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► **To cite this version:**

Anne Goarzin. Attractive Marginality: Irish Painters in Brittany in the 1880s. Keatinge, Benjamin; Pierse, Mary. France and Ireland in the Public Imagination, Volume 55, Peter Lang, pp. 59-76, 2014, Reimagining Ireland Series. hal-01096155

**HAL Id: hal-01096155**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01096155>**

Submitted on 3 Jan 2015

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# Reimagining Ireland

Volume 55

Edited by Dr Eamon Maher  
Institute of Technology, Tallaght

Benjamin Keatinge and Mary Pierson (eds)

# France and Ireland in the Public Imagination



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ANNE GOARZIN

## Attractive Marginality: Irish Painters in Brittany in the 1880s

Exhibitions of Breton-themed paintings by Irish artists sojourning in Brittany have taken place regularly over the last two decades, whether it is at the Pont-Aven Museum in 1999<sup>1</sup> or at the Crawford Gallery of Art in Cork in 2000.<sup>2</sup> In September and October of 2010, Limerick's Hunt Museum mounted an exhibition entitled 'The French Connection (& The Rediscovery of Thomas Hovenden)'.<sup>3</sup> It looks back on the influence of *pleinairism* and the contemporary taste for painting ordinary models, as well as reminding the viewer that towards the end of the nineteenth century, France attracted a considerable number of Irish (and international) artists whose works were very popular at the time.<sup>4</sup> 'The French

1 'Peintres irlandais en Bretagne (1870-1930)', 26 June 1999-27 September 1999, see <<http://www.museepontaven.fr/PEINTRES-IRLANDAIS-EN-BRETAGNE.html>>. Accessed 15 October 2012.

2 'Irish Artists in Brittany', Crawford Municipal Art Gallery, Cork, 2000. An earlier exhibit was also devoted to Nathaniel Hill in 1993 ('Nathaniel Hill and the Bretons', Milmo-Penny Fine Art, December 2007).

3 'The French Connection', 10 September-10 October 2010, Hunt Museum, Limerick. Online catalogue available at <<http://www.adams.ie/clandeboye/documents/FrenchConnectionCat-small.pdf>>. Accessed 4 May 2012.

4 In addition to the expected favourite painters such as Sir John Lavery, George Osborne, Charles Lamb or Nathaniel Hill, the 2010 'French Connection' exhibition at Adams sought to display works by lesser known figures such as Thomas Hovenden, a Cork-born artist who became famous in America in the 1880s, as well as Stanhope Forbes (who went on to create the Newlyn school of painting in Cornwall), Mary Kate Benson and Georgina Moutray Kyle. See the online catalogue, 3-4. <<http://www.adams.ie/clandeboye/documents/FrenchConnectionCat-small.pdf>>. Accessed 11 July 2012.

Connection' surveys the works of painters whose fascination for French subjects (in addition to strictly Breton ones) had much to do with the fact that the country's status as Europe's painterly destination enabled Irish visual artists to address issues of representation and to experiment with new forms. While academic painters in France reproduced scenes from mythology, ancient history or the Bible *ad infinitum* and exhibited them at the annual Paris Salons, outdoors or *plein air* painting asserted itself as a step towards reclaiming proximity with life and celebrating nature, landscapes and familiar subjects. Impressionism took this approach one step further, focusing on 'impressions' rather than on detailed realist representation – as of that the rising sun mirroring itself on the sea in Monet's landmark 1874 painting, *Impression, Soleil Levant*.

The Hunt Exhibition takes as its starting point Thomas Hovenden's recently-rediscovered canvas entitled 'The Story of the Hunt' (1880) and the curator draws a parallel between Hovenden's genre painting and Aloÿsius O'Kelly's similarly Breton-themed portrait of a 'Yendéon from Finistère' (1885). What these works have in common is the fact that they were both made in Pont-Aven, where the artists shared accommodation at the famous Pension Gloanec in the mid-1870s. The two paintings thus offer an opportunity to reevaluate the Irish production in the wider context of French artistic trends in the late nineteenth century. The paintings selected for the exhibition further testify to the stylistic and cultural connection between Irish painters and Brittany, where it is probable that the latter felt at home in the similar, although smaller-scale landscape. They also help in assessing the direct impact of Breton culture on the Irish artists' individual imagination as well as the indirect impact of their production on the public's imagination in their native Ireland.

