

CHAPTER ONE

Contexts



Although Paris is the focus of this book, it was not the sole destination of Breton émigrés. Bretons had a history of departures abroad and a shorter but important history of moving within France, which along with Brittany itself provides a crucial context for the late-nineteenth-century mass movements to Paris.

BRETONS IN THE WORLD

The people of Brittany had long moved over ocean and sea to the western and southern hemispheres. Although Bretons represented insular provincials to Parisians during the Third Republic, international contacts and emigration have marked this region since late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Bretons from Saint-Malo and Nantes were among the medieval navigators who traded with northern Europe. The sugar and slave traders of Nantes and the coastal traders faded in the nineteenth century, but fishing remained important; men fished for cod and tuna on the high seas, for sardines off the south coast, and for local fish along the west and north coasts of Brittany, where fisherman and peasant were not entirely separate. In addition, over three-quarters of naval officers and sailors in 1890 were Breton, not counting apprentices and cabin-boys. In the words of the historian Gérard Le Bouëdec, “the sailor belongs to global society.”¹ The maritime traditions of Brittany directed emigrations from France across the Atlantic in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Many parts of coastal Brittany were part of a maritime culture and economy that lined the Atlantic and North Sea coasts, essential to the history of Breton mobility. These areas “belonged to an outwardly turned and mobile sector of French society” that sent men abroad.²

Yet the history of emigration from France is less clear or complete for the French than for other Europeans. This is partly because French emigration was neglected by historians until recently.³ Publications since 1985 include case studies of the French in Algeria, the United States, and Canada, as well as Annick Fouquier's study of the French in California and a history of Alsatians in the United States.⁴ In addition, the "administrative construction of the émigré" reveals that the French state long discouraged emigration and was somewhat hostile to those who chose to leave for the New World. It promoted and encouraged migration to Algeria, however—without great success.⁵ Finally, in the old regime émigrés were understood by the French to be criminal and immoral, "a random sweeping of rogues and sluts." This reputation persisted even though only a small proportion of émigrés were criminals and France did not export prisoners on a large scale as did the British, for example.⁶

Some Bretons went to the West Indies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, leaving via Nantes or Saint-Malo after having journeyed from a smaller town or village. Migration to the West Indies carried the possibility of quick fortunes, and to be "rich as a creole" was a byword for splendour in France.⁷ In the century after 1632 the vast majority of emigrants departing from Nantes were headed for the Caribbean.⁸ The most fortunate, like the family of Pierre Dieudonné Dessalles that left Brittany in the mid-seventeenth century, became successful sugar planters and notables while some, including Dessalles, took on a creole identity.⁹ Men like Dessalles were few among Bretons, since Breton ports turned to the Atlantic more than to the Caribbean; moreover, the Haitian revolt of 1791 severely attenuated these fortunes.

In the eighteenth century northern Brittany sent many men abroad as fishermen and sailors for the merchant marine, which depended on the market for salted cod. They quickly turned to Canada, where the small French settlement on Île Royale (now Cape Breton Island) was over one-quarter Breton in 1734; these were fishermen and navigators, but also men in the building trades, commerce, and the priesthood. In the 1750s many Malouins moved into the Acadian settlement.¹⁰ The northern Breton port of Saint-Malo was more oriented toward New France in Canada than toward the Mediterranean, unlike La Rochelle and Bordeaux to the south. Nonetheless, the number of French settlers in the eighteenth-century colonies was relatively small; in 1754 there were only 55,101 French inhabitants in the most populous colony, Canada.¹¹

Leslie Choquette has demonstrated that French migration to Quebec was far different from what scholars had thought, because it was not the movement of permanent settlers who arrived from their home village. Rather the Breton migration to New France was seasonal, temporary, and often part of a series of moves from villages to port towns and on to Quebec—and then back to France. Choquette and Peter Moogk concur that during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the work of overseas Bretons was part of widespread French temporary and seasonal migration both within France and beyond its borders, and that the unemployed in port cities were most likely to sign on for trips to North America.¹² Bretons figured heavily among the thirty thousand or more Old Regime French migrants who went to Quebec and most of all among those who did not stay.¹³ Many had already moved within Brittany, to Nantes or Saint-Malo. And these were men: *brettonnes* rarely made this trip, since the women who settled in Canada, the *filles du roi* who were sent to provide brides for French men, were recruited primarily from the Hôpital Général of Paris.¹⁴ Recruitment and labor contracts were necessary to get the French to Canada, and even this movement was cut off by the British victory in the French and Indian War of 1754–63.

