

## For a Welsh French Studies: Breton poets ‘writing to Wales’

In 2003, I wrote a paper describing the work of Breton regionalists of the nineteenth century as ‘writing to Paris’.<sup>1</sup> What I meant was that, while celebrating their native region and its culture, these writers had one eye on Parisian literary tastes and fashions, and that this focus on Paris was an inescapable part of their success. In more abstract terms, this model would be the periphery writing to the centre. Here, I wish to discuss a different model: the periphery writing to another periphery, specifically Breton poets ‘writing to Wales’.

### A Peripheral Perspective on France

Having been brought up and educated in a peripheral/minoritized language (Welsh), I have a distinctive perspective on the world, and a particular insight into France because of the thrill of language similarity between Welsh and Breton. No matter which foundation myth of the Bretons you favour – emigration of Saints from insular Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries, or the survival of Gaulish speakers in the westernmost tip of the Hexagon – the similarity is real and inspiring.<sup>2</sup> I remember the excitement of finding the same words spanning the Channel in Welsh and Breton respectively: bara/bara [bread], gwin/gwin [wine], tân/tan [fire], dŵr/dour [water], mynydd/menez [mountain]. I have also seen tears in the eyes of a bygone generation upon realizing how young visitors from Wales spoke a version of the language that their own children and grandchildren had lost. Such is the affinity for Breton in Welsh-speaking Wales that the phrase ‘Wastad yn mynd i Lydaw’ [always going to Brittany] has become shorthand for the special relationship between Welsh and other peripheral

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Writing to Paris: poets, nobles, and savages in nineteenth-century Brittany’, *French Studies*, 57 (2003), 475-90.

<sup>2</sup> On these two myths and the relationship between them, see Joseph Rio, ‘Celtisme et constructions historiographiques en Bretagne, du XVIe au XIXe siècles’, in *Le Celtisme et l’interceltisme aujourd’hui*, ed. by Yann Bévant and Gwendal Denis (Rennes: Tir, 2012), 39-63; Jean-Yves Guioamar, ‘Quand les bretonistes répudièrent la Gaule (1840–1850)’, in *Nos ancêtres les Gaulois: Actes du colloque international de Clermont-Ferrand*, ed. by Jean Ehrard and Paul Viallaneix (Clermont-Ferrand: Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines, 1982), pp. 195–201.

cultures.<sup>3</sup> As a product of this culture, I have always looked at France from the perspective of internal difference and minority identities within the Hexagon, even before the discipline of French Studies started rejecting the methodological nationalism bequeathed by the French Revolution.<sup>4</sup> Our discipline became markedly interested in faraway French colonies during the 1980s–90s, but only recently has it started to question its own monolingualism, and open itself to ideas such as the ‘translingual’ and ‘decolonizing multilingualism’.<sup>5</sup>

In minority studies, it takes one to know one: being instinctively aware of difference brings us a clearer vision of hierarchies of power. We understand that questions of history, politics, and identity look very different depending on whether you speak the indigenous language of a place. However, the Welsh perspective has limits as well as advantages. The education system in Wales made generations fluent in French, a colonizing language. It was only while on school exchanges and a year abroad designed to perfect my French that I learnt the indigenous language of Brittany. On the other hand, an exclusively inter-Celtic perspective on the relationship between Wales and Brittany, that bypasses French risks reducing the complexity of Brittany’s case. Because Celticity (the essence of Brittany’s difference) was *also* a centralizing force, or an idea used by the centre in the nineteenth century,<sup>6</sup> Brittany must be seen simultaneously within a French nation-building context *and* a pan-Celtic one.

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<sup>3</sup> The lyrics ‘Wastad yn mynd i Lydaw, byth yn mynd i Ffrainc | Wastad yn mynd i Wlad y Basg, byth yn mynd i Sbaen’ [Always going to Brittany, never going to France | Always going to the Basque Country, never going to Spain] from the song ‘Cân i Gymru’ (1993) by David R. Edwards and Rhiannon Matthews, of the group Datblygu, parody the solidarity between stateless European nations dominated by powerful neighbours that is typical of Welsh speakers’ attitudes.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Forsdick describes a ‘challenge to the “methodological nationalism” in the light of which French studies was established and allowed to evolve as an autonomous field’, ‘What’s “French” about French Studies?’, *Nottingham French Studies* 54:3 (2015), 312-327 (326).

