recorded by Claudine Mazéas from Jeanne-Yvonne Garlan, Minihiy-Tréguier, c.1960–1. Dastum, NUM-2832.

91 Bernard Lasbleiz, 'Le timbre de Kêr Is: Un air populaire qui traverse les siècles', *Musique Bretonne*, 188 (2005), 34–8; Bernard Lasbleiz, *War don... Les timbres des chansons et cantiques populaires en langue bretonne (17e–20e siècle)*, unpublished doctoral thesis (Brest: Université de Bretagne Occidentale, 2012).

18th centuries which inspired *gwerziou* not collected until considerably later.⁹² Wherever possible, multiple ballad versions are compared with information from more familiar written sources. Certain periods are especially well represented; there are several ballads covering the wars of religion in the last decade of the 16th century, often focusing on the troubles caused by the unruly followers of characters such as René de La Tremblaye, Marguerite Charlès or Guy Éder de La Fontenelle (nos 15, 16, 17), or referring to specific military actions, such as the siege of the town of Guingamp (no. 12).

Also well represented in the *gwerz* repertoire are ballads reflecting conflicts within the Breton nobility at the beginning of the 17th century, particularly encounters ending in duels (nos 23 and 24). Others focus on historical figures who left their mark on the popular imagination, such as the Marquis of Guerrand, the subject of several songs based on his turbulent youth and his penitent old age (no. 22), the Marquis of Pontcallec executed for treason (no. 30) and the Chouan leader Jean Jan (no. 34). Others preserve the memory of local events, such as the shipwreck at Penmarc'h (no. 11) and the murder of a group of merchants by Lord Villaudrain (no. 14).

The individual case studies are fascinating and often require considerable detective work. But the *gwerziou* as a body also permit a broader analysis through a cultural historical lens, offering a window onto Breton society under the *ancien régime*.⁹³ Any analysis needs to take account of the fact that songs are not preserved in aspic – that they change and adapt in the course of transmission. But the structure of the song, its form and its rhymes, quite apart from the status accorded the *gwerz* as a repository of ‘truth’ makes it inherently conservative. And comparison between the songs and the written evidence of the archives reveals that the historical *gwerziou* almost always offer closer reflections of the period of their composition (generally between the 16th and 18th centuries), than of the period during which they were collected (usually the 19th and 20th centuries).

They are detailed enough, for example, to allow the exploration of aspects of material culture, whether in terms of the built environment – the importance of the local manor house and its planted avenues of trees (no. 23) – or the furnishing of interiors, as with the use of coffered ceilings (nos 19, 20 and 27). Styles and types of clothing are signalled in brief, significant details which permit the listener to identify the socioeconomic status of the protagonists: the rich with their ribbons, lace and high-status materials (nos 20 and 22); heiresses sporting beautifully ornate *coiffes* (no. 13); and nobles trying to escape justice dressed as peasants in garments of coarse linen (no. 30).

The *gwerziou* allow plenty of scope, too, for examining the relations between the world of the nobility and the labouring rural classes, as well as considering perceptions of the destitute and the socially excluded. The nobility they portray is far from uniform, from the rich ladies organising balls and dinners in their manor houses, or seeking to marry off their *pennhêrez* (heiress) (nos 13 and 24), to the impoverished aristocrats struggling to keep up appearances in front of an up-and-coming *paysan* class seeking to make advantageous marriages (no. 22). Nobles have the right to wear a sword or to retain a family pew at church (no. 24) – privileges which continue to

92 For a list of dated *gwerziou* with accompanying case studies see Guillorel, *La complainte et la plainte*, 122–4.

93 For a more detailed exploration of this point see Guillorel, *La complainte et la plainte*, pp. 290–490.

distinguish them from the wealthy farming classes. For the latter, status is linked to material wealth – the size of their herds or the number of farms (no. 18). Amid this broader network of social relations, certain themes appear specific to Breton-speaking Brittany. Among them we find the ostracism of ‘*kakous*’, a group believed to be descendants of lepers and excluded from taking part in normal society long after the disease itself was eradicated. Earning their living as ropemakers (the only craft permitted to them), they live apart, marry among themselves and are forbidden from mixing with the wider community, even at mass (no. 18).⁹⁴ Other ballads offer striking representations of diseases such as the plague (no. 8) and rabies (no. 9).

