

BRITTANY AND THE BRETON PEOPLE: A CHANGING IMAGE

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Introduction

Although the image of Brittany today is often quite stereotypical, it is, by and large, a positive image—but this was not always so. What we will be concerned with in this paper is the way the image that Brittany and its people once projected (to the French), and the vision the Breton people had of themselves, have evolved in the last forty or fifty years, so that rather than being a burden (as was the case still relatively recently), the representation of Brittany today is becoming an asset. In more ways than one, the turning point was the 1960s. Yet in order to understand how momentous the changes that occurred during this decade were, it is necessary to take a step back in time.

1. Emergence of a stereotype

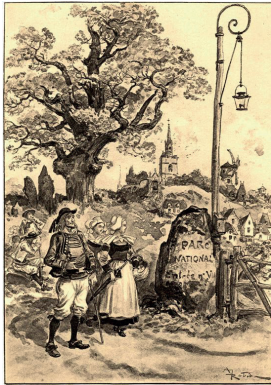
Isolated as it long was at the westernmost edge of the European continent, Brittany was under-developed compared to other areas of France, and remained so until quite late in the 20th century. Yet this is in fact largely what had made it so attractive to tourists and artists in search of exoticism in the previous century. Like others, Gauguin had come to Brittany in search of what he saw as the primitive and unspoilt quality of the place and people, the vast majority of whom then spoke a foreign tongue. Brittany seen from the outside was a remote and picturesque province where men wore their hair long and loose and where one might come across wizened old peasant women smoking pipes, as shown on popular postcards of the time. Due to the arrival of the railway, this exoticism and quaintness were made more easily accessible for visitors. By 1865 the travel time from Paris to Brest was reduced from over three days to seventeen hours. From then on, places like Concarneau, Quimper, Pont-Aven all attracted increasing numbers of visitors. As a country steeped in the Catholic religion, Brittany was also reputed to be particularly conservative, even reactionary; indeed, its piety was at times presented as a sign of the Breton population's misguided reluctance to embrace progress, as shall be seen.

Yet at the same time, the way Brittany was portrayed from the outside — and particularly from the French capital — also betrayed nostalgia for a rural society viewed as idyllic in its archaic simplicity. Here was a place where city-dwellers could get some respite from the stress of “electric life” by stepping back in time. In the futuristic France he imagined, Albert Robida¹ stated that modern life and progress — *La vie électrique* — stopped at the gates of the national park of Armorique (*Parc national d'Armorique*) which he imagined in 1892:

Où sommes-nous donc ? Avons-nous reculé de cent cinquante ans en arrière, ou sommes-nous dans une partie du monde si lointaine et si oubliée que le progrès n'y a pas encore pénétré ? Non pas ! Nous sommes en France [...] dans [le] Parc national d'Armorique [...]. Au poteau marquant sa frontière, le progrès s'arrête et ne passe pas [...] nous nous trouvons reportés en plein moyen âge, au tranquille et somnolent XIX^e siècle.

(Robida 1892: 75)

Where are we? Have we stepped a hundred and fifty years back in time, or is this part of the world so remote and God-forsaken that progress has not reached it? Not at all! We are in France, [...] in the Armorique National Park. [...] The signpost marking its entrance keeps progress out [and] we find ourselves thrown back to the Middle Ages, to the quiet and peaceful 19th century.



Writing in the late 19th century, Robida had set his story in 1955, which was uncannily premonitory not only because *la vie électrique* would eventually become reality, but also because a “Parc d’Armorique” (Fig. 1) — although regional, not national — would indeed be created in 1969. In this instance,

Fig. 1. Le Parc National d’Armorique, *La Vie électrique*

1 Albert Robida (1848–1926) wrote and published several hundred books (most of them illustrated), contributed to many magazines and produced 60,000 drawings. He also founded a magazine entitled *La Caricature* in 1880, but it is perhaps for his science-fiction trilogy that he is best known today: *Le Vingtième siècle*, published in 1883, followed by *La Guerre au vingtième siècle* (1887) and *Le Vingtième siècle. La vie électrique* (1891–92). In a very different vein, Robida also wrote and illustrated an impressive study of “old France” (*La Vieille France*) comprised of 2 volumes on Paris (1892) and 4 others on Normandy (1890), Touraine (1892), Provence (1893) and Brittany (1900) – over 2,000 pages in all.

Breton society was a society in which faith and tradition still held and in which life was basic and carefree. This was also the view given in most of the academic art produced in the 19th and early 20th century, such as the Bretons at prayer (Fig. 2) represented by Eugène Buland, or Henri-Paul Royer's *Ex-voto* (Fig. 3), with paintings of Breton inspiration displaying picturesque rural scenes where a devout people in quaint dress were shown going about their daily life — Bretons at the market, Bretons on their way to, (or coming back from) a *pardon*,² etc. This academic production often revealed as much about those who commissioned or bought the innumerable paintings with Breton themes as it did about the people featured in them.



Figs. 2, 3 (left to right). Eugène Buland, *Bretons en prière*, 1898 ;
Henri-Paul Royer, *L'Ex-voto*, 1898

2. Image wielders *versus* image sufferers

Images of Brittany produced in the late 19th and early 20th century occasionally bear the influence of Celtomania,³ with Brittany often represented in a rather romantic light. In literature, paintings and even schoolbooks of the period, the Breton people were depicted as direct descendants of the Celts, with the emphasis laid on the

² Traditionally, some churches, fountains, or the sites of alleged miracles were the object of particular devotion and would draw crowds from afar, with people seeking a remedy or the pardon of the local saint. The custom survives in the form of a religious procession, often organised once a year (*pardon de Saint Anne d'Auray*) but also in rites such as the blessing of horses (*pardon des chevaux*).