### From Barbizon to Le Pouldu

Brittany had held a special place in the public's imagination since the 1830s. Indeed this Western region had come to crystallize the Victorians' thirst for travel and their fascination with Otherness, which expressed itself extensively through a wide number of publications.<sup>5</sup> It also induced a reverse process through which the Victorian observer of the Breton 'exotic' subject became, in turn, an object of observation for himself. In the 1880s, even those of the Irish painters who were born into the Anglo-Irish Protestant elite no longer systematically headed for London for their artistic education as had been the case of William Mulready, Daniel Maclise or Francis Danby in the nineteenth century, and of James Barry earlier.<sup>6</sup> Brittany at the time offered a vantage point for artists to assess their place, both within the aesthetic canon of realism, and within the Empire as Victorians, as well as Irishmen and women, and eventually as Moderns.

Both French and Irish academic and realist painters had visited Brittany regularly since the 1830s, and French writers displayed as strong a fascination for the western tip of Europe as did the Victorians. This is shown by, amongst others, the numerous travel books on Brittany<sup>7</sup> and by the popularity of the translations of Balzac's *The Chouans* in 1860 and of Renan's 1854 essay entitled *The Poetry of Celtic Races* in 1892. French 'atmospheric' landscape painters such as Camille Corot (one of the precursors of Impressionism) or Eugène Boudin (who took part in the first Impressionist exhibition in 1874) also ventured into those distant provinces in the 1860s, although not specifically to Pont-Aven. Later on, as the spread of railways made Brittany more accessible to visitors from the

5 See Jean-Yves Le Dizec, *Etrange Bretagne: récits de voyageurs britanniques en Bretagne (1830–1900)* (Rennes: PUR, 2002).

6 Brian Fallon, *Irish Art 1830–1900* (Belfast: Appletree, 1994), 48–9. For a more extensive study of James Barry, see Finran Cullen, *The Irish Face* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2004).

7 See J.Y. Le Dizec, *Etrange Bretagne*, 12–13. There were early translations into English of Emile Souvestre's writings on Brittany.



French capital, foreigners came to discover these exotic parts of Europe. Among them were the art students of Carolus Duran,<sup>8</sup> whose free portrait classes attracted members of the higher society from all over Europe; also there were students of the Académie Julian in Paris.<sup>9</sup> At the time, *Grèz-sur-Loing* near Fontainebleau, and closer to Paris,<sup>10</sup> was another location where *plein air* painting thrived; it attracted other European artists, among them the Irish painter John Lavery.

Looking back on the period, it is striking that the first artists' colonies in Pont-Aven were overall foreign. American artists had been staying there as early as the 1850s,<sup>11</sup> but it took the enthusiasm of visitors<sup>12</sup> to build the reputation of Pont-Aven. The closing of the *École des Beaux-Arts* to foreigners in Paris also prompted a string of American and English naturalists to look in Brittany for more affordable and stimulating places for their art. Thus started the colony where they devoted themselves to the painting of models clad in traditional clothes and of the unspoiled landscape around the village.<sup>13</sup>

8 Born Charles Auguste Émile Duran (1837–1917), he changed his name to Carolus Duran as a young painter to seem or sound more exotic.

9 The Académie Julian, founded in 1867 by French painter Rodolphe Julian, quickly became an alternative to the French *École des Beaux-Arts*, especially for women, who were not allowed to apply until 1897. The level of French required by the *Beaux Arts* made it impossible for foreign artists to enter the school, and the Académie Julian thus welcomed many professional as well as amateur foreign artists.

10 Sir John Lavery, *The Bridge at Grèz* (1883). See <[http://www.christies.com/LotFinder/lot\\_details.aspx?intObjectID=13696777](http://www.christies.com/LotFinder/lot_details.aspx?intObjectID=13696777)>. Accessed 11 July 2012.

11 For a detailed chronology of the Pont-Aven school, see <<http://www.museepontaven.fr/Chronologie.html>>. Accessed 11 July 2012.

12 They included Henry Bacon in 1864, and later the Philadelphia-based painter Robert Wylie who chanced upon the village during a visit to Brittany. Wylie's American friends, some of whom studied in Parisian studios, also visited.

13 Julian Campbell suggests that aside from cheap living for artists, it is likely that the attraction of Brittany was stimulated by the publication of Henry Blackburn's book *Breton Folk – an Artistic tour in Brittany*, which 'described in a lively manner the most picturesque towns, and detailed means of transport between them. The artist colonists, particularly Pont-Aven, saw the arrival of a new generation of artists, fresh out of studios in Paris or Antwerp.' (J. Campbell, 'Irish Artists in Brittany', *Peintres*