All of these migrations were, however, small in number. It was not until Bretons joined the well-known emigrants in French political history, the Royalist “émigrés” who were enemies of the government during the revolutionary period, that they departed in large numbers. Because Brittany is bound by the sea and emigration requires no border crossing, and because of the state of revolt and civil war during the Revolution, it is difficult to know the precise volume of political emigration. Nonetheless, Donald Greer’s tireless research of every département of France demonstrates that Breton départements were among those that sent many émigrés abroad—the Côtes-d’Armor (over 2,500), the Finistère (2,000), Ille-et-Vilaine (2,000), the Loire-Atlantique (1,700), and the Morbihan (1,300).¹⁵

In the nineteenth century Bretons were attached to the mission of the church worldwide. As James Daughton has pointed out, “a century after the Revolution had inflicted a dizzying blow to Catholicism, the Third Republic boasted an apostolic system with the recourse to recruit, train, place, and support missionary work on six continents”—and Bretons were crucial to this effort.¹⁶ The primary fundraising organization was the Oeuvre de la Propagation de la Foi, whose *Annales* gave the faithful a

missionary's-eye view of the world; notably, 6,500 copies a year were published in the Breton language in the 1890s, a figure that only dipped slightly by the time of the Great War.¹⁷ Breton priests were important among the settlers in Canada, and they were also key to France's mission in nineteenth-century Africa. Orders such as the Frères de Ploërmel "assured public instruction to Senegalese youth in contact with French colonial authorities." According to a history of the order, "State employees, the brothers were nonetheless, first and foremost, missionaries of the gospel and men of the church, with an open attitude and in dialogue with Islam, the primary religion of their students."¹⁸ In 1836 the minister of the colonies contacted the prefect of the Morbihan, who wrote to the founder of the order, brother of the famed Catholic author Robert de Lammenais from Saint-Malo, to suggest that the order take on primary education in the colonies. Thus began the engagement of the order in the Antilles, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Guyana, St. Pierre and Miquelon, and then Senegal. Between November 1841 and 1904, 174 brothers worked in Saint-Louis and the Island of Gorée—and then other coastal towns of Dakar and Rufisque—beginning with the arrival of Brother Euthyme, a thirty-year-old Breton, and Brother Heraclien, a creole from Martinique. By April 1842 the two had 110 students.¹⁹ Over the course of the nineteenth century the Frères de Ploërmel sent over eleven hundred priests abroad, among which Bretons were eager participants. For example, when eight teachers were called for to replace those killed by the epidemic of 1867 in Saint-Louis, four hundred Bretons volunteered.²⁰

Regular orders, missionary orders, and smaller orders of every kind recruited successfully in Brittany and sent members to China, Indochina, South and North America (including the United States), the Caribbean, South Sea Islands, and Africa. Many of the Jesuits in China were from Brittany, for example, and Bretons accounted for over half the Trappists who founded a monastery in Algeria and planted the first French vines there in the 1840s. The Soeurs de Saint-Joseph de Cluny, who taught with the Frères de Ploërmel in Senegal, worked as teachers and nurses in Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas. Among them was the nurse and administrator Marie Dédié, from near Brest in the Finistère, who arranged marriages for her charges in Brazzaville; described as a "valiant little Breton" and the "little mother of the Congo," Dédié was honored by the Académie Française in about 1913 and the Legion of Honor in 1927. The Filles de la Charité de Saint-Vincent de Paul sent 245 bretonnes to

Asia, Africa, and the Americas between 1850 and 1910, among them Hermine Simon-Suisse, sister of the statesman and reformer Jules Simon; born in Lorient in the Morbihan, she died in Lima, where she worked in a mental hospital between 1856 and 1880. In all an estimated twelve thousand Bretons worked abroad as missionaries for the Catholic church between 1800 and 1990. As important as these men and women were to their families, the church, and French colonial efforts, they were few in number compared with those who went to Paris.²¹