³ A magnificent example is Evariste Luminais' *La Fuite du Roi Gradlon*, displayed at the Musée des Beaux-Arts of Quimper.

persistence of ancient cults, odd customs or superstitions, the outlandish dress, and the ‘authentic’ nature of the place & people. The more popular depiction of Brittany, however, as found in the popular press, or in popular imagery and song for instance, tended to be somewhat less romantic. An equation was notably made in popular imagery between Bretons and pigs, with the two often placed on the same level—if not worse, as illustrated in a schoolyard taunt: *les pommes de terre pour les cochons, les épluchures pour les Bretons*, “feed the potatoes to the pigs and leave the peelings for the Bretons”. One finds an echo of this in a film released in 1940 which showed the famous character of the Breton maid Bécassine feeding potatoes to a piglet she had taken to bed with her, while the children in her care were left to eat the peelings.⁴

Some respected French authors also actively contributed to the spread of such negative *clichés*. One of them was writer Prosper Mérimée who travelled through Brittany in the summer of 1835 in an official role as an inspector for historical monuments and commented that “pigs and children [could] be seen all rolling about together on the heaps of manure in the villages” (*on voit les enfants et les cochons se roulant pêle-mêle sur le fumier*, Goulemot et al. 1997: 29), adding that he thought it likely that pigs in even the most god-forsaken area of France would turn their snouts up at the gruel eaten by Breton children.⁵ The common association of Bretons and pigs is just one illustration among many of the overall vision of Brittany as a primitive backwater (Fig. 4). Increasing tourism fed the demand for postcards, which in turn stimulated more tourism: the prolific production of picturesque Breton postcards contributed to the spread of a vision of Brittany that was largely based on what visitors wanted and expected to see.

Breton scenes were expected to conform to the idea of Brittany which people from the outside already had of it, and countless postcards displayed supposedly authentic scenes staging typical Breton characters (‘the fisherman’, ‘the beggar’, ‘the clog-maker’, etc.) to feed this appetite for folkloric images.

4 This film adaptation of Joseph Pinchon’s original comic strip Bécassine was produced by Pierre Caron, and generated protests in Brittany in the summer of 1939, even before the filming was finished. When it was released in 1940, the film caused such an outcry that some cinemas had to stop showing it.

5 “la pâtée que mangent les premiers serait probablement refusée par les cochons du Canigou”, wrote Prosper Mérimée in a letter to Joubert de Passa in 1835



Fig. 4. *Environs de Brest—un Dolmen* (postmarked 13.09.1908)

Brittany continued to lag behind during the 20th century, thereby earning the reputation of being backward in every respect. The mass migration of Bretons leaving their region to find work in French cities only served to confirm this reputation, since the overwhelming majority of Breton migrants hardly spoke any French. As well as making the Breton migrants easy prey for all types of exploitation, this implicitly made them more expendable than other French citizens. In 1909 for instance, a newspaper announced that rail consignments of Breton servants would be unloaded on the town square where landowners were invited to hand-pick the subjects who best suited their requirements. That Bretons were expendable is also implied in one of the more dubious verses written in the early 20th century by the Breton *troubadour* Théodore Botrel, who explained about the French republic: *Un Français doit vivre pour Elle/Pour Elle un Breton doit mourir*, “a Frenchman must live for Her, for Her a Breton must die”.⁶ This verse offers a justification of sorts for the

6 Théodore Botrel (1868–1925) was one of the most prolific and popular songwriters of the early 20th century in France where he was seen as both very patriotic and the representative of a picturesque and unassuming Brittany. “*Veillons sur la France immortelle / Toujours prêts à la secourir / Un Français doit vivre pour Elle / Pour Elle un Breton doit mourir*”, is an extract from Botrel’s poem entitled *Pour la Patrie* !

fact that comparatively more Bretons than men from most other regions of France were to die during the First World War (Gilles et al. 2014: 519–32).⁷



Fig. 5. Jean Le Blant, *Chouan tenant son chapelet*, 1893

Seen from the outside, one of the dominant traits of Brittany was the comical and outlandish appearance or customs of the inhabitants, assumed to be a relic of their pagan, Celtic past and their strange, even foreign nature. Whether in school textbooks or in the words of Victor Hugo, the people of Brittany were often described as very much a breed apart — and backward in every respect. In *Quatrevingt-treize*, for example, Hugo had explained the chasm that existed between the life and mentality of the Breton peasant and the progressive ideals of the Revolution by giving a description of an utterly primitive people, light years away from revolutionary

⁷ In terms of casualties, Brittany paid by far the highest tribute of all French provinces, with over 125,000 soldiers killed, which is partly explained by the fact that over ¼ million men had been mobilised there — a higher proportion than in many other regions. Just over 8% of the male population died in the conflict, which represents the second highest percentage in France (after Limousin).

France. For him the Breton cut a “stern, singular and wild-looking figure, with his blue eyes and long hair” (Hugo 1874: 205).⁸ Furthermore, Bretons were dirty, “only ever using water to drink”, “ignorant, bedecked with embroideries” and they “tattooed their clothes as their ancestors had tattooed their faces” (*ibid.*). They spoke “a dead language, and stood in awe of the church altar but also of the tall mysterious standing stone erected on the moorland”. The archetypal Breton “was deeply attached to his kings, his masters, his priests—and his lice”. Hugo ended his description by asking whether this blind creature could ever have been expected to embrace the light of progress. This very disparaging description of Breton men made by Hugo corresponds to that of the fiercely royalist and Catholic Breton *chouan*: a reactionary Breton peasant wearing the typical broad hat and *bragou-braz*, which became another popular enduring *cliché* (Fig. 5).