Unlike the Barbizon artists, the painters in Pont-Aven do not evince a unity in style even though most of the works represent Brittany in an elegant and picturesque mode. A few less-conventional paintings were the exception.<sup>14</sup> In spite of the enthusiasm for the location, it seems that the Irish artists who joined the existing English-speaking community in Pont-Aven<sup>15</sup> around 1880 (Augustus Burke and Aloysius O'Kelly were part of it) witnessed the end of an era: a critic writing in *L'Union de Quimperle* remarked in 1885 that the 'Breton subject' had reached saturation point, and wondered 'Quel est le pays, le monde assez vaste pour faire une semblable consommation de l' "article breton" ?'<sup>16</sup> Julian Campbell nonetheless insists that there was a strong popular demand for Breton-themed paintings in Ireland from the 1870s onwards, as the annual exhibitions at the Royal Hibernian Academy show. Augustus Burke exhibited sixteen Pont-Aven canvases in 1876–1878, adding that '1884 was the year which saw the greatest concentration of images of Finistère by both Irish and British painters.'<sup>17</sup>

*Inlandais en Bretagne*, ed. Denise Delouche, exhibition catalogue, Musée de Pont-Aven/Crawford Municipal Art Gallery, 26 June–29 September 1999, 13). André Carion explains that the cost of a model was much more affordable in Pont-Aven than in Paris, another reason for artists to establish themselves there. The place became so popular that there were forty to fifty painters in the summer of 1875, reaching 100 in 1885, thus again confirming the fact that Blackburn's 1880 essay was instrumental in enticing an increasing number of English-speaking artists to Pont-Aven. They included Irish-born Norman Garstin, Henry J. Thaddéus and Nathaniel Hill. (See also André Carion, *Les peintres de Pont-Aven*, Rennes: Éditions Ouest France, 1994, rep. 1999, 24.)

14 Thomas Alexander Harrison's 1882 painting *Châteaux en Espagne* which represents a Breton boy daydreaming on a beach (reconstructed outdoors in the courtyard of the Lezawen manor house) received a prize at the 1882 Paris Salon. (See André Carion, *Les peintres de Pont-Aven*, 35.)

15 The community had grown to a point that local hotels and shops posted information in English. There were 4th July celebrations from 1883 onwards, as well as baseball competitions between Concanneau and Pont-Aven. André Carion mentions that the population of Pont-Aven increased by 50 per cent between 1866 and 1886, reaching 1,566 inhabitants in 1866 (Carion, 30).

16 Edgar Courtois, *L'Union de Quimperle*, 22 August 1885 (quoted by Carion, 36–7).

17 Julian Campbell, 'Irish Artists in Brittany', 27.



These pictures circulated in Europe and were also shown in Cork, Liverpool or London. Some, such as Nathaniel Hone's port scene at Roscoff, 1869, even made their way to the Paris Salon in 1868, while Thomas Hovenden's work was shown at the Exposition Universelle in 1878. But it should be said that critics in academic circles of the time acknowledged the exoticism of the Breton theme rather than its political relevance for the Ireland of the time, or its proximity to any Irish cultural or religious traditions. It was very much considered as a 'continental' topic in its own right – reassuringly foreign, from the colonizing power's point of view, and familiar in its formal treatment that ranged from realist genre painting to impressionist landscapes and portraits. Accordingly, this triggered an affectionate and sympathetic reaction from the public.<sup>18</sup>

The transition between the naturalist and even the Impressionist treatment of the Breton subject was fostered by Paul Gauguin in his search for alternative expressions of shapes and colour.<sup>19</sup> Faced with economic hardship at the time, Gauguin chose to exile himself to Brittany in 1886 not because he was attracted to the place or the people or even needed a change of subjects but because he felt the need to reach beyond the Impressionists'

18 Joseph Malachy Kavanagh's 'A Breton Byeway' (1886) illustrates how such works were received by the Irish public: 'it was described as "a very charming and competent work."' The critic of the *Dublin University Review Art Supplement* commented 'This is an excellent example of Mr Kavanagh's work. The expectant attitude of the kid rells of someone coming along the path and adds a point of human interest to the landscape which renders the picture particularly pleasing.' See <http://www.adams.ie/clandeboye/documents/FrenchConnectionCar-small.pdf>, 18.

19 The term 'Post-Impressionists' was coined by the English critic Roger Fry, who mounted a show of 'modern French art' in London in 1910. He was referring to the individual endeavours of the painters who had participated in some of the 1874–1886 Impressionist exhibits such as Seurat, Cézanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin. One should bear in mind that they had all been through the academic schools of France before trying to fix the changing effects of light on canvas and moving on to define their own style. For instance, Paul Gauguin's *Paysage Breton* (1888) was influenced by Camille Pissarro, but his treatment of lines already announced the radical move to '*cloisonnement*' and marked contours in later paintings.

