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Memoirs of a breton peasant - Jean-Marie Déguignet

Bernez Rouz. □ **THE STORY BEHIND THIS STORY**

In the late 1970s, it became apparent that the population was growing and changing rapidly in the village of Ergue-Gabericon the outskirts of Quimper in Brittany. New settlers had come to outnumber the native-born residents, and it seemed urgent to gather what recollections and historical records might preserve the sense and artifacts of the old rural commune. The local historical society, *Arkae*, set out to establish an archive for that purpose.

The easiest way to begin was to find and inventory the few existing studies on the commune or on notable figures who came from it. Researchers turned to "The Bulletin of the Archaeological Society of Finistere" as a major avenue for these first steps into the byways of the collective memory. And there, on page 83 of a grayish, unprepossessing volume of issues from 1963, they came across an article by [historian] Louis Oges introducing a "humble bouquet of ancestral blossoms sprung from the folk soul of Breton Cornouaille"-fifty pages of tales and legends. Routine enough, it would seem, in that heyday of interest in regional traditions, but the writer of these tales detonated off the page : " The informants made fools of the scholars... in exchange for a glass of brandy, those men and women invented legends out of whole cloth... " That set the tone. And Oges went on to say that this sharply opinionated character wrote his whole life story with that same caustic verve twenty- six notebooks of a hundred pages each.

Unbelievable! But the delight of the discovery was followed by long nights of discussion and puzzlement: where had those sulfurous manuscripts got to?

The quest led us to *La revue de Paris*, a literary magazine that published work by such well-known writers as Renan, Loti, Barres, D'Annunzio. And in the issue of December 1904 there appeared an excerpt of *Mémoires d'un paysan bas-Breton* by Jean-Mane Déguignet. The folklorist Anatole Le Braz, who prepared the text, described the author in dithyrambic terms :

It was in 1897, an evening in June. In comes a man of about sixty years, still very lively in appearance and manner, fairly small, short-legged with hulking shoulders, the classic type of the Quimerois peasant, dressed in the local style and bearing all the external markers of such a man, except for one detail: instead of the shaven face of his fellows, he let his tow-colored beard grow freely, and it bristled his face with its abundant, untended brush. He wore wooden clogs. His clothes were worn but clean.

I saw in short order that he knew French very well, and even used it, mostly with a precision of expression that a good many bourgeois would envy.

There was a certain bitter harshness to his tone. Great was my surprise to hear a peasant of Lower Brittany speak with such casual disrespect about beliefs that may be the most profoundly rooted in the heart of the race. He saw my amazement, and, levelling upon me the clear gaze of his gray eyes hooded by a canopy of thick brows, he said :

"Ah! well, you see-I am a peasant who has moved about a good deal, whereas the others stayed put."

And the excerpted *Mémoires* tell us that this Deguignet-in turn beggar, cowherd, domestic servant-learned, French on his own. As a soldier, he fought in the Crimean campaign ; on furlough in Jerusalem, he lost his faith, revolted by the commercial practices around pilgrimage. Promoted to corporal, he took part in the Italian campaign for liberation. Then, nothing more :

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ceased its publication of the
Mémoires.

Those one hundred-thirty pages in *La revue de Paris*, largely on his military campaigns, gave us a taste for this wild honey mead. We had those first clues, but the Grail itself remained to be found.

A few soundings of the familial history left us skeptical as to the continued existence of the notebooks, for no one had heard of them. Then a journalist's newspaper appeal for the manuscript bore fruit : the precious writings lay sleeping in a public housing project in Quimper. Thanks to the kindness of Jean-Marie Deguignet's descendants, and the diligence of the municipality of Ergué-Gabéric, forty-three notebooks, nearly 4000 pages, were photocopied.

The saga of Jean-Marie Deguignet could now be made whole. He left the army after the Italian wars; he looked in vain for work in Brittany ; he re-enlisted. His new military career took him to Algeria and then to Mexico to help shore up the ill-fated Emperor Maximilian. Discharged in 1868, he came home to work as a peasant farmer, insurance agent, tobacco-seller ; his republican, anticlerical views got him hounded by the church party. He spent his last years destitute in various Quimper slums. There, in the 1890s, he wrote his story, his account of his "ninth-class peasant" life.

But the *Story of My Life* that we have in hand is not the same one represented by *La revue de Paris* text. On page 1467 of the newer manuscript, Jean-Marie Deguignet explains that [back in 1897] Anatole Le Braz paid him one hundred francs for the rights to publish his *Memoires*, and took away the original writings. Several years later, when neither publication nor money had turned up, Deguignet cries thief, imagines a conspiracy of "the Breton nationalistic-clericalists," and sets about writing his life story all over again. What we have is 'that-new version.

Now, to put it before the public.

As it was for Anatole Le Braz, for Louis Oges, for the editors at *La revue de Paris*, the task promised to be very arduous. The French idiom of the autodidact Deguignet is remarkable, threaded with Bretonisms, bejewelled with quotations in Latin, Italian, and Spanish ; the text is studded with digressions, but rich with vernacular expressions in the man's savoury Cornouaille speech. It might mean rewriting the *Mémoi*

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entirely: 2.584 pages of student notebooks !