3. The fostering of a deep-seated inferiority complex

The Bretons, then, were a breed apart, to the point that even in Brittany, Bretons might be considered foreign—and inferior. When he was fourteen, the writer and journalist Morvan Lebesque (1911–1970) realised that his hometown of Nantes was in fact in Brittany. His account of this sudden revelation shows that being Breton also had negative connotations within Brittany itself. Lebesque recalls:

Je savais désormais que je vivais en Bretagne, non que j'étais breton. Me l'eût-on dit, j'eusse éclaté de rire. Les Bretons, je les connaissais. C'étaient des êtres crasseux, superstitieux, comiques, bref étrangers, logés à l'extrémité de la ville, dans [...] un quartier où on allait peu, juste après celui des putains. [...] Ils se chauffaient encore à la tourbe. Ils avaient leur église, leur prêche en patois et même leur cinéma; simplement, le patron était obligé de leur traduire les sous-titres des films, en se mettant à leur portée [...] "N'importe, concluait mon père, ils sont tout de même plus civilisés que dans leur foutu bled où ils n'ont ni plats ni assiettes et mangent dans un trou creusé dans la table. Et puis les jeunes vont au regiment. C'est le bon côté de la caserne: on se moque d'eux et ils ont honte.

(Lebesque 1970: 22–3)

8 V. Hugo, *Quatre-vingt-treize* (1874: 205): *ce sauvage grave et singulier, cet homme à l'œil clair et aux longs cheveux [...] ne se servant de l'eau que pour boire, [...] inculte et brodé, tatouant ses habits comme ses ancêtres les Celtes avaient tatoué leurs visages, [...] parlant une langue morte, ce qui est faire habiter une tombe à sa pensée, [...] dévot à l'autel et aussi à la haute pierre mystérieuse debout au milieu de la lande, [...] aimant ses rois, ses seigneurs, ses prêtres, ses poux [...]*. This was Hugo's last work and the events are set in the year 1793 (during the Reign of Terror), hence the title.

I now knew that I lived in Brittany, which is not to say I knew I was Breton. Had someone told me I was, I would have found the idea ludicrous [...] No—I knew who the Bretons were: comical creatures, filthy and superstitious, in a word, a foreign people who lived at the other end of Nantes, in a district we barely knew, beyond the red-light district. [...] They still burnt peat to heat their houses. They had their own church, sermons in their dialect and even their own cinema—the owner just had to get down to their level and translate the subtitles for them [...] ‘All the same’, my father would say, ‘they’re still more civilised here than in that bloody backwater of theirs, where they have no plates or dishes and eat in a hollow carved out into the table. And the young ones have to do their military service. That’s the good side of the army: people laugh at them and they feel ashamed.

The remoteness of Brittany, the very basic living conditions of a mostly agricultural society and the imprint of religion partly account for the commonplace characterisation of Bretons as filthy (the country people were reputed to live like and with their livestock) and superstitious, the legendary piety manifesting itself in the parading of statues (*pardons*), the omnipresence of calvaries, parish enclosures, worshipping at sacred fountains etc. Yet it was also to a great extent the fact that the people of Western Brittany (*Basse-Bretagne*)⁹ spoke a different language that contributed to their characterisation as a backward people. The imaging of Bretons as unkempt and ignorant savages mirrored the scorn poured over the Breton language, stigmatised as *Yezh ar moc’h* “the language of pigs”.¹⁰ In the late 19th century the French authorities sought to impose linguistic unity, which was naturally incompatible with the existence of regional languages or dialects: hastening the demise of the Breton language was then seen as the best way to ensure the education of Bretons and their integration into modern society.

It is therefore hardly surprising that feelings of humiliation and shame were associated with speaking Breton a few generations ago. We find them expressed for instance in a poem written by Youenn Gwernig (published in 1982) in which Gwernig, who was born in 1925, expresses the anguish of a young Breton-speaking

9 There used to be a distinction made between *Haute-Bretagne* and *Basse-Bretagne*, the latter being Breton-speaking while French (and Gallo) were spoken in the other. The terms *Haute* (Higher) and *Basse* (Lower) were perceived as implying an inferiority of the Breton-speaking areas and are now no longer used.

10 P.-J. Heliaz uses the term in *Le Cheval d'orgueil*.

boy — himself perhaps? — “with his hunger / with his shame”, who was forbidden from speaking his ‘gibberish’ and forced to ask for permission to use the lavatory in French:

Breizhad e oan	I was Breton
Gant va naon	With my hunger
Gant va mezh	With my shame
Dindan rizennoù ha merkoù liv	under the ink-stained streaked ¹¹
va forpant voulouz	velvet of my jacket
n'hellen implij va zatouilherezh	I was not allowed to speak my gibberish
<i>M'sieur, permission faire pipi...</i>	<i>M'sieur, permission faire pipi...</i>
Me vije bet serriñ va beg	I was supposed to shut my mouth
ha staota er voulouz	and urinate in the velvet
rizennet	streaked
merket	stained
a zaeloù	with tears.

(Gwernig 1982: 12)

The poem significantly ends on the word ‘tears’, expressing the humiliation experienced by the schoolboy standing in clothes which are now no longer simply stained with ink, but with urine — and tears.