landscapes around Paris.<sup>20</sup> His first stay made it possible for him to paint for three months in succession, and to refine his artistic objectives. While his early Breton canvases displayed impressionist features (his works were still much influenced by the Impressionist Pissarro at the time), they already gestured at his interest in masses of colours, in rethinking his conception of space, and in questioning the traditional composition of paintings and contrasting shapes and colours. The display of works by 'Impressionists and synthesists' at the 1889 Paris Exposition Universelle confirmed the rupture with academism and with the declining Impressionist movement. Eventually, Gauguin would even choose to go to Le Pouldu, leaving Pont-Aven as the village where he had hoped to find peace had turned into a battlefield for the ongoing quarrel between 'academic' and 'Impressionist painters.'<sup>21</sup> Together with Émile Bernard whom he had met in 1866, Gauguin developed 'syntheticism', which would be later theorized by Maurice Denis as follows: 'It is well to remember that a picture before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote, is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order.'<sup>22</sup> To synthesize, he says, does not mean to simplify but to render the object represented more intelligible.<sup>23</sup>

The works of the Irish painter Roderic O'Connor, one of Gauguin's intimate circle, aptly epitomize these fluctuating aesthetic influences at the turn of the century. O'Connor's artistic itinerary literally spans the decades that saw the emergence of naturalist landscape painting in Grez (in 1880), and then that of impressionism and of its rejection (while in Pont-Aven).

20 Daniel de Monfreid's famous comment that Gauguin wanted to make the most of this exile by focusing on the 'primitivism' of life there was made afterwards and contemporary critics disagree that Gauguin came looking for primitivism.

21 Denise Delouche, *Gauguin en Bretagne* (Paris: Apogée, 1996), 13.

22 'Il est bon de rappeler qu'une image avant d'être un cheval de bataille, une femme nue, ou une quelconque anecdote, est essentiellement une surface plane reconverte de couleurs en un certain ordre assemblés.' See the Musée d'Orsay archive for more details: <http://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr/>. Accessed 11 July 2012.

23 Paul Sérusier's painting entitled *Le Talisman*, *L'Heure au Bois d'Amour* (1888) was to become the visual manifesto of the French Nabis painters (the 'prophets' in Hebrew) who established the basis for more abstract forms and asserted the liberation from mimesis. The group included Vallotton, Maillol, and Vuillard among others.

It also saw his involvement in the syncretist movement in Le Pouldu in 1892, where he stayed with Gauguin and his followers Seguin or Filiger. As Fallon says, 'No one represents more thoroughly the intelligent émigré artist, on the edge of great events and responding to them feverishly.'<sup>24</sup>

### Defining an Irish cultural space

It is artistic encounters, such as O'Connor's with Brittany in the 1880s, which contributed to the definition of the methods and identity of expatriate Irish painters. They came to Brittany in the wake of the British Victorians who sought in Brittany a form of cheap 'orientalism', as Le Dissez puts it his study of British travellers in Britain (1830–1900).<sup>25</sup> The attraction of the region was, he explains, complex and definitely connected with imperialism. There also was a fascination on part of the British Protestants (and possibly Northern Irish painters) for this Catholic 'Other' that the Breton was, and for the fact that this most Catholic province resisted some aspects of French republicanism. The mediation of the public imagination associated with Brittany is of the utmost importance here: for the Victorians in general, Brittany was a welcoming place for artists and a cheap orient where experiencing the 'Otherness' of the Breton at best gave way to a faint questioning of the so-called values of imperialism.

However, unlike British travellers who envisaged Brittany mostly as commodity and as a way to gently test the Victorian imperialist ideology, it may be argued that Irish artists sought a more radical modern *locus* for creation and self-creation – and this is why I would agree with art historian Finran Cullen's statement in *Visual Politics* that 'what needs to be asked is how these artists relate to their home country; with perhaps less dominance

given to the discourse of modernism.'<sup>26</sup> Seamus Deane stresses that in the case of Ireland, the period following the Union gave rise to growing tension between imperial and national sentiment. Cultural productions were destined to 'make Ireland recognisably part of the United Kingdom, to represent it as a part of the larger system [...]'.<sup>27</sup> Simultaneously, the 1800s was a time when 'a deeply conservative and nostalgically inclined national sentiment'<sup>28</sup> began to develop in Europe. Speaking about the emergence of national Irish literature, Seamus Deane has also noted that Ireland could only be adequately represented by producing cultural space outside the 'canonical "British" forms of representation'.<sup>29</sup> This seems to have been an incentive for travelling to Brittany. Indeed, not unlike John Millington Synge on Aran,<sup>30</sup> Irish painters conceived of Brittany as a pre-modern, primitive world that was likely to spur their own creativity. And like Synge, who created an idiolect which assimilated the communal singing on Inishmaan and his personal dramatic idiolect, it may be said that Irish painters created their own visual idiolect by merging the visual codes and constraints of Victorian genre painting<sup>31</sup> (i.e. realist and sentimental painting) with their own perception of the place. It thus appears that in the later decades of the nineteenth century, they took the strangeness of their native *anglicized* Ireland literally, by moving to the Continent and creating their own cultural space, away from home.

