

REVIEW ARTICLE

A rare thing: the memoirs of a Breton peasant*

by R. W. Hoyle

The appearance of an English translation of the autobiography of the Breton peasant, Jean-Marie Déguignet (1834–1905), brings to the attention of a new audience a remarkable account of what in many ways was an ordinary life. Déguignet spent the first years of his life in and around Quimper in south-west Brittany, the son of a farmer who failed and was forced to give up his farm and take day labouring jobs a few months after Jean-Marie was born. When he was six, Jean-Marie was kicked in the head by a horse. This gave him a wound which suppurated for a decade or more, and which, when finally cured, left him with a pronounced scar on his temple. Using cod-phrenology, Déguignet explained his acquisition of intellectual interests and abilities from this injury. But it was also a curse: his childhood companions had, he acknowledged, in some ways lived happier lives than he, ‘but lives exclusively physical and animal’ (p. 32).

From the age of about ten the boy begged on a regular circuit around the farms of Ergué-Gabéric (a small village on the east side of Quimper) and undertook small jobs in the countryside. In 1851 he became a cowherd on a model farm run by a Professor Olive at Kerfeunteun (now a suburb of Quimper) and then in 1854 a domestic servant on another farm in the same commune. Later that year he joined the army and saw service in the Crimean campaign, arriving shortly before its end: after the cessation of hostilities he took the opportunity to travel to Jerusalem. In 1859–60 he saw service in Italy in Napoleon III’s intervention in Italian politics: he was then demobbed having served seven years and been made an NCO, and returned to Quimper. But back there

he could find no work, so he re-enlisted in the army as an ordinary soldier and spent a further seven years as a soldier, spending time in Algeria and then Mexico where he witnessed the downfall of the Emperor Maximilian. He was compulsorily demobbed in 1868, and returned to Quimper with the intention of setting himself up as a smallholder and apiculturalist in the woods which fill the estuary valley of the river Odet between Quimper and the sea.

This was not to be. His return to his native parish as a bachelor with sizeable savings made him prey to all his relatives, friends and acquaintances. He quickly found himself – in a display of remarkable passivity – being married to the daughter of a widowed farmer at Toulven, south of the town. She was nineteen: and with her Déguignet inherited responsibility for her mother and her younger siblings. He also, at some periods, had his own elderly relatives living with him. The farm, adjacent to the chateau at Toulven, was badly run down and undercapitalized, but Déguignet set about applying modern farming ideas – some acquired in his time at the model farm at Kerfeunteun in the early 1850s – to it, and seems, on his account at least, to have made it into an efficient and profitable dairy farm. He stayed there for 15 years until evicted in circumstances which tell us much about his character.

Déguignet was an autodidact of a kind which has probably entirely disappeared from Europe with the spread of formal, primary education. He was brought up to speak Breton, learnt Latin from a bilingual missal and French from French-speaking students at Professor Olive’s farm. When his regiment was told that it was

* A review of Jean-Marie Déguignet, *Memoirs of a Breton peasant*, trans. Linda Asher (Seven Stories Press, 2004), £17.99. The translation is based on the selective edition of Déguignet’s writings published in Quimper in 1998 as *Mémoires d’un paysan bas-breton* (Éditions An Here). More recently the unexpurgated Déguignet has appeared: Jean-Marie Déguignet, *Histoire de ma vie. L’intégrale des mémoires d’un paysan bas-breton* (Éditions An Here, 2001). Regrettably the volumes have little editorial apparatus. For another review, which served to attract my attention to Déguignet, David Coward, ‘To the manure born’, *London Review of Books*, 21 July 2005.

moving to Italy, whilst his fellows were writing their last letters to their families, he tells us he went out and bought an Italian grammar so he could talk to the Italians in their own tongue. He also had some Spanish. When garrisoned in Durango in Mexico, he went to the library there to obtain a history of Mexico. He records his astonishment that the library was full of books in French – still in their crates – but he met and formed a friendship with a professor of languages who was in exile there. A beggar-boy from Brittany, he returned there with his sergeant's stripes, a literate and well-read man with wide interests and a penchant for scientific knowledge. A polymath, when he was turned away from the Quimper public library in the 1890s, he had gone there seeking a book on *astronomy*.

But he also returned to Quimper an atheist and a free-thinker, who entirely rejected the magical and superstitious world in which he had been brought up. A rationalist, he was vehemently anti-clerical. Faced by a marriage he was reluctant to make, he tried to evade it by telling his future landlord that he was 'a republican of the most advanced sort, and in religion a freethinker, a philosophic friend to humankind and ... the declared enemy of all gods, who are only imaginary creatures, and priests who are only charlatans and knaves' (p.293) and by offending the clerics whose permission he needed to marry. He emerged as a locally prominent agitator on behalf of anti-clerical, Republican opinion in his district. It was this which cost him the tenancy of his farm at Toulven. His opinions and politics made it impossible to secure a tenancy elsewhere, and, as his tenancy at Toulven came to an end, he was run over by his own cart and, whilst unable to speak (and so object), he received the extreme unction. During his incapacity his wife bought a bar in Quimper: already an alcoholic, she drank herself to death and Déguignet was left to bring up their children alone. After a short period selling insurance to farmers was brought to an end by his wife's collapse and then death, he secured a licence to sell tobacco in a commune to the west of Quimper, Pluguffan, but after three years there, the landlord of his shop ended his tenancy and other possibilities for renting