There are many other examples of the shameful implications of speaking Breton. The humiliation of Breton-speakers through the use of a ‘symbol’ (a Breton equivalent of the Welsh Not) is perhaps the best-known one. There is some debate today regarding the extent of the use of this symbol as a deterrent, but whether or not it was actually used as much as has been claimed is perhaps not the point. What matters is the importance that the practice has acquired in the collective psyche in Brittany. The fact that some Breton-speakers were actually in favour of its use is likewise just as revealing of the stigma attached to the language: it shows the extent to which the Breton people had internalised the notion

¹¹ Literally, ‘streaked velvet’ and referring here to corduroy.

that their language constituted an obstacle to economic and moral progress and a hindrance to social advancement.

4. A people depicted as backward — and troublesome

If Brittany was an object of popular ridicule, it was also a thorn in the flesh for the French authorities, notably during the *Chouanneries*¹² after the Revolution, partly for the reasons evoked by Victor Hugo. Popular discontent would flare up again in the next century in this region that suffered considerable economic turbulence. The mutations of the 19th century were traumatic: the linen trade and cottage industry on which so many Breton households relied suffered sudden decline in the face of competition from more and better industrialised areas, adding to the hardship of the rural population, which already barely subsisted. There were few alternative means of making a living unless one found employment in the sardine-processing factories (*sardineries*) that were developing at the time (the first opened in Nantes in the 1820s), or left the area to find work elsewhere, as so many did. The dire economic situation was reflected in the vast number of beggars in every town or village — an unusually high number that was often mentioned by travellers and writers, which only served to confirm the common assumption that the Breton population was poor and slovenly. By the 1880s the *sardineries* produced the vast majority of the world output of canned fish and provided a vital income for the fishing communities.¹³ But when the Breton sardine industry was threatened by foreign competition and catches fell due to an unexplained scarcity of sardines on the Breton coasts (which happened sporadically, notably in 1902), whole communities faced starvation. The press published accounts of this, with illustrations in popular titles like *Le Petit Journal*, *L'Illustration*, *Le Monde illustré* allowing readers a glimpse inside the houses of fishermen and vividly emphasising the miserable conditions these families lived in.

In the first quarter of the 20th century, Brittany likewise attracted the attention of the national press when agricultural unions stirred up unrest, blocking

12 Royalist rebellions in the western areas of France in the late 18th century (from 1792), which opposed republicans to royalist Chouans in the aftermath of the Revolution.

13 While the sardine processing factories employed mainly female workers (as many as fifteen thousand in the late 19th century), they naturally also provided a vital income for the men working for the fishing fleets.

trains and resorting to other actions that led to confrontations with the authorities and some arrests. In the image given of Brittany at the time, one sometimes finds a mixture of conflicting assumptions, for example an older vision of the Breton character amalgamated with more recent alleged characteristics that had emerged in the public mind from seeing increasing numbers of uprooted, often bemused and lost Breton men and women arriving into the capital. Reading accounts of rebellious and politicised farmers or factory workers confronting the authorities only added to the stereotype of the Breton as not only backward but obstreperous. Like other countries, Brittany was undergoing profound changes, but as is often the case, the image visitors or readers (from France or elsewhere) had of it would take longer to evolve. New traits and an older, more 'traditional' vision would coalesce slowly to later morph still further and accommodate an increasingly rebellious and assertive attitude on the part of the Breton people. Indeed, Brittany continued to cause trouble for politicians who in the 1950s increasingly found themselves at a loss when faced with what came to be known as *le problème Breton*.

This *problème Breton* in its modern form was the result of a combination of factors: for one, Breton agriculture was under-developed and essentially limited to subsistence farming (partly because of the strong demographic pressure — one of the highest in France), but the addition of a new political militancy to the potentially explosive issue of social as well as agricultural unrest also played a significant role in making Brittany and its population appear as a problem for the authorities. And in the early sixties the swelling unrest made it difficult for them to ignore the crisis.

5. The mutation of Brittany in the 1960s

Indeed, in the 1960s and 70s, Brittany often made headline news in the French media because of actions by Breton language activists targeting symbols of the French State. Even though these actions could be quite spectacular and cause considerable disruption,¹⁴ these were nevertheless isolated, marginal actions. What was far more representative of the state of mind of the bulk of the Breton people was the wave of social unrest that swept through Brittany from 1960 onward (Bougeard

14 As was the case with the destruction (attributed to the FLB, *Front de Libération de la Bretagne*) of the television transmitter for the whole region, set on top of the Roch Tredudon, in the Monts d'Arrée (Finistère) area in February 1974.

2010). The Breton countryside was the starting-point of many ‘battles’, as the press liked to call them, such as the ‘Battle of the Artichoke’ in 1960.¹⁵ What lay at the root of it was the upheaval of farming methods, and the very rapid change in the needs and expectations of the farming world. By 1961, the region was in constant turmoil—or so it seemed seen from the outside, with reports of countless acts of protest paralysing all areas of Brittany (destruction of telegraph poles, roadblocks, railway blockades, tons of vegetables dumped in front of government buildings...). A sudden collective awakening was giving rise to a new display of solidarity in Brittany as shipyard and factory workers joined ranks with farmers and the Bretons appeared united in their resolve (Gourlay 2012).

By the mid-sixties, it had become clear for the government that Brittany could no longer be ignored.¹⁶ Special measures were therefore announced in an attempt to pacify the troublesome region. They included subsidies for rural areas, discounted coal and electricity, improved rail and road links, for instance, but all to little effect, for, in 1968, politicians warned that Brittany was on the brink of revolution—admittedly, so was the rest of France at the time. More measures followed but still the social storm failed to abate and eventually the riot police had to be called in to put down the strikes and protests, thereby causing Brittany to make the headlines of the national press yet again.