La

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Paris

had given up on the task ; it had published only those hundred thirty pages, revised and corrected by Anatole Le Braz. But that reworked version, which might appeal to fans of cheap fiction, would not be useful as a document for demanding readers shaped by the present-day social sciences.

The decision was reached to type up the text bit by bit. Thanks to a long chain of volunteers, the Ergue-Gaberic Municipal. Library inherited an accessible version of the twenty-four surviving notebooks of Déguignet's *Mémoires*. Other notebooks of lesser interest on philosophy, politics, sociology and even mythology remain in manuscript form.

But it soon became apparent that, given the chance, readers were unwilling to read the full text. The author, who was writing in enormously trying circumstances at the turn of the last century - he lived in a hovel on a fern-frond mat - was mentally troubled, obsessed with his persecution ; he was angry at the nobility, the parish priests, the politicians, all of them the sources of his misfortunes_ He especially resented Anatole Le Braz, who "stole" his manuscripts. His writings are burdened by anticlericalist tirades, by digressions into local or national politics, by diatribes against his enemies, all running off at the pen in indescribable disorder. These circumvolutions, which become unremitting from the ninth notebook on, make the reading an ordeal.

We therefore decided to propose to An Here Publishers this edited text : a running narrative made up of excerpts from the adventures of Citizen Déguignet, one that would make the account coherent and readily accessible without betraying either the spirit or the letter of the original.

For the testimony is still enormously powerful. It is a unique document of rural Breton society in the nineteenth century. Déguignet is not part of that tradition of churchmen, aristocrats, and intellectuals interested in glorifying folkways. De La Villemarque, Souvestre, Luzet, Le Braz, and many others are a million miles away from the concerns of our autodidact. What we have here, for the first time, is the direct testimony of a poor man among poor men : beggar, cowherd, private soldier, sergeant, farmer, shopkeeper, pauper, madman- a fierce destiny in which life's pleasures have little place. These memoirs of a tormented soul challenge afresh a number of preconceived notions about the golden age of rural civilization in Lower Brittany.

Déguignet the soldier is also highly incisive on military life. The Crimean War, the Italian War, the Algerian Campaign, the Mexican War-in the space of fourteen years he lived through all the expeditions of the Second Empire. Through his experience as corporal and as sergeant, he provides us a scathing look inside the French Army-a wholesome counterpoint to the soothing accounts by the generals and the official historians.

The most disconcerting element in Déguignet is certainly his anticlerical bias. A journey to Jerusalem definitively turned this model catechism pupil away from religion. A priest-eating ogre, his arguments and diatribes may stir a smile these days, but at the time he was writing his life story, Finistere was involved in a virtual religious war. From 1902 to 1905, the secular and anticlericalist policies of the national government were hotly contested in Brittany. Demonstrations against the expulsion of the religious communities, protests against the prohibition of the Breton language in church sermons, made the climate particularly tense. Déguignet, the atheistic republican, could scarcely keep silent in such a debate. He flooded powerful people, officials, and local newspapers with abusive letters-letters he reproduces whole in his text, and of slight interest. But his tangles with the local clergy are vivid, and, if the imprecations are ignored, the text is a flavorful evocation of the difficulty of being a freethinker in a society entirely regulated and controlled by the all-powerful Church.

There remains, finally, the polemic against Anatole Le Braz. The noted writer meets our peasant in Quimperin 1897. The text is a shock to him : " All unsuspecting, I opened the first notebook. It was a revelation. Not until I had read every word could I tear myself away from the powerful, rough appeal of these intimate writings from a Breton man of the people." He offers Déguignet one hundred francs and promises to publish his manuscript. For some reason, not until December 1904 (seven years later !) does *La revue de Paris* print the first of Deguignet's pages. For seven years, no contact at all, while Le Braz is publishing successful books like

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among Armorican Bretons,

Déguignet is convinced that Le Braz has destroyed his work because of its anticonformist views, or-worse still-that he plundered Déguignet's manuscript to feed his own work: hence the condemnation, The publication of the first pages of his

*Mémoi
res*

a few weeks before his death -came as a veritable balm to his spirit's sufferings.

Some readers will be startled by the violence of Déguignet's comments on his Breton compatriots. Few come off well. An avenger against conservatism, against the routine, alert to anarchist and revolutionary ideas, he is always out of step with the society of his time, This diary of a tormented soul sometimes reminds one of the Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. Déguignet may irritate, but his narrative is alive, forever rebounding, and it reads like a true adventure tale. Certainly its finest quality is sincerity, and that is its appeal, No bookshelf devoted to truth can be without Déguignet as an extraordinary witness and critic of 'The Waning of Rural France" and the start of the breakdown of traditional Breton society.

Bernez Rouz

* The name Déguignet has some linguistic link to the Breton term for "flayed alive".