Bretons also supplied bodies to the imperial settlements in Algeria, although considerable efforts to recruit fishermen and farmers to North Africa (not simply Algeria, but also Tunisia and Morocco) did not have great success. Like the seventeen boatloads of Parisians sent to Algeria as part of the relief of the economic and political crisis of 1848, Bretons met with a hard reality that contradicted any ideas of a tropical paradise.²² The founding of the *Société Bretonne de Colonisation en Algérie* by M. Auguste Roncière of the *Côtes-d'Armor* was among the efforts to attract Bretons. Roncière's idea was to recruit rural religious families, with the goal of implanting Catholicism in North Africa. The deputy from Saint-Brieuc, le Comte de Champagny, had the same idea when he declared in 1853 that "no emigrant can offer greater aptitude for colonization than the Breton farmer. A Breton colony would carry to the African soil the image of the fatherland and its simple and religious ways."²³ These schemes did not enjoy significant success, and perhaps for this reason, in the 1890s the state tried to lure settlers with free passage and one hundred francs per man (two hundred per household), plus ten francs a month for lodging. Bretons moved to the coastal towns of Annaba, Skikda, and Collo; in 1891 an entrepreneur in Concarneau opened a sardine cannery and curing facility in Skikda. Most successfully, just afterward the governor general opened three seaside villages within thirty-five kilometers of Algiers. Finally, after 1904 free lands were offered to poor French settlers who would live on and farm the land, and similar efforts were made to settle Breton fisherman.²⁴

Emigrants saw more promise in the western hemisphere, so despite government discouragement hundreds of thousands of French departed in the nineteenth century, especially to Argentina (the destination for nearly 227,000 between 1857 and 1924), the United States (nearly 492,000 between 1820 and 1924), and Canada. Others went to Mexico.²⁵ The nearby sea offered an exit to adventuresome Bretons. When the handloom

weavers of Brittany lost the New World market for their goods in the face of competition from Silesia, Saxony, and England and high tariffs in the early nineteenth century, one of their choices was to join the crews of whaling boats. It was by this means that Joseph Leroy from the Morbihan got to Monterey, California, in the 1830s, where he abandoned ship, along with the weaver's son Vincent Louis Saget from the Côtes-d'Armor. Bretons in early California like these two—each born near a port town—seem to have sold their labor at sea as part of a young man's way out, rather than part of a collective movement.²⁶ Small groups of Bretons from the Finistère set out for Montevideo, at the mouth of the Plata River in Uruguay, including a young hat maker and a sixty-four-year-old merchant with his wife and two daughters in March 1854. The same year five men in the building trades sailed for Lima. The following year a group of fifteen men in all trades, the majority in their twenties, left for Tova Island off the coast of Argentina.²⁷ A pharmacist and a *propriétaire* set out to do business in New York, a teacher to Boston. Destinations were scattered from New York to Patagonia for these small groups of emigrants.

This was true at least until news of the California Gold Rush reached France. Coming in 1848, at a time when the European economies were at a nineteenth-century nadir, the Gold Rush brought Europeans, men, in the main, to the West Coast of the United States, which also attracted men from China, Mexico, Latin America, Australia, and New Zealand. The French, by and large in their twenties and thirties, numbered over ten thousand. These included some three thousand out-of-work Parisian men and women transported in a shadowy lottery scheme—or at least those who survived the long journey around Cape Horn in seventeen sailing vessels.²⁸ By 1860, when they first appeared in the U.S. federal census, nearly 8,500 French remained in the state. A good number of Bretons came along, like the *cultivateur* Jean Le Berre from the village of Plogonnec in the Finistère, twenty-four, who declared himself an emigrant and struck out for California in 1856.²⁹