It was at that time that a new image of Brittany emerged, that of a militant Brittany, with claims and demands—a stronger, more assertive Brittany, aware of its new economic role. By 1975, Brittany accounted for 10% of France’s agricultural output and the yield per hectare was 80% higher than the national average. So rather than the *problème breton*, there was now talk of a *modèle Breton* (Bougeard 2010). The brutal adoption of a productivist model, however, implied an equally sudden adaptation of the Breton population to new values. The consequence was a rejection of traditional Bretonness, seen as irrelevant and outdated. This often expressed itself through hostility towards the language, which was perceived as having lost

15 Among these many ‘Breton battles’ that made the headlines, there would also be the *Bataille du Rail* in 1962 (see Gourlay 2012).

16 Charles de Gaulle was president of France at the time, and between 1958–69, he took the time to make nine official visits to Brittany.

its relevance in the modern context. Likewise, material symbols of the traditional Breton culture in rural areas were now increasingly dismissed as worthless: families would sell or throw out traditional Breton furniture to replace it with formica, and favoured newly-built, modern neo-Breton villas in place of the old stone houses which were left to decay, or were knocked down.

6. The cultural revival

These years marked a turning-point in attitudes and mentalities. This can be seen in the very sharp polarisation of feelings concerning culture and language. Indeed, while there was hostility and rejection on one hand, there was also passion and commitment on the other. The state of economic neglect Brittany found itself in now fuelled the claims of a generation of Bretons who cast a new eye on the cultural problems and needs of modern Brittany. This happened at a time when things were evolving quickly — so quickly in fact that France was soon swept by what the press called *la vague bretonne* (“the Breton wave”). This phenomenon owed a great deal to musician Alan Stivell (1944–),¹⁷ for it was above all the musical dimension that put this new Brittany on the map.

Reflecting on the radical change in the way Breton culture was now perceived, Alan Stivell recalled that in 1969, anyone rash enough to attempt to sing in Breton to the accompaniment of a harp in Paris would have been pelted with tomatoes before even making it onto the stage. However, only five years later, on 28 February 1972, several thousand people came to hear the harpist play and sing in Breton — a first for the prestigious Olympia concert hall in Paris — with the crowd even standing up to dance. The concert was broadcast live on French mainstream radio station *Europe 1* and heard by an estimated 7 million listeners. Overnight, Breton music and culture

¹⁷ Alan Stivell, born Alan Cochevelou in Auvergne, in 1944, is a musician (composer and harpist) credited with the revival of the Celtic harp in Brittany in the 1960s. He first started playing the harp (using an instrument crafted by his father, Jord Cochevelou), giving concerts from 1953, when he was still a young boy, then went on to play in the *bagad Bleimor*, the pipe-band of the Breton Scouts of Paris. Stivell was the first musician to actively promote Breton language and culture by inventing his own modern version of the Breton folk-song and singing in Breton in the mid-sixties. His first album to draw widespread attention, *Reflets*, was released in 1970 and his popularity kept growing as he released two further albums in 1971 (*Renaissance de la harpe celtique*) and in 1972, the live recording of the very successful concert at the Olympia.

and their new ambassador became the object of media hype, and by the autumn of 1972, the name of Alan Stivell was familiar to the general French public and he had sold 1.5 million copies of the *Concert à l'Olympia* album. This momentous concert at the Olympia acted as a revelation and gave Breton culture a new, positive visibility. Looking back, Alan Stivell compares its effect to that of an electric shock. This does not seem exaggerated as the impact of his music on the public had a great deal to do with his 'dusting down' of traditional, sometimes religious, Breton airs through the admixture of electric musical instruments (guitars, keyboards, later an electric harp) to the traditional *bombarde*. This explains the 'Stivell phenomenon' and its incredible popular appeal, among a young and trendy French-speaking public. The Breton people, who had been persuaded to believe their music belonged in the past, became aware of the popular appetite and interest for Breton music and culture through the growing media coverage: while it left some baffled, it did indeed act as an electric shock for many others, helping them to cast off old taboos. A world which had been buried deep resurfaced, and people suddenly embraced Breton culture.

It is significant that much of the impetus for the Breton cultural revival came, not from traditionally Breton-speaking areas, not even indeed from Brittany, but from large urban areas (namely Paris and Nantes). Likewise, many of those spearheading the revival were brought up outside Brittany (A. Stivell grew up in Paris) or lived outside Brittany. It is of course not unusual to find exiles and expatriates spearheading cultural movements (the London Welsh, the Liverpool Irish to mention only a few examples), but in the case of the Breton movement, what is also significant is the attitude of the figureheads of this new movement towards the language. Soon followed by Gilles Servat¹⁸ and others, Alan Stivell made a point of singing in Breton at a time when, in Brittany, many people were still actively refraining from speaking a language which they had been told would hold them back (as it had held back their parents). Yet people continued to speak Breton in private.