<sup>26</sup> Finran Cullen, *Visual Politics: The Representation of Ireland 1750–1930* (Cork: Cork UP, 1997), 161.

<sup>27</sup> Seamus Deane, 'The Production of Cultural Space in Irish Writing', *Boundary 2*, 21:3 (Autumn 1994), 118.

<sup>28</sup> Deane, 'The Production of Cultural Space in Irish Writing', 119.

<sup>29</sup> Deane, 'The Production of Cultural Space in Irish Writing', 120.

<sup>30</sup> Alex Davis, 'Learning to be Brutal: Synge, Decadence and the Modern Movement', *New Hibernia Review*, 14:3 (Autumn 2012), 42.

<sup>31</sup> Traditionally, the five categories of representations are as follows: history, portrait, genre (i.e. small-scale, paintings of subjects from everyday life), landscape, and still life.

<sup>24</sup> Brian Fallon, *Irish Art 1830–1990*, 54.

<sup>25</sup> Jean-Yves Le Dissez, *Etrange Bretagne : récits de voyageurs britanniques en Bretagne 1830–1900* (Rennes: PUR, 2002).



## From exotic regionalism to the familiar Celtic 'Other'

Focusing on the way in which the Irish painters' perception of Brittany in that period led to changes in the representation of the Breton subject from merely exotic to somewhat familiar – I shall further suggest that these artists did not so much seek to position themselves within an Irish political/peripheral identity (inspired by the marginality of the Western region they explored) as to interrogate the virtual reality that was the founding principle of naturalism in the 1870s and 1880s. Indeed, many of their works obliquely reflect their difficulty in connecting with subjects whose representation was aesthetically coded. In conclusion, I shall show that this realization called for alternative techniques, ones which were to be found through exchange with fellow painters from France and Europe.

Deane writes that from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, 'Ireland's difference [...] was a difference that paraded anachronism as a form of modernity, the form that was opposed to modernization and was, in consequence, culturally richer.'<sup>32</sup> It is no wonder then, that among the Irish artists' favourite Breton topics were the similarly anachronistic, yet 'richer', rural landscapes with market, domestic or beach scenes (often showing fishermen gathering kelp) as well as 'pardon' (local pilgrimage) scenes, and sitters in local costumes. Paintings by Irish artists unambiguously displayed the same defiance of the laws of progress and modernity as took place in literature making Brittany, according to Belfast artist Samuel Taylor 'a delightful old world place. Very primitive [...] and the costumes are most wonderful.'<sup>33</sup> J.M. Synge is an obvious reference in order to understand how the Irish public imagination was reclaimed by spatial displacement (to Brittany, or in his case back to the West of Ireland). As a young man

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studying in Paris in the 1890s, he was fascinated with works by Anatole Le Braz and Ernest Renan; he even began to learn the Breton language and to write articles about Brittany in Irish newspapers. He wrote about it in his *Etude Morbide* (1897–1898)<sup>34</sup> as Davis explains:

In the *Etude*, Breton culture and the landscape of Brittany grant the persona a vista of an alternative experience of art to that imparted by [...] disaffected metropolitan authors [...] the clan vital of the Breton peasants is in marked contrast to the morbidity and ennui chartered in earlier entries in his fictional diary.<sup>35</sup>

Living in voluntary exile on the fringes of Europe was, as Deane puts it, 'the high cultural form of emigration'<sup>36</sup> for Irish artists. But while the peripheral location of Brittany was also a strategic location for artists (especially writers) to reclaim the clichéd peasant image, they did so more aesthetically than politically.<sup>37</sup> Indeed the art critic Julian Campbell underlines that the Breton experience:

had a liberating effect upon those Irish artists who worked in Brittany. [...] In the 1870s and eighties Brittany helped introduce a new Realism into Irish art, and an interest in rural and peasant subjects. In the 1890s and early twentieth century, it brought a new interest in light, and an unprecedented use of colour. [...] it helped

34 Alex Davis, 'Learning to be Brutal: Synge, Decadence and the Modern Movement', 34.

35 Alex Davis, 'Learning to be Brutal: Synge, Decadence and the Modern Movement', 34–5. The sense of primitivism reaches its climax with Synge's trip to the Aran Islands in the summer of 1898. Davis has an interesting point concerning Synge's position in Aran: quoting Gregory Castle's *Modernism and the Celtic Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), he points to the fact that Synge cannot avoid his own modernity as he is aware of 'his difference from the native subject whose primitive traditionalism/they? he desires.' Late Victorian writers were also questioning the idea that the English language was the expression of national identity (see Davis, 41).

