

How important is the natural environment in the representations of Brittany you have studied? Illustrate your answer with detailed analysis of at least two examples of either texts or paintings of Brittany.

The aim of this essay is to demonstrate that the natural environment has an important part to play in representations of Brittany. To achieve this goal the essay will analyse several sources which have been created over an extended period of time for diverse reasons and with different intended audiences. It will look at sources created by 'insiders', people who were born in or have some kinship link with Brittany and 'outsiders', who have no such links, as a way of establishing if close association with Brittany influences the way that aspects of it are depicted in representations. The sources will include art, poetry and prose including the specific genre of travel writing. The sources will include work in Breton, French and Welsh and their respective translation into English.

The first type of representation to be reviewed is that which relates to tourism and travel writing. One example of this type is a poster that dates from the 1930's.



GWR Railways Tourism Poster. Source: Moodle

This poster was created for the UK based Great Western Railway as part of an advertising campaign at a time when rail travel and tourism for the masses was becoming increasingly popular. The poster shows positive and appealing images of the Breton countryside which include the sea, the beach, green vegetation and a clear sky with fluffy clouds. Each of the component parts of the poster has been carefully selected to create an overall image that is almost utopian in terms of holiday destinations. It is directed at people who are unlikely to have visited Brittany before and may therefore have little or no preconceived idea of what to expect. The natural background provides an important backdrop for the images of the two ladies who have a healthy, fresh-faced appearance suggesting that the natural environment in Brittany is conducive to good health. The target audience

for this poster can be considered to be 'outsiders', people who have no connection with Brittany. The second example of the type is also from an 'outsider' but one that may view Brittany from a different perspective and think of themselves as having a kinship link with the Bretons due to their shared Celticism. The Welsh travel writer, John Dyfnallt Owen¹ visited Brittany and in his book *O Bentire Llydaw* (From the Breton Headland) published in 1934, he describes a visit to the fishing port of Concarneau.² In his work, Owen highlights the importance of the sea and how the life of the town revolves around it with the fishing fleets and their catches of fresh fish. It appears that without the sea there would be no Concarneau. Owen shows the affinity that he shares with Brittany when he says, 'The craft of repairing and drying the nets after the trip is like that of the coracle fishermen on the rivers Towy and Teifi'.³ The third example also comes from an outsider but this time from a Parisian. In the 1870s the poet Mallarmé⁴ was writing for a fashion magazine *La Dernière mode*, when he suggested Brittany as a fashionable travel destination for the informed traveler that was already being visited by, 'les amateurs, artistes ou gens épris des grands sites et de solitude'.⁵

The second type of representation to be analysed is that related to the romantic discovery of Brittany. Prior to the 19th century a stereotype of Brittany had existed which depicted the area as having a harsh and unforgiving landscape, being a peninsular that was surrounded by cruel seas and that was known for its poor weather with fogs and biting winds. This image was to be replaced by a much kinder one in which Brittany was reinvented as a place of natural beauty with a fashionable coastline and healthier alternative to life in a city, in particular, life in Paris. This movement was known as Romanticism. Gustave Flaubert⁶ was known as the father of Romanticism who wrote his travel writings about Brittany in 1846 called *Over Strand and Field: A Record of Travel through Brittany*.⁷ In this work he describes the natural environment that had once been seen as harsh and unforgiving in a completely opposite way, making it something beautiful instead.

'They always opened through large, pointed arches which were either upright or inclined, their bold columns supporting enormous pieces of rock. Black, veined with purple, fiery red, or brown streaked with white, these beautiful grottoes displayed for their visitors the infinite variety of their shapes and colouring, their graces and their grand caprices. There was one all of silver veined with deep red; in another, tufts of flowers resembling periwinkles had grown on glazings of reddish granite, and drops of water fell from the ceiling on the fine sand with never-ceasing regularity.'⁸

¹ <https://biography.wales/article/s2-OWEN-DYF-1873> Last accessed 7 august 2025

² Gibson, Jacqueline, Gwyn Griffiths, and Bernard Le Nail, *The turn of the ermine : an anthology of Breton literature* (Francis Boutle, 2006) p. 389

³ Ibid p. 389

⁴ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/stephane-mallarme>

⁵ Stéphane Mallarmé, *La Dernière mode*, September 6, 1874, in *Œuvres complètes II*, ed. by Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), p.503.

⁶ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gustave-Flaubert>

⁷ Flaubert, Gustave, *Over Strand and Field: A Record of Travel through Brittany* (Project Gutenberg)

⁸ Ibid p. ?

In a similar way, Chateaubriand⁹ wrote in his *Memoirs from Beyond the Grave* a description of Spring in Brittany in which he paints a picture of abundant nature using it to show how Brittany is superior to Paris.

Spring, in Brittany, is milder than in the neighbourhood of Paris, and begins three weeks earlier.... The earth is covered with oxeye daisies, pansies, daffodils, narcissi, hyacinths, buttercups...each apple tree, with its carmine flowers, resembles the large bouquet of some village sweetheart/bride.¹⁰

The third and final type of representation to be looked at is one in which nature is used as part of a political argument. Anjela Duval was an 'insider' and a Breton speaker who wrote poetry in the Breton language.¹¹ In her poem *Work of the Foreigner* (translated from the original *Labour an Estron*) she uses natural elements in conjunction with their known associations to give them even greater strength and depth of meaning to support the points she is making. For example, she does this on the second line, 'Sweep away the sacred oaks of the Druids' Here, she is using the link between the oaks and the Druids to recognise the early Celtic history of Brittany. The line 'Fertilized with the ashes of our trees' speaks of the loss of native trees to make way for forests of commercial conifer planting. The poem was written in 1967 at a time when the concept of eco-poetry did not exist but in today's world this piece of work would be seen as such with the natural environment providing the rails on which run the political arguments of the poem.

In conclusion, it can be seen that the natural environment plays a very important role in the way that Brittany has been represented over an extended period of time. This range of depictions appears to depend on several key elements, such as who is the intended audience; is the creator of the representation an 'insider' or an 'outsider'; if they perceive that they have a shared Celtic affinity; if they hold a romantic view of Brittany or if they belong to a generation that pushed back against romanticism. Regardless of the type of portrayal or the creator, it can clearly be seen that the natural environment has an important role in the representation of Brittany.

Biography

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⁹ Britannica <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Francois-Auguste-Rene-vicomte-de-Chateaubriand>> [Last accessed 8 April 2025]
¹⁰

https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Chateaubriand/ChateaubriandMemoirsBookI.php?textLinkTarget=c3ByaW5nK2luK2JyaXR0YW55#anchor_Toc158719479

¹¹ <https://www.anjela.org/oberenn/?lang=en>

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The Poetry Foundation, <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/stephane-mallarme>> [Last accessed 7 April 2025]

Poetry in Translation

<https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Chateaubriand/ChateaubriandMemoirsBookI.php?extLinkTarget=c3ByaW5nK2luK2JyaXR0YW55#anchor_Toc158719479> [Last accessed 8 April 2025]