Many of the prominent figures of the cultural revival spoke no Breton or had learnt a standardised version of it comparatively late in life. Exile opens one's eyes,

18 Gilles Servat (1945-) was one of the main protagonists of the Breton revival, alongside Alan Stivell and Glenmor. Originally from Nantes, he sang in French and Breton, which he had learnt as an adult.

and in the case of the Bretons living outside Western Brittany, their perceived exile was both geographic and linguistic. Yet it offered an advantage of sorts since contrary to most rural Bretons, these young exiles had not been shamed for their language or culture — quite the reverse in fact, for they expressed a strong sense of loss and resentment at having been deprived of what they considered to be their birthright. Alan Stivell made a point of singing more often in Breton than in French for without the Breton language, as he made clear, “there could be no Brittany” (*heb brezhoneg Breizh ne bet*)¹⁹ and he delivered the message by deliberately blending tradition with modern instruments such as electric guitars. The only way Breton culture could be modernised was by stressing its relevance, and the only way it could be seen as relevant was by stressing its modernity. *La pop celtique* (‘Celtic pop’) was therefore the most powerful and appropriate medium to put this message across. And it was effective: being further removed from Brittany, Bretons ‘exiled’ in the French capital were arguably better able to stand back and take stock, and they clearly perceived the extent of the changes that had come over Brittany. The image of Brittany projected through this young, militant Parisian vanguard was very different from the one given in the media at the time, and the effect was to present people with a puzzling picture of Brittany as split in two. On one hand, an archaic land peopled with elderly women in quaint headdress (holding the obligatory umbrella) and, on the other, modern, long-haired, electric-guitar-wielding militant young men — the irony being that those who spoke up for the language were those who had not inherited the language from their parents, in other words, those whose link with the language was the most tenuous.

The cultural revival fed on the various events which marked the period, be it ‘the Battle of the Artichokes’, ‘the Milk War’ or the massive protests against government plans to build a nuclear plant in a pristine coastal area of the Pointe du Raz (Finistère) at Plogoff, not to mention the disastrous aftermath of several oil spills.²⁰ Ironically, this also served to give Brittany more visibility and, in the turbulent sixties and seventies, the image of Brittany underwent a reappraisal, both

19 *Heb brezhoneg Breizh ne bet* (“without Breton, there can be no Brittany”) is the chorus of one of his most famous and political songs of the period.

20 In 1967, 1976 and, most famously, in 1978, when 233,000 tons of crude oil spilled on the coasts of Brittany from the Amoco Cadiz super-tanker.

from outside and inside. The key to this change lies in the fact that Breton cultural identity had mostly been linked to a rural society. Consequently, the image France had of the Breton people had evolved from the two most obvious aspects of their specificity as perceived from the outside, namely, that they were a society of poor farmers and fishermen eking out a primitive living in a primitive land and were in this situation because they persisted in holding on to their archaic tongue, culture and way of life. This population had long been dismissed as *ploucs*,²¹ complete with wooden clogs and quaint folk dress. And it was this rural society that had produced and sustained virtually all aspects of Breton culture: costumes, ballads, dances and instruments, the language... In the 1960s, however, there was a transfer of this rural cultural heritage, and a consequent intellectualisation and adaptation when a more urbanised Brittany set about recreating a modernised popular Breton culture.

By 1970, it had become clear that there was a growing discrepancy between the traditional, clichéd vision of Brittany and the reality that could be observed in the region: Breton agriculture had evolved and it was obviously no longer the case that most of the population were only able to understand and speak what had been dismissed as *baragouin* (“gibberish”). After several epic industrial strikes, the Bretons were no longer perceived as gullible or docile workers either. But most importantly, the Bretons themselves were now aware that they were just as educated as French people — indeed surveys showed the superiority of Breton schools in terms of achievement.²² Hence Bretons woke up to the fact that the negative image they had come to internalise was not grounded in fact.

21 The derogatory term *plouc* originates in the observation that the names of many parishes in Brittany start with *Plou*, hence the name *ploucs* (which is roughly equivalent to “country yokels” or “bumpkins”) referring to their inhabitants.

22 This is still the case today: the area of Rennes has the best results at the Baccalauréat exam, and the excellence of Brittany when it comes to school achievement has long been noted, yet this was not always so. Indeed, in the early 20th century, it was the opposite since Brittany had the highest rate of illiteracy. While there is no consensus regarding the reasons for the reversal of this trend, several factors have been put forward, among which the anxiousness of parents across all social classes that their children do well at school (a legacy of the stigma attached to Brittany’s reputation for backwardness), or the influence of Catholic schools (*écoles privées*), of which there are more in Brittany than anywhere else in France today still.

7. Casting off the shame

As a militant singer who was at the forefront of the revival, Gilles Servat sums this up in a song entitled *Tregont ble zo* ("It has been thirty years"), in which he looks back at what happened in the collective consciousness in the seventies: *les hontes qui nous pesaient dessus, nous ne les avons pas méritées / Pendant longtemps nous les avons eues, maintenant nous les avons jetées* ("We had not deserved the burden of shame imposed on us / We carried it for a long time, but now we have cast it off").

No study of the image of Brittany would be complete without a mention of Bécassine. The character of Bécassine, created over a century ago as a comical character for a children's magazine,²³ is considered with scorn by some people because she is perhaps the best-known symbol of the alleged stupidity of the Bretons: her very name ('woodcock') implies that she is a birdbrain.²⁴ Like the archetypal Breton migrant, she is depicted as naïve, superstitious, devoted and loyal, and in fact embodies all the characteristics commonly attributed to young Breton women who had come to Paris to find employment and were both praised for their loyalty but mocked for their naivety and lack of worldliness which, more often than not, landed them into trouble. Unlike other popular comical characters for children, though, Bécassine was the embodiment or symbol of a specific and easily identifiable people: she was very obviously Breton (recognisably so through the distinctive costume and *coiffe* she wore). Indeed, this was what so many Breton people resented and occasionally still resent, since for several generations of French (and Breton) children Bécassine represented the typical Breton woman, and through her, the Breton people as a whole.