36 Seamus Deane, 'The Production of Cultural Space in Irish Writing', 13.

37 Julian Campbell also notes that very few artists claimed an interest in their Celtic roots. Irish painter Helen Mabel Trevor, who was interested in the 'Celtic spirit' and its legends is the exception rather than the rule (see *Peintres Irlandais en Bretagne*, ed. Denise Delouche, 41). As for Nathaniel Hill, he displayed an interest in the poor and beggars in Brittany which echoes the later concerns of Jack B. Years.

32 Seamus Deane, 'The Production of Cultural Space in Irish Writing', 126. See also his remark about '... the Celt as dreamy, imaginative, indifferent to the material world' (Deane, 130).

33 J. Campbell quoting Belfast artist Samuel Taylor, in J. Campbell, 'Irish Artists in Brittany', 23.



some artists to 'discover' aspects of their own country, including the beautiful, but impoverished, regions of the West of Ireland, as J.M. Synge was to do in his writings.<sup>38</sup>

However, Campbell remarks upon the fact that no Irish School emerged from this experience, that the lack of similar artist colonies in Ireland also meant a lack of representation of the extreme poverty of the West, and he points out that their stay in Brittany did not have the same impact on the Irish painters as it did on J.M. Synge. Indeed, as men and women of their times, European artists held stereotypical views of the Celts which had been culturally formed since the eighteenth century.<sup>39</sup> Joep Leerssen explains that Celticism at the time (in the case of Wales, or Spain, or even Ireland) was 'a form of exotic, romantic regionalism: different from, but not opposed to, mainstream English culture: a dash of colour at the national periphery.'<sup>40</sup> Thus, the artists staying in Brittany relied somewhat, or for the most part, on an invented tradition. What results from this is that, however pleasing the thought might be, the Irish in Brittany did not set about to deliberately depict an imagined community of Celts. It seems that Irish painters in Brittany were in fact looking for a renewed *epistemological* place where they could produce works that might challenge the fixity of time so present in Victorian narrative painting, rather than for a geographical locale where they could define themselves against England's (or France's) modernity (as was the case of Irish writers). It appears more accurate to envision the Breton subject as a step in this attempt to reclaim a space for painting rather than as an especially Irish space.

<sup>38</sup> Julian Campbell, 'Irish Artists in Brittany', 27.

<sup>39</sup> Seamus Deane mentions the 'romantic' characterization of Ireland in the late eighteenth century, which 'at first assumes an ecumenical form, whereby the Irish community is envisaged as having a peculiar and exotic origin (Cartaginian, Scythian), that distinguishes it from the English (Saxon, Roman) [...]' ('The Production of Cultural Space in Irish Writing', 121). This, he says, resulted in books such as Charlotte Brooke's *Reliques of Irish Poetry* (1789), 'to found a national consensus through the melding of the Gaelic-/and English-language-traditions in poetry' (Deane, 121). See Joep Leerssen, 'Celticism', in *Celticism*, ed. Terence Brown (Amsterdam: Atlanta GA: Studia Imagologica, 1996), 14.

Seamus Deane analyses the difference between Joyce and Yeats as two moments in the definition of Irishness and art, rather than as an essential difference in nature. Similarly, I would like to propose that rather than interrogating their own national position (like Yeats), Irish painters in Brittany went against the grain of literary history by first exploring the plurality of knowledge and influences (like Joyce), saving their Yeatsian national moment for later, in the 1920s and 1930s as the nation emerged and as works by Paul Henry or Sean Keating asserted the Irishness of their art:

If Joyce claims an epistemological privilege for writing, Yeats claims it for Irish writing. This is not to say that Yeats is more 'nationalist' than Joyce. Rather, it is to point out two different, but connected, moments in the nationalist enterprise in which Ireland as a territory, specific to itself and not parasitically adjunct to England, would be reconstituted (Yeats) or constituted for the first time (Joyce) in writing [...] for Yeats, the Ireland of anachronistically defined modernity is retaining what England had lost in the process of modernisation. [For these painters as] [F] or Joyce, chronicity or anachronicity are irrelevant. The issue for him is spatialisation of that which has been displaced in the dimension of time. History is not ordered in either linear or cyclic fashion. Instead it is thrown into a synchronous space, plural and present.<sup>41</sup>

While it may seem at first that Irish painters set out to represent the exoticism of an almost pre-lapsarian Breton subject (therefore locating it in a chronology), and to epitomize a stalled, nostalgic moment in time, it appears more accurate to envision the Breton subject as a stage in this attempt to define a 'synchronous space, plural and present', which would account for the long lasting popularity of Breton representations.