<sup>5</sup> ‘Translingual Writing in French and Francophone Literature’, ed. by Natalie Edwards and Christopher Hogarth, *L’Esprit créateur*, 59:4 (2019); Alison Phipps, *Decolonising Multilingualism: Struggles to Decreate* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> ‘Within France, the Celtic past also provided a historical thread with which to sew together the patchwork of territories into the modern French nation: appealing to a shared past allowed for plurality in the present’. Ian B.

## Textual Work

Linguistic similarities make it fairly easy for Bretons to learn Welsh and vice versa, so Wales and Brittany have enjoyed close cultural ties ever since the early nineteenth century, generating a wealth of texts in Breton, French, Welsh, and English. In particular, there is a disproportionate amount of translation between Welsh and Breton, as well as a strong tradition of travel writing in both directions.<sup>7</sup>

These examples of strong minor-to-minor cultural interaction suggest how significant ‘writing to Wales’ has been for Bretons. These texts certainly appear to bypass Paris, but I am not convinced that they avoid the imprint of the centre even when they avoid mediation by it. By mediation I mean using the language of the centre, or using cultural references gained from a certain kind of linguistic and cultural education. An imprint, on the other hand, is more subtle, might manifest as ‘tensions on the periphery’,<sup>8</sup> and be read detected in self-censorship, feuds or over-caution around certain topics. In the case of Brittany such topics would include Celticity itself.

The texts in question here are travel writings by Bretons who visited Wales in 1899 to attend a neo-druidic festival (*eisteddfod*). Two of these travellers, Taldir (the bardic name of François Jaffrennou, 1879-1956) and Francis Vallée (1860-1949), learnt Welsh and published a bilingual Breton-Welsh poetry collection, thus neatly subverting the parallel text tradition (French and Breton) that characterized the Breton cultural revival.<sup>9</sup> Taldir certainly

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Stewart, ‘Language and the national past in Napoleonic France: reassessing the Académie celtique, 1805-1813’, *French History*, 35:2 (2021), 219-42 (p. 228).

<sup>7</sup> Heather Williams, ‘Travelling Ideas Between Wales and Brittany’, *VTU Review*, 2:1 (2018), 47-54; Kathryn N. Jones, Carol Tully and Heather Williams, *Hidden Texts, Hidden Nation: (Re)Discoveries of Wales in French and German Travel Writing (1750–2015)* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), pp. 99–111.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Tensions on the periphery: Breton druids in Cardiff (1899)’. For a critique of this tradition see Erwan Hupel, ‘Le cœur et l’esprit: déchirements et strat’égies d’autotraduction chez quelques auteurs bretons’, *Glottopol* 25 (2015), [http://glottopol.univ-rouen.fr/telecharger/numero\\_25/gpl25\\_08hupel.pdf](http://glottopol.univ-rouen.fr/telecharger/numero_25/gpl25_08hupel.pdf), accessed 21 December 2022.

<sup>9</sup> *Gwerziou gant Abhervé ha Taldir* (Sant-Brieg: F. Guyou, 1899).

succeeded in ‘writing to Wales’ and became a part of Welsh cultural history through his many publications and visits. In his Welsh journalism, he speaks about the persecution of the Breton language in a bolder way than when writing in French or even Breton.<sup>10</sup> This apparent self-censorship suggests that it was not possible for him to ignore or bypass the centre when writing in a language that the centre understands.

In contrast, Charles Le Goffic (1863-1932) and Anatole Le Braz (1859-1926), who both published substantial travelogues in French about visiting Cardiff, seem to be ‘writing to Paris’ even while writing about Wales.<sup>11</sup> Le Goffic, in a preface to Taldir’s poetry, seeks to protect his status as a good French patriot by avoiding the language of kinship and by hardly writing about Wales at all. Also in both Le Braz’s and Le Goffic’s travelogues we find criticism of what they see in Wales, expressed through sarcasm and disapproval, all of which become stronger when we compare successive drafts of the texts.<sup>12</sup> Why might they have wished to play down their connections with Wales? Why might Le Goffic refer to ‘Gallois’ instead of using the popular terminology ‘Bretons d’outre-mer’ or ‘nos cousins celtes’? The answer is that they had an eye on Paris, I think. Le Goffic absolutely did not want to bypass Paris – he lived there, published there, got elected to the Académie française. Like his friend and role model Maurice Barrès (1862-1923), what he wanted to do was tweak things so that Paris would accept a particular type of regionalizing voice. This involved presenting a comforting, tamed version of regional difference, and never appearing unpatriotic. They produced a harmless, nostalgic type of regionalism based on the idea of rootedness rather