In 1937, a play entitled *Bécassine vue par les Bretons* (fig. 6) was written in response to the vision given of Breton women by the character, a vision which was perceived by some Breton people as humiliating. The introductory note written by the publisher explained why:

23 *La Semaine de Suzette*, published from 1905 to 1960. The emblematic character of Bécassine was the joint creation of illustrator Joseph Pinchon and Jacqueline Rivière, chief-editor of the magazine. The magazine had a large readership and Bécassine, featured from the first issue onwards, quickly became a household name.

24 *Bécassine* is the diminutive form of the French term *bécasse* which refers to both a woodcock and a simpleton.

« Bécassine vue par les Bretons », présentée sous la forme d'une pièce de théâtre, est une réponse magnifique à ceux qui ont tenté de ridiculiser les Bretonnes en les représentant sous les traits d'une marionnette frisant la bêtise, l'ignorance et affublée d'un accoutrement ridicule, tournant en dérision le costume breton féminin. Ce personnage répondant au nom grotesque de « Bécassine » est devenu légendaire et a été savamment utilisé par certains pour bafouer la Bretagne.

(Calvez & Caouissin 1937: introductory note)

Presented in the form of a play, *Bécassine vue par les Bretons* is a magnificent response to those who have attempted to ridicule Breton women by portraying them in the guise of a puppet bordering on stupidity and ignorance, wearing a ridiculous outfit and making a mockery of Breton women's costume. This character, grotesquely named "Bécassine", has become legendary and has been skilfully used by some to mock Brittany.



If the character is seen as so objectionable, it is also because Bécassine is not only naïve, superstitious, devoted and loyal, she is also, and above all, dumb — quite literally, as the character was never given a mouth by its creator (see Fig. 6). Is it because as a Breton character whose native tongue was Breton, Bécassine could not possibly have anything to say that was worth hearing? This is how her absence of mouth was interpreted by many.

Fig. 6. Bécassine being trampled by Breton women

In the late 1970s, however, Bécassine (and through her, Brittany) was symbolically given her voice back: graphic artist Alain Le Quernec gave her a mouth, which she promptly used on posters showing her with defiant look and raised fist to exhort Bretons to 'Remember Amoco' (an angry reference to the Amoco Cadiz oil spill of 1978).

The creation of the first Diwan Breton-language school in 1977 could be seen as another strong symbol that Bécassine now not only had a mouth, but a tongue — and intended to use it. Ironically, it had taken the near disappearance of the Breton language for the Breton people to free themselves of their inferiority complex. For all that, in 1978, statistics showed evidence of the damage already done: the rejection of their Breton identity by one part of the population²⁵ was the most obvious symptom of what could be called the “Bécassine syndrome”, a people in effect silenced by their internalisation of the negative reflection the French mirror sent back to them. The cultural revival was therefore the more constructive manifestation of a profound mutation. Its lasting outcome, unexpectedly perhaps, has been Brittany’s new assertiveness, which has become visible in the last 20 years.

Today, the Breton people are very much aware of their specificity and this awareness is no longer a source of shame. Over the last decades of the 20th century, the *problème Breton* mutated into *l’exception bretonne* — a far less negative phrase, which refers to a number of peculiarities that set Brittany apart, among which is the fact that Brittany has had the best results in the Baccalauréat for several decades now. It also has the highest percentage of people who read the local press, the second most dynamic publishing sector, and is the only region where all dual carriageways and motorways are toll free.²⁶ Furthermore, it is significant that this ‘Breton exception’ is particularly marked in the fields of education and culture. Although it lacks the political recognition enjoyed by Ireland, Scotland or Wales, Brittany today does have one asset: its strong visibility, in the fields of culture, music, tourism, but also business. The recent and widespread use of identity to give a positive visibility to Breton products is particularly striking. The advertising strategies of successful Breton companies like Loïc Raison, Coreff, Breizh Cola, A l’Aise Breizh, Hénaff, Paysan Breton successfully put forward the Breton nature of their products. Likewise, the products bearing the *Produit en Bretagne* (“produced in Brittany”) brand are increasingly identified by the public who see it as a mark of quality as well as authenticity.

25 The majority of the older Breton-speaking population born during the first half of the 20th century.

26 This is a unique privilege, conceded by President Charles de Gaulle in 1969, to help compensate for the fact that Brittany suffered from its remote and isolated situation.

The images used by Breton companies and brands provide fascinating and striking evidence of the change that has been under way in the last decades. As well as being a humorous reference to the common assumption that the Bretons are stubborn and proud of it, a recent advertising campaign for the Loïc Raison cider brand wittily echoed with its slogan *Les Bretons ont toujours Raison* (“Bretons are always right”, written to evoke scrawled graffiti) the militant slogans of the Bretons in the sixties and seventies which opposed Brittany to Paris.²⁷ The Raison advertising campaign also used elements (such as the wild, indomitable sea) previously used to typecast the Breton temperament. There are countless occurrences of the Bretons being described as a ‘granite’ people, harsh, wild, close to nature. This advertising campaign was one example of the very clear reversal of the image of the place and people in recent years, from negative to positive and attractive. This, it should be noted, occurred in sectors like the economy or industry where Brittany was once seen as lagging hopelessly behind. Furthermore, in the same way, the images are attractive, the country *itself* is now attractive and, for several years now, the exodus out of Brittany has been reversed. Indeed, more and more people are moving into the region than are leaving it (Cazenave 2017; Cazenave & Lardoux 2023; Bovi et al. 2023). The area is increasingly seen as particularly pleasant to live in, to the point that Brittany is now the area of France witnessing the highest in-migration.²⁸ Admittedly, this is a phenomenon which may have much to do with rising temperatures and periods of drought as well as other more recent factors like the search for less populated, rural areas seen as safer following the Covid-19 pandemic. Additional factors are the comparatively affordable prices of accommodation by comparison with other attractive areas of France.