Gwerziou can also contribute a great deal to our understanding of popular religious belief and practice, reflecting as they do the characteristically intense religiosity of Breton-speaking Brittany well into the modern period.⁹⁵ They include accounts of local, often unofficial, saints (no. 6) and unusual representations of the afterlife (nos 1 and 3). Often richly detailed, they describe attitudes to death, prayers, processions, funerals and particular acts of charity towards the poor (nos 10 and 13). There are vivid vignettes of pilgrims circling churches on their bare and bloodied knees, heading for the numerous *pardons* – pilgrimages to favoured shrines at Sainte-Anne-d’Auray, Le Folgoët, Saint-Jean-du-Doigt and Le Yaudet. Once at church, they may offer votive gifts of long waxed cords (‘*ceintures de cire*’) in exchange for divine protection (nos 4 and 26). A recurrent protagonist in the ballads is the figure of the ‘*kloarek*’ (‘cleric’), usually the son of relatively wealthy farming family, pursuing religious studies, a situation which often sets up a painful conflict between the demands of a sweetheart at home and the desire of the *kloarek*’s parents who wish to have a priest in the family (no. 22).

Strikingly, too, Breton ballads vocalise and form part of a world of constant movement – so many of the *gwerziou* begin with characters setting off for fairs, or the *aire neuve* (threshing floor, where dances are held), leaving for a pilgrimage or to try and make a living at sea. Also widespread are stories of soldiers heading off to war, or returning after many years unrecognised by their families or sweethearts (no. 32), often with tragic consequences. Descriptions of young men called up to the military by the drawing of lots (no. 33) correspond to known historical procedures from the 17th and 18th centuries.

And in a genre full of violent deaths it is not surprising to find references to various aspects of the judicial system of the *ancien régime*: arrests, trials, sentences and executions, with punishment often gradated by class – hanging for the lower classes, decapitation for the nobles and burning at the stake for women accused of witchcraft (nos 17, 20, 30). Several ballads use the motif of royal letters of remission or pardon for a criminal (no. 22). Others offer us glimpses of oral-based legal activities that leave little trace on the written record, such as unofficial negotiations resolving issues that would damage the reputation of families. In some cases, they shed new light on events known from other sources; the case of the murder of Louis Le Ravallec, studied in detail by Donatien Laurent, is perhaps the best example of this. Where the contemporary written record

⁹⁴ Constantine, *Breton Ballads*, pp. 83–128.

⁹⁵ Croix, *La Bretagne aux 16^e et 17^e siècles*.

appears to have been deliberately muted in order to protect certain influential people, the *gwerz* and the handed-down knowledge that accompanies it have preserved a fuller and more damning account of events (no. 31).⁹⁶ The *gwerziou* thus permit us to see history from unusual angles, and are a valuable resource when considering Brittany under the *ancien régime*.⁹⁷

While the stability and relative conservatism of the *gwerz* tradition lend it historical credibility, this does not of course preclude the songs being renewed in altered historical contexts. Several ballads relating to events from the 16th to the 18th centuries gain a new emphasis and new meanings during the 1789 French Revolution and its attendant counter-revolutionary rebellions. During this period of civil war, a period which scarred Brittany deeply, those who held revolutionary ideals confronted those who sought to uphold the authority of the monarch and the church (a group often, if rather too simplistically, labelled ‘Chouans’). Some versions of the ballads on the murder of Perrine Le Mignon in 1695 (no. 28) or the death of the Marquis de Pontcallec in 1720 (no. 30) have clearly been ‘updated’ to reflect a counter-revolutionary perspective; this is especially the case in the Vannetais, where *chouannerie* was most active.⁹⁸

These kinds of meaningful alterations, only possible to detect where multiple versions of a single *gwerz* can be compared, offer further insights into the development of Breton society, and show the continued importance of certain key cultural or historical moments into the period when most of the songs were collected in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Performance and meaning: communities and individuals

Switching analytical focus, performance-oriented criticism steps outside the individual song text to ask questions about the meaning of a given song for its singers and their audiences. Song repertoires are intensely personal. Certain songs may have been learned from family members and carry with them vivid penumbra of childhood associations; some may have been acquired during specific periods of close personal contact with other bearers of the tradition – for example, during apprenticeships or group work sessions. Personal taste – a penchant for a particular kind of ballad story – must also count for a lot. One might note the harsh religiosity of much of Marc’harit Fulup’s repertoire, with its emphasis on bloody penitential acts, its investment in the notion of redemption bought through pain. Songs that play out dramas of violence against women or the loss of a son to the army may directly reflect and articulate lived experiences. It may not be pure chance that the repertoires of both Mari-Job Cado and Mari-Job Kerival, both of whom sang for Luzel, contain five different *gwerziou* about infanticide.⁹⁹ From what we know of the tradition, songs on such topics are virtually never sung by men. Under-represented in the written archive, acts of violence specifically relating to women, such as rape and infanticide (nos 25 and 27), are