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Are the Bretons French? The case of François Jaffrennou/ Taldir ab Hernin’, *Nottingham French Studies*, 60:2 (2021), 192-205.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Le Goffic, ‘Chez Taffy: quinze jours dans la Galles du sud’, *La Revue hebdomadaire*, 5:6-7 (May 1901), 448-68 and (June 1901), 22-50, 229-50, 369-95, 520-47. Anatole le Braz, *Voyage en Irlande, au pays de Galles et en Angleterre*, ed. by Alain Tanguy (Rennes: Terre de Brume, 1999); ‘Pèlerinage celtique’, in *La Terre du passé* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1901), pp. 315-33.

<sup>12</sup> Jones, Tully and Williams, *Hidden Texts, Hidden Nation*, pp. 99-111.

than difference, one that stressed the local colour and specificity of ‘Breton’ culture or Bretonness, but not Celticity.

Having an eye on Paris, rather than pan-Celticism, paid off in the long run. Of these four writers, only Le Goffic and Le Braz are still in print and are the subject of biographies. Taldir is only remembered by druids and the keenest Welsh historians. Vallée is hardly known.

## Conclusion

France is a notoriously centralized nation state, and Paris is a notoriously dominant capital and world literary centre. The Welsh perspective that investigates the ways in which the ‘minoritized’ cultures of Wales and Brittany have interacted over two centuries can promote thinking beyond the nation state and offer a way of decentring and also refreshing French Studies. It can enable more learning about ‘lateral networks’ between minoritized cultures, as evoked by Shih and Lionnet,<sup>13</sup> and close textual analysis can lead us to probe the role played by the ‘centre’ or ‘major’ culture within these ‘lateral networks’. The case of France demonstrates how the periphery can become central, as happened to Celticity in the middle of the nineteenth century, when the new Republic’s Celtic ancestry became a mainstream interest. This reveals the terms ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ as at best relative.

Milan Kundera and Michael Cronin have used their own peripheral perspectives (Czech and Irish respectively) to destabilize the centre-periphery binary. For Kundera, ‘provincialism’ is ‘the inability (or the refusal) to see one’s own culture in the *large context*’.<sup>14</sup> In the case of

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<sup>13</sup> Shu-mei Shih and Françoise Lionnet, ‘Introduction: Thinking through the Minor, Transnationally’, in *Minor Transnationalism*, ed. by Shu-mei Shih and Françoise Lionnet (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 1–23 (p. 1).

<sup>14</sup> Milan Kundera, ‘Die Weltliteratur’ [2005], in *World Literature: A Reader*, ed. by Theo d’Haen, César Domínguez and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen (London: Routledge, 2013), 289–300. Cited in Rajendra Chitnis,

French, this happens because of a belief that the major colonial culture is sufficiently rich or ‘universal’ that there is no need to take an interest in what other people are writing or thinking, as in the case of Enlightenment Paris.<sup>15</sup> At the micro level of textual analysis of travel writing, Michael Cronin has shown how literature in major languages can become deficient, arguing that a major language such as English becomes ‘minoritized’ in the face of flora and fauna that are unknown to it: if you don’t have the vocabulary for the distinctive features of a place, you will not be able to describe that place properly.<sup>16</sup> But the tensions at the periphery that are revealed by a multilingual, transnational approach to close textual analysis, do more than relativize the terms ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’, ‘major’ and ‘minor’. They collapse the model of neat binaries.

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‘Introduction’, in *Translating the Literature of Small European Nations*, ed. by Rajendra Chitnis, Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen, Rhian Atkin and Zoran Milutinovic (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), pp. 1-7 (p. 1).

<sup>15</sup> Pascale Casanova, *La République mondiale des lettres* (Paris: Seuil, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> Michael Cronin, ‘Minority reports: travel, language and the politics of microspeciation’, *Studies in Travel Writing*, 20:2 (2016), 190-99 (p. 196).