8. Imaging Brittany from within — and projecting Brittany to the world

Nowadays, Brittany is the most important area of France in terms of agricultural output and fishing (ranking first in both sectors), and generally-speaking, Brittany

27 As well as being a *clin d’œil* to the Breton political and cultural militancy of the seventies, the slogan is intended as a pun: the name of the brand (*Raison*) is used in the phrase that means ‘the Bretons are always right’, as well as implying Raison cider is Brittany’s favourite.

28 Long classed second most attractive region of France (after Provence-Alpes-Côtes d’Azur) and favourite holiday destination (ahead of Languedoc, the Côte d’Azur and Provence since 2015), in the last years Brittany has become the most attractive region for respondents of surveys, a trend confirmed by the data of the French national office for statistics since 2004.

is becoming something of a “cool marketing product”. Indeed, many Breton firms have chosen to emphasise the specificity of the local produce, culture and landscape, through names referring to Breton culture: *Paysan Breton*, *Prince de Bretagne*, the *Duchesse Anne*, *Bonnets Rouges* and *Blanche Hermine*, beers of the Lancelot brewery, to mention only a few emblematic examples.

It is interesting to note that advertising often relies on humour: the logos of several fashionable Breton clothes companies give a cheeky and modern view of the famous *Bigoudène*, imposing the image of a ‘Cool Brittany’. Indeed, the picturesque *Bigoudène* (as the women of the *pays Bigouden* west of Quimper are known) with her distinctive high *coiffe* and ubiquitous umbrella, is no longer a reality but an image that now belongs in the past. The last *Bigoudène* to wear the *coiffe* died a few years ago, but the image endures. It seems that France cannot yet conceive of a Brittany without *Bigoudènes*. So the latter have been given a new lease of life and are depicted as quirky, humorous and trendy in the Coreff brewery’s marketing campaigns and logo, or in that of the very popular Breton clothes brand A l’aise Breizh, as Breton image-makers, beating others at their own game, have the last laugh. Probably the most emblematic example of the new Breton assertiveness in marketing is the cola brand Breizh Cola: created in 2002, it is now the second most popular cola in France (behind Coca Cola but ahead of its historic rival Pepsi). From the start, this brand adopted humour as a marketing tactic,²⁹ but beyond that, one of its recent campaigns featuring a poster entitled *Breizh Cola débarque à Paris* (fig. 7) was not just a humorous and resolutely cheeky reference to the D-Day landings, but could be read as a metaphor of Brittany’s new-found confidence.

In a *clin d’œil* to WWII, posters showed *Bigoudènes* leading an assault to liberate Paris (implicitly from the monopoly of the American rival, Coca Cola...) by bringing thirsty Parisians crates of Breizh Cola. There were parachutes and jeeps in this light-hearted campaign — which, it must be remembered, was not only intended to be seen by Breton customers but was also aimed at the Bretons living

29 Breizh Cola’s early slogan was *l’autre cola du phare ouest*, meaning “the other cola of the far west” but using the homophone *phare*, which means lighthouse, to refer not just to the region’s remoteness but to its maritime identity.

in Paris...³⁰ And Breizh Cola has managed a feat in that it was the first *cola communautaire* (“community cola”) to have unnerved the Coca Cola Company enough for it to relent in adapting its graphic charter—an exceptional occurrence. As a result, in a local targeting strategy, black and white Breton flags, *triskels*, and even words of Breton were included by Coca Cola in its advertising in Brittany, to counter the competition from Breizh Cola—a clear sign that the Breton market and the Breton brand weigh enough to matter.



Fig. 7. Breizh Cola débarque à Paris - Le grand ravitaillement

30 The “Bretons de Paris” represent a community of around one million people.

The publishing sector also provides evidence that the perception and self-image of the Bretons is changing: while for a long time there were only very few well-identified and established magazines devoted to Brittany (monthly magazine *Ar Men* being practically the only one), there are now several, which, significantly, revolve around identity and culture and have a wider than just regional readership: *Bretagne(s) — Bretons d'aujourd'hui et de demain*, *Bretons* magazine, to name but a few, all point to more introspection of a confident kind, a redefinition of what it means to be Breton and a certain fascination for all things Breton.

Conclusion

Although there is still room for improvement, Brittany has come a long way in the last sixty years. One thing does seem clear where the young generation is concerned: the shame associated with speaking Breton has been shed; today, indeed, being Breton and speaking the language is largely felt as positive, and there is a keen interest in learning Breton³¹. The existence of Breton-medium schools (*Diwan*) and bilingual classes (in the mainstream educational system, both public and independent), the money invested by the Brittany regional authorities in promoting the language, and also, significantly, the confident marketing or branding of a trendy Breton image, have all contributed to a change of perception in the last few years, so that being Breton is no longer systematically equated with being 'uncool' — quite the reverse if we are to believe the current popularity of Breton brands.

Admittedly, these recent changes might essentially be a brave front masking a lingering need for Bretons to reassure themselves of the value of their culture. They might well be a reaction to the increasing uniformity caused by globalisation. But should one not also see in them a sign that, after making them inferior in the eyes of the outside world, being Breton and speaking Breton, is today helping the Breton people stand on their own two feet with a new confidence and sense of legitimacy? Time will tell.

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³¹ It is important to mention that the Breton that is being taught in schools bears little resemblance to the varieties of Breton that are still spoken by the older native speakers, to the point that many among the latter find this normalised Breton largely unintelligible. This raises the question of what "speaking Breton" may mean today or in the future.

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