96 Laurent, ‘La gwerz de Louis Le Ravallec’.

97 Guillorel, *La complainte et la plainte*, pp. 173–288.

98 Guillorel, *La complainte et la plainte*, pp. 479–81.

99 Guillorel, *La complainte et la plainte*, pp. 206–7.

much in evidence in the *gwerziou*; they offer insights into a female discourse which is rarely accessible through other sources. Elements of a ballad story may have a deeply hidden, indirect connection to the psychology of singers or listeners; any information about the emotional importance of a particular song for an individual is precious (and largely missing, of course, for 19th-century versions), but one can also legitimately ask how society as a whole, or the parts of society that participated in the song culture, 'used' songs like these to deal with difficult, even taboo, subjects.¹⁰⁰

More generally, one might ask how 'meaning' works for modern singers of ballads which date all the way back to the 16th century, but for whom that original historical context is lost. What keeps songs alive beyond the first context of their production? Aesthetic sensibilities must play their part, but narrative is fundamental. One of the most widely collected songs dating from the wars of the Ligue has a plotline eminently capable of being transposed in time (no. 16): should the young woman abducted by a captain kill herself to preserve her virginity? Female honour, an essential component of *ancien régime* society, retained its importance in successive generations; and the song remains a powerful one even in contemporary society, where the interpretation has shifted away from the subject of honour and virginity to focus on the trauma of rape.

In contrast, it is not hard to find examples of ballads that are hugely popular in the 19th century, yet fail to appear in later collections. The complex question of why some songs survive and others vanish is ultimately unanswerable, but once again, in at least some cases, the nature of the narrative must play a part. The ballad on the death of the Marquis of Guerrand – which took place in 1669 at Plouégat-Guerrand (Trégor) – is an astonishing rhymed tour de force setting out his bequest to some 30 or so religious establishments. Known in a dozen versions from 19th-century sources, it has never since been recorded. More than two centuries after the marquis' death, this endless litany, with minimal narrative impact, seems not to have carried much meaning for singers or audience, and thus fell out of the ballad tradition altogether.¹⁰¹

Performance context is equally important when trying to grasp the possibilities of meaning in songs. Most collectors will testify to the subtle invisible 'rules' that make certain songs singable in certain contexts and not others. We have already seen that class, gender and/or politics might constrain a singer's desire to share her repertoire with a collector, but even within communities certain songs may be held back in the presence of a singer with a better claim to it, or in favour of a different version – and perhaps, too, out of respect for the families. Where a song evokes real and tragic local events (no. 31), a singer might hesitate to sing it 'car la famille existe encore' (because the family still exists).¹⁰² More practical circumstances also shape a repertoire; different pieces will be sung to accompany everyday chores, collective work outside or at a wedding party.

100 See, for the French song tradition, David Hopkin, *Voices of the People in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); for anglophone tradition, David Atkinson, *The English Traditional Ballad. Theory, Method, and Practice* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 1–38.

101 Guillorel, *La complainte et la plainte*, pp. 423–32.

102 See Patrick Malrieu, *La chanson populaire de tradition orale en langue bretonne. Contribution à l'établissement d'un catalogue*, unpublished doctoral thesis, 5 vols (Rennes: 1998), vol. 1, p. 132.

Conditions have changed dramatically, of course, over the last 100 years, with a shift from singing as a normal workplace activity in the fields or the domestic sphere, or as part of the long *veillées* combining work (such as spinning) and sociability, to the modern contexts of performance. The *veillées* continue, in pubs and village halls, as do the popular *festou-noz* where singing and dancing come together; but *gwerziou* may also now be heard in concert halls, on the radio or television, or on a CD played at home. Such audiences are wider but infinitely more disparate, and the meanings of these pieces for their singers and listeners are perhaps even more unknowable and unpredictable. What is certain, however, is that the meanings of songs can and will be renewed in quite different contexts, including in the privacy and silence of the printed page, and even refracted through another language. It is to be hoped that, in ways we cannot foresee, this anthology will help to give the Breton *gwerziou* a new lease of life.