Joep Leerssen argues that while it is possible to read Celticism as something which takes place in a 'centre-periphery polarity',<sup>42</sup> as 'a form of exoticism (actuated by the periphery's troubled relations with the power centre)',<sup>43</sup> or 'as a struggle of historical narratives and self-definitions',<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Deane, 'The Production of Cultural Space in Irish Writing', 133-4.

<sup>42</sup> Joep Leerssen, 'Celticism', 17.

<sup>43</sup> Leerssen, 'Celticism', 17.

<sup>44</sup> Leerssen, 'Celticism', 17.

one should not foreground the bipolarity of these analyses such as centre-periphery, hegemony versus power imbalance, etc. In the case of Norman Garstin, the Limerick-born artist,<sup>45</sup> geographical displacement was actually a way to reclaim a cultural *plurality* in the form of the interrelatedness between Celtic regions. After Brittany, he travelled to the South of France, then to Italy and Morocco, before settling in Newlyn, Cornwall, where he founded the eponymous school of outdoor painting, with the Dublin-born Englishman Stanhope Forbes. It gathered artists who had been through their similar European Grand Tour. Garstin's spatial displacement epitomizes the ability of Irish painters in that period to move in European circles (like O'Connor with Gauguin) and American ones (like Cork-born Thomas Hovenden who settled in New England). In so doing, Garstin denied the exclusive reading of the Breton subject as an exotic other, and acted upon the space of Celticism rather than providing a strictly political, nationalist reading.

### From frozen space to resumed momentum: questioning the limits of form

Shunning these bipolarities, which are never the subject of their paintings, Irish artists went on to question the ability of realist forms to express time and space. Naturalist paintings from the 1880s and 1890s predominantly focus on picturesque village scenes in which the artist seems to remain at several removes from his models and their quaint lives. Numerous works convey a sense of aloofness, of the odd distance between the artist and the Breton model engrossed in daily chores. Time, or history, seems to have stopped, framing the Breton subject within a picturesque architectural

moment<sup>46</sup> which Watson argues, 'has the comforting ring of remoteness and some of the dignity of antiquity'.<sup>47</sup> The effect is that Breton society is represented as a society that has not submitted to change not unlike the 'paradise stasis in Connemara and on the Aran Islands'<sup>48</sup> that Synge writes about.

In most paintings, the Irish artists remained distant witnesses, documenting Breton life in an almost anthropological manner, as naturalists. Thomas Hovenden's 'The Story of the Hunt' clearly relies on the popular tradition of Victorian genre painting: here is a canvas about a story that is being told in the intimacy of a domestic space.<sup>49</sup> Ironically, it is precisely the visual focus on the 'quaintness' of the protagonists which locks both painter and viewer out of the action taking place, and out of the real 'story of the hunt.' Both the process of this pictured storytelling and the location of the painting's subject are significant in that regard: the house walls frame the domestic scene, bathed in the warm light of the evening. But the painting also serves as a metaphor for the limits in the representation of the Bretons, both by Irish artists, and perhaps more generally by all foreign artists, all of whom were left out of the snapshot of the real life they aimed at depicting. Here, the storyteller/painter remains at a distance from the couple, in the shade, pointing at the picturesqueness of the subjects. His romantic vision of happy domestic life and oral communal traditions is undercut by the fact that the viewer and the painter are equally unable to achieve a sufficient degree of familiarity and knowledge of their models, or of the language. This is a very visually and socio-historically realist painting indeed: it purports to give a voice to the models, but leaves its sounds to the imagination, and a narrative definitely suspended.

<sup>46</sup> See Mary Kate Benson (1842–1921), *A Court, Quinners, Brittany*, Oil on canvas, 60 × 44cm, The French Connection catalogue, <<http://www.adams.ie/clandeboyc/documents/FrenchConnectionCar-small.pdf>>, 5.

<sup>47</sup> George Watson, 'Celticism and the Annulment of History', in Brown, *Celticism*, 208.

<sup>48</sup> Brown, *Celticism*, 210.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas Hovenden (1840–1895), *The Story of the Hunt*, 1880, oil on canvas, 65.5 × 78.75cm, The French Connection catalogue, 17.