Canada remained a privileged destination for Bretons into the twentieth century, offering an attractive alternative to the poverty of Brittany.³⁰ The islands of St.-Pierre and Miquelon, just south of Newfoundland, continued to be destinations after Argentina faded as an attraction at the end of the 1880s. The French increasingly headed west, especially to Manitoba and after 1900 to Saskatchewan.³¹ The parish of Saint-Brieux was founded north of Saskatoon in Saskatchewan by Bretons in 1904,

when twelve hundred seasonal fishermen and three hundred other emigrants made a forty-three-day trip from Saint-Malo to Prince Albert.³² But as the dire warnings to prefects in correspondence from Paris indicated, life across the Atlantic was fraught with danger and the threat of failure.³³ Thus the sudden death of the pioneer Joseph Bélébuic after two years in St.-Brioux, Saskatchewan, for example, necessitated help for his widow and four young children (one born after his death), who could only survive if they returned in 1912 to Douarnenez, where the widow could open a *maison des modes* and work with her three nieces and the help of a faithful maid. Madame Bélébuic, like many Bretons, had relatives who had left for other shores; she had a brother in the colonies, a Père du St. Esprit who had officiated at her wedding in France in 1907 and was in the French colony of Gabon when she returned to France.³⁴ Bretons continued to come to Canada throughout the twentieth century: during the interwar period, when the United States closed its doors almost completely, Canada was where most of the 16,200 French emigrants settled.³⁵

Thus Bretons, as part of an outward-looking, mobile sector of French society, participated in France's global activities—as seamen in early North Sea trade, as sailors and aspiring planters in the Caribbean, as settlers in what would become Canada's Maritime Provinces and prairies, and in Latin America and the United States, from coast to coast. Bretons were part of the civilizing missions of the French state and the Catholic church, as well as of fishing and whaling fleets, worldwide.

Many returned to Brittany, and even more aspired to return. This Breton (but not uniquely Breton) strategy of traveling the ocean rather than sticking to land may have been part of the reason why Jean-Marie Déguignet, who called himself a man of the soil in his autobiography *Mémoires d'un paysan bas breton*, could be a seafaring Breton soldier and world traveler but still think of himself as a peasant. Déguignet was born into the family of an agricultural laborer not far from Quimper in 1834 and was begging at ten and working as a shepherd at seventeen before he entered military service in the Breton port of Lorient. From there the military sent him to fight in the Crimean War, to Jerusalem (where he lost his faith), to fight against Italy in 1859 and Algeria in 1861, and then to take part in the “ignoble and criminal intervention” in Mexico; he then returned to farm in the Finistère and descend into poverty and psychiatric incarceration before his death at the age of seventy-one in 1905.³⁶ Yet he called himself a Breton peasant. This Breton, lauded and published to

wide acclaim nearly a century after his death, is understood to have embodied regional culture despite his wide travels; he also demonstrates the capacity for multiple and ambiguous identities.

BRETONS MOVE WITHIN FRANCE

Bretons did not migrate much within France before the mid-nineteenth century, however. Unlike the famous Limousins, Auvergnats, and Savoyards, who established a presence in Paris in the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth, Bretons did not enter the history of Paris as a group, nor were they engaged in large-scale migration repertoires. Certainly there was little demand for migrant labor within Brittany as elsewhere along the Atlantic coast—and there was little temporary migration, particularly in comparison with the mountainous regions of France that sent people out annually.³⁷ In addition, before about 1850 the Breton customs and *mentalités* kept people at home. Brittany, especially the westernmost département of the Finistère, was “the most stay-at-home in Europe,” according to its prefect. “The Breton male,” Gabriel Désert intoned, “lived apart from interregional human exchange.”³⁸ The great historian of temporary migration Abel Châtelain attributes this tendency to Breton misogyny that demands keeping the woman at home and out of sexual danger, as in Corsica, but also to women’s practice of weaving and doing other necessary work at home such as caring for the farm, the children, and the elderly. However, “even *Brettonnes*,” he noted, eventually came to Paris to work as domestics.³⁹

As farm workers began to leave temporarily or permanently before the First World War, scholars concerned with Brittany articulated the nationwide concern with the rural exodus in a number of important writings,⁴⁰ culminating in the law dissertation of the Breton Georges Le Bail, defended in Paris in November 1913. Le Bail placed himself in the company of scholars like Emile Vandervelde, the Belgian socialist whose long political life included the presidency of the Second International in 1900, and who published *L'exode rural et le retour aux champs* in 1903.⁴¹ Le Bail described temporary and permanent emigration from the Finistère in great detail, and did so with an explicit point of view. These words of the Breton poet Auguste Brizeux followed the dedication of the dissertation:

Oh, I tell you, never leave
The doorstep where you played as a child.

Never leave the doorstep,
Die in the house where your mother died.⁴²

Brittany is in crisis, Le Bail asserted; it is in a period of adaption, of struggle between the elements from the routines of the past and those reforming and scientific elements that the present brings.⁴³ His presentation of the temporary and permanent emigrations and their causes are cloaked in a hope to reverse the process. The dissertation ends in a reverie that has nearly the tone of a hallucination, as Le Bail dreams that the children of Brittany will desert Paris and return to the fields. It is worth taking in: “May they return! May they take, one evening, one of those trains that leaves the Gare Montparnasse for Brittany, and when the night has passed, when the great cities are far away, as the locomotive glides lightly along the rails across the Breton countryside, when the first dawn begins, the Mother Earth will suddenly appear before their astonished eyes, still enveloped in the blue fog of spring dawn, the fertile earth, the indulgent earth, forgiving of their abandonment, offering her fecund and rich loins to the labors of their arms.”⁴⁴ Le Bail, and those who shared his interests, saw the extraordinarily high fertility of Brittany as one of the virtues that separated it from the rest of France. The birth rate for France was 207 per 10,000 inhabitants in 1909, and about 270 for the Finistère at the same time. The international comparison is telling of France’s unusually low birthrate and growing pronatalism; the rate was 486 in Russia, 350 in Austria, 335 in Germany, 275 in England, and 260 in Sweden. In a proposal for assistance to large families, the deputy from the Finistère M. Argeliès pointed out that had France had the birthrate of the Finistère since 1871—year of the shameful defeat at the hands of the Germans—France would have a population of 53 million rather than 39 million. Finistère, like the rest of Brittany, was seen to be gifted with “perpetual increase.” If only France would follow its example.⁴⁵

When Bretons left home before the Great War, some headed for the sea. In addition to the kinds of overseas travel and settlement described above, Bretons worked as fishermen, supplying the regional markets as well as sardine canneries on the coast. For example, by 1906–7, of the 216,642 men who made their living from the sea, over 45,500 were from the Finistère, France’s westernmost département.⁴⁶ Aside from those who went to the North Atlantic for cod, this work did not take men from home, as did panning for gold in California or working in Argentina. Nonetheless, fishing was dangerous work. The navy, however, did take

men away from home, and Bretons were more likely than other Frenchmen to join the navy. Le Bail contended that nearly a quarter of naval conscripts in France, and virtually all the naval volunteers, were from the Finistère. Likewise, the young men of the Côtes-d'Armor were more likely than non-Bretons to go into the navy.⁴⁷

The kinds of seasonal work that enlivened the fields in the nineteenth century took some Bretons abroad, especially those who lived in the northwest of the peninsula. The farming and marketing of *primeurs* (delicious spring vegetables such as peas, onions, potatoes, and artichokes) took Bretons from St.-Pol-de-Léon to England, as well as to the cities of Brittany and to Paris. Strawberries from Daoulas, just east of Brest, were marketed in England.⁴⁸ A very well-organized contingent from around the northwestern commune of Roscoff—some twelve hundred at the beginning of the twentieth century—packaged and sold onions along the south coast of England between July and January. This hard-working contingent of traders formed a small English-speaking and tea-drinking subculture near the tip of Brittany.⁴⁹ With the exception of pockets of people from Roscoff headed for England and agricultural workers in Jersey, however, there was little maritime emigration by the turn of the century.⁵⁰

As elsewhere, the cities of Brittany drew upon people from the surrounding region—in the words of Jean-Pierre Poussou, the “demographic basin.”⁵¹ Among these was the provincial capital of Rennes. Nantes, the seaport on the Loire (Loire-Atlantique) and the sixth-largest city of France in 1851, grew to 96,000 at its peak. Brest (Finistère), at the tip of the peninsula, was the eleventh-largest city at the same time. Bretons left the countryside beginning with a crisis in the rural textile industry in the 1830s that forced them to flee the villages of the Ille-et-Vilaine and the Côtes-d'Armor for Rennes and the Loire-Atlantique, where Nantes and Saint-Nazaire offered employment.⁵² Young women went to large towns such as Brest and Lorient in the Finistère, where they could find work as servants or wet nurses and make higher wages than they could closer to home.⁵³