## New-found images: the real and the symbolic dimension

In the 1880s, painting national and class stereotypes also allowed the Irish artist to position himself as an outside 'eye'/'I', thereby creating himself through vision. In the 1890s, under the influence of Gauguin in Pont-Aven, formal experimentation with masses of colour, shapes and setting became central to change and led artists to question the limits of realism. It is undeniable that the Breton-themed yet formally radical painting, *The Vision After the Sermon (Jacob Wrestling with the Angel)*, dated 1888, takes after the literal representations of prayer scenes in Finistère.<sup>50</sup> However, Gauguin also brings together the real (landscape, faces and costumes) and what belongs only to the public imagination: 'the landscape and the fight only exist in the imagination of the people praying following the sermon.'<sup>51</sup> Previous hesitant, naturalist representations of these fascinating strangers paved the way for more daring approaches in the 1890s. O'Connor's works exemplify this in particular, with their radical, bold use of colour and shapes to depict the Breton landscape in *Houses of Lezaven* (1898), and in close-up portraits such as *Head of a Breton Peasant Girl* (c. 1893).

Over the fifty-year period when their presence was recorded, Brittany allowed Irish artists to mature their style from naturalism to expressive realism, impressionism and post-impressionism. Although there is little evidence of this in writings by artists, one is still tempted to say that it took this ex-centric positioning on the margins of France to locate their own

<sup>50</sup> Paul Gauguin, *The Vision After the Sermon (Jacob Wrestling with the Angel)*, 1888, oil on canvas, 71.20 × 91.00cm. See The National Galleries of Scotland: 'Genesis (32.22–32)

relates the story of Jacob, who, after fording the river Jabbok with his family, spent a whole night wrestling with a mysterious angel. In a letter the artist wrote to Van Gogh he said 'For me the landscape and the fight only exist in the imagination of the people praying after the sermon.' <http://www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/artistsaa/G/3374/artistName/Paul%20Gauguin/recordId/4940#LABEK\_V1F8E>. Accessed 13 July 2012.

<sup>51</sup> V. Merthes, *Correspondance de Paul Gauguin, 1873–1888* (Paris: Fondation Singer-Polignac, 1984), 165. (My translation.)

## Attractive Marginality: Irish Painters in Brittany in the 1880s

Irishness. The physical distance and naturalist stance of the late 1880s gave way to a stylistic modernity and to a more daring approach acknowledging the proximity of a model who was then no longer a local curiosity mired in a timeless world, but became more of an alter ego. The sitter was at last able to return the artist's gaze, mirroring his/her ability to see himself through the other.<sup>52</sup> The Breton subject, geographically marginalized (much like the situation of the Irish in Britain), yet attractive because of its removed position in terms of traditions, language and culture, thus served as a magnifying glass for the under-represented Irish face in Ireland. It is true that while they were busy painting these familiar strangers, Irish painters were not confronting the Ireland of their day. But, working from the peripheral position that Brittany was considered to be in at the time, Irish artists were enabled to see themselves differently, and to progressively 'become involved with their own peripheral position within the Union of Great Britain and Ireland.'<sup>53</sup> As Finnan Cullen adds, this was 'not just a story of the periphery making it to the centre, but also 'a story of the periphery being involved with itself'.<sup>54</sup> Brittany was a marginal place even for the French, but it was a centre for the expression of a thriving Irish School abroad the same degree of unity was never quite reached in Ireland at the same period. This chosen marginality and the community of the artists' colonies in the West of France allowed artists to forge their own modernity through contact and exchange with other European and American artists; it made them European moderns even before they reclaimed Ireland as a proper subject for national art in the 1920s and later, with paintings by the likes of Jack B. Yeats, Paul Henry or Sean Keating. 'Henry's vision of Ireland as

<sup>52</sup> Charles Lamb's *The Breton Fisher Boy*, painted in the mid-1920s as he was staying in

Brittany, appears to illustrate this newly-gained aesthetic maturity, as it bridges the gap between the foreign artist, his own Irish milieu and the local Breton subject. Here, the backdrop of the sardine fleet in Concarneau seems to have influenced Lamb's later Irish paintings, such as the one showing Galway hookers by the pier. Lamb was one of the first artists to use the west as a source of subject matter, but it may be argued that his eye was trained in Brittany.

<sup>53</sup> Finnan Cullen, *Visual Politics*, 134.

<sup>54</sup> Cullen, *Visual Politics* 162.

a rural utopia,<sup>2</sup> Sigle Bhreanach-Lynch writes, 'coincided with the state's construction of national identity during the thirties, forties and fifties. Because his western imagery was widely reproduced and used commercially to promote tourism at home and abroad, his painting became iconically what was to become the public's quintessential image.'<sup>35</sup> Britany in the 1880s thus served as a laboratory where Synge developed his vision of an unspoiled West of Ireland and where Irish visual artists were able to acquire the tools that would enable them to approach landscape and people from a national perspective, and to define the topoi of Irishness in post-independence Ireland.

## PART II

### Constructing the Images

55 Sigle Bhreanach-Lynch, *Ireland's Art, Ireland's History: Representing Ireland, 1845 to present* (Omaha: Creighton University Press, 2007), 80–1.