After 1850 a pair of changes began to move Bretons out of their home area en masse, a trend that transformed mobility before the outbreak of the First World War. First of all, the railroad brought Brittany into contact with the rest of France. Although regions with long traditions of seasonal and temporary emigration on foot and by coach, like the Au-

vergne, had sent people out for some two hundred years, it is clear that railroads allowed easier travel for women as well as men, in addition to returns home. For Brittany the railroad played a more fundamental role. All signs confirm the findings of a study published in 1905 that “regular emigration . . . could only begin when the modern means of communication made a breach in the longstanding isolation of the region . . . the two great arteries of emigration, temporary or permanent, were the two [railroad] lines North and South, Brest to Rennes and Brest to Nantes.”⁵⁴ The line from Paris to Nantes in southeast Brittany was completed in 1851 and extended out to Lorient on the south coast eleven years later. The line to the provincial capital and central city of Rennes opened in 1857 and by 1865 connected the outermost city of Brest to Paris. The railroad was only the most visible manifestation of Brittany’s opening in the nineteenth century; nonetheless Bretons understood its importance. “You are invited to attend the funeral procession for the mores, customs, language and traditions of old Brittany. . . . The ceremony will take place tomorrow, December 7, 1863, at the station, about three in the afternoon,” wrote a contemporary in Quimper of the railroad’s arrival.⁵⁵ And the opening would continue, as other lines crisscrossed the province in the following years, and narrow-gauge railroads connected Bretons in towns of three or four thousand with national lines by about 1907.⁵⁶ The railroad lines facilitated seasonal fieldwork by charging laborers for their trip out but bringing them home without charge.⁵⁷

Second, the demand for seasonal agricultural labor outside Brittany increased. With the end of use of the fallow, cultivated acreage increased by a third in the Paris basin, and the scythe became the tool of choice for a labor force that now included Flemish and Breton workers, according to the national agricultural inquiry of 1866. They replaced the local workers who had deserted the fields for Parisian industries and public works. Those from the mountains stayed in the South and Southwest, where the grape harvest was most pressing, leaving the demand for harvest labor north of the Loire to the Bretons and Belgians. Indeed, “without the Bretons, it would never have been possible to get the number of working arms necessary” in some villages outside Paris. Breton agricultural workers were needed in the three départements west of Paris, especially the rich Beauce region near Chartres.⁵⁸ And Breton farm workers—whose salaries were among the lowest in France—were willing to go. Nearly all emigrants, Le Bail reported in 1913, came from the farm.⁵⁹

By the beginning of the twentieth century Breton men were circulating throughout northwestern France. A study by Jean-Claude Farcy and Alain Faure of the conscript class of 1880—those men born in 1860 in the Côtes-d'Armor—reveals their itineraries. The Côtes-d'Armor, like much of the rest of Brittany, was a primarily rural département where over two-thirds of young men worked the land, especially those who lived inland from the coast. More mobile than past generations, over a third of the men in this département departed, and a quarter of those went to greater Paris. Nonetheless, the Bretons were the least likely to live in a city of any French group under study. Men from the poorest areas—inland parts of the west of this department—were most likely to emigrate, and least likely to go to a city. A marked contrast distinguished young Breton men on the coast from those inland: coastal areas, with their rich agriculture, maritime activities, and diversified economies, produced conscripts with higher levels of physical health and culture, and men from the “golden belt” on the coastline were more likely than their poorer inland compatriots to seek out an urban destination at some point in their lives.⁶⁰

The Bretons cut a distinct figure in comparison with other provincial men, and stood in particular contrast to two of the best-known groups of migrants to Paris, the Limousins from the Creuse and the Auvergnats from Cantal, each of whom had a long tradition of migration to Paris and of working as stonemasons and in construction (the Limousins) and in café and barkeeping (the Auvergnats).⁶¹ Brittany had a large and fertile population, but its people were underprivileged; Breton conscripts in the class of 1880 were on average the shortest of any group at a time when stunted growth signaled undernourishment. The illiteracy rate of the men born in 1860—schooled before compulsory primary education—was the highest in the country (34 percent), because many did not know French.⁶² The Limousins were rooted in a tradition of seasonal and temporary stays in Paris, and in their mid-forties were likely to remain in Paris (52 percent) and more likely to return home (28 percent) than any other group; the Auvergnats, part of a close community in the city, were most likely to remain in Paris (66 percent) rather than return (17 percent). By contrast, emigrant Breton men were less likely to be in Paris than either of these (50 percent)—but strikingly more likely than Limousins or Auvergnats to be in the *banlieue*, or *suburbs* (8 percent), or somewhere else in France (17 percent), and less likely to go to a city at all. Of those who left home in adulthood, far more Limousins and Auvergnats than Bretons

touched down at some point in greater Paris. Generally speaking, Breton men did not become city people: when they reached the age of forty-five, in 1906, over three-quarters of the men under study lived in settlements of fewer than two thousand residents; this set them apart from not only Limousins and Auvergnats, but the other provincial men as well.⁶³ Bretons were however a bit more likely than others to travel to the colonies and abroad, most likely to take seasonal work on the British islands of Jersey and Guernsey and to join fishing sojourns to Saint-Pierre and Miquelon.⁶⁴

Nonetheless, one-seventh of these Breton men did go to greater Paris—this in contrast with the one-quarter of the men in the class of 1880 from other areas of France.⁶⁵ What set them apart in the Parisian Basin was the tendency of Breton men to go to the banlieue of Paris, rather than to the city itself. Even when very few were in the Paris area at the age of twenty, the moment of conscription, over a third were in the banlieue—presumably with their parents, because they had moved before reaching the age of twenty. By 1906, when one-quarter of the Bretons were in greater Paris, two-thirds of these men were in the banlieue.⁶⁶ Of all the newcomers to arrive from the class of 1880 from throughout France, Bretons had the shortest stay—over a third stayed less than five years, and one-sixth stayed for less than a year.⁶⁷

Breton men moved on to other locations in northwestern France without returning home. Among these were the men who stopped in the town of Bonnières northwest of Paris to work on a model farm, and in its grimmest industries—a distillery, a petroleum refinery, and a glue factory.⁶⁸ From Paris they went back to the Ille-et-Vilaine, a more prosperous département in upper Brittany, to Normandy, and particularly to the Seine-Maritime and its primary city of Le Havre.⁶⁹ The colony of Bretons that formed in the port city of Le Havre grew with speed during the period 1875 to 1900. Numbering ten thousand in 1891 and thirty thousand a decade later, Bretons would come to be a substantial minority of Havrais. Bretons settled especially on the Île Saint-François in the heart of the city—men from the Côtes-d'Armor displaced by the fall in New World fishing and others from the inland Finistère who worked in port construction, followed by customs clerks from the Morbihan, southern Finistère, and Saint-Malo. Bretons in Le Havre were noticed for their accents and language: they were said to “baragouine” because they used the Breton words for bread (*bara*) and wine (*gwin*). Their appearance—the

wives' starched headwear, coiffes, and men's garters and stockings—also set apart the Bretons of Le Havre.⁷⁰

Although Breton men who moved to Paris to stay at the age of twenty were as rare as “aloe in Siberia,” this was not necessarily so for towns of the banlieue like Saint-Denis. Moreover, with “half the world is missing” from the analysis of male migration by Farcy and Faure, theirs is a very incomplete portrait of Breton migration, especially because the city itself was clearly a more important destination for women than for men. The census of 1901 reports that among Bretons living in the city limits there were sixty-nine men for every hundred women, and among those from the most important source of newcomers, the Côtes-d'Armor, sixty-four men for every hundred women.⁷¹ Like nearly all cities, Paris had much to offer women, and as in most cities women outnumbered men. Bretons from the Côtes-d'Armor offer the extreme case.

BRITTANY

The past half-century of scholarship on Brittany reveals a unique and heterogeneous province marked by waves of change. The work of the noted Breton scholar Yves Le Gallo underscores the longstanding existence of “two Brittany,” in terms not only of language but also culture and traditions.⁷² Although Brittany is justifiably reputed to be among the most Catholic of provinces, religious practice was less fervent in the cities and some rural areas and more so in the Léon of the northern Finistère. The faith, we shall see, was closely affiliated with the Breton language, so that the Combes Law (1905) banning the use of Breton in the church and teaching congregations was particularly controversial in Brittany.⁷³ Moreover, pre-Christian Celtic practices, Druidism, and Bardism were part of Breton culture for some men and women.⁷⁴ Finally, the markers of high fertility and illiteracy for which Brittany was well known also varied by area.⁷⁵ And they evolved, shaken by the changes wrought during the Third Republic. “Between the Brittany of the eighteenth century and that of the postwar period, another Brittany emerged. A Brittany that, little by little, accepted the Republican model, knew its demographic peak, saw its children emigrate. An agricultural Brittany that evolved toward small holdings and improved its yields, a coastal Brittany in the throes of change. *Bref*, a social universe constantly renewed to which Bretons adapted.”⁷⁶ Thus whatever Parisians' view of Brittany and Bretons, the

region was not only heterogeneous but also an arena of change over the course of this history. The historical anthropologist Martine Segalen wisely warns us against the error of assuming a changeless backdrop: “Let us not make the mistake of supposing,” she writes, “an immemorial, frozen past.”⁷⁷

Nonetheless, in the words of Mona Ozouf, Brittany offers the “canonical example” of resistance to national integration.⁷⁸ Breton regionalist movements are part of its past—they have a rich and lively history in Brittany that blossomed during the Third Republic—and reach to the present. Issues of language and identity are at the heart of these movements. Seated in reactions to the centralizing forces of revolutionary Jacobinism and the triumph of the Republic after 1871, activists formed the Union Régionaliste Bretonne in 1898 to promote political decentralization and economic and cultural expansion. In the Belle Époque a less conservative Fédération Régionaliste de Bretagne broke off to leave religion off the table; the more religious Bleun-Brug (Heather Flower) was founded the following year. Regionalism flowered after the Great War and gave birth to autonomist movements such as the Union of Breton Youth, founded in 1920, which transformed itself into the Breton Autonomist Party in 1927. During the interwar period some Breton activists became more fascist in orientation and looked to Germany for confirmation, but the German occupation did not recognize the claims of Breton nationalists and showed more interest in guarding the coastline against invasion from the west; Vichy gave little satisfaction to these groups, and by the end of the war Breton nationalism was discredited for its fascist associations. After the war’s end regionalism found new activism in political, economic, and cultural life beginning in the late 1960s, continuing with the Socialist government of the 1980s and expanding with the European Union.⁷⁹

The famous regionalists of the Belle Époque and interwar period that will appear in these pages include the militant Marquis de L’Estourbeillon, the composer and singer Théodore Botrel, and a number of young activists, but they will not play a starring role. Three observations lie behind this: regionalism, especially in the beginning, was an elite affair. In the main, elites joined these organizations, especially the Union Régionaliste Bretonne, whose one thousand or so members belonged mostly to the nobility (25 percent), the priesthood (17 percent), and the liberal professions (11 percent).⁸⁰ Most of the Bretons in Paris did not

enjoy elite status. Second, the politics of federalism that constitute a fundamental thread of regionalism are peripheral to this story. Like regionalism in general, federalism attacks “the centralized unitary state, for which France . . . has become the archetype” and is part of a long tradition in French politics that is bearing fruit today.⁸¹ The Bretons in the federalist movement also acted as leaders in the Paris community, and it is from this perspective that I view them. Caroline Ford has given a thoroughgoing treatment of the political relationship between Brittany and Paris as it was played out in Brittany in *Creating the Nation in Provincial France*.⁸²

Finally, the regionalism that has been highlighted by Anne-Marie Thiesse emphasizes the desires to preserve the Breton language and costume.⁸³ As important as these were in the context of Breton organizations, the maintenance of language and costume was not a central concern of many Bretons who had moved to Paris. On the contrary, these were a hindrance to their making their way in the city and colored how they were viewed by urbanites. As one postwar arrival quipped, “When I arrived, I didn’t want to speak Breton anymore, because I really needed to learn French.”⁸⁴ The representation of Breton speakers and their clothing, and of Breton culture in the International Exhibits of 1900 and 1937, was crucial, but language and costume find less emphasis in this book. Indeed, I open with a pioneering newcomer who came to Paris in 1882, more concerned with a secure livelihood than with the linguistic and sartorial marks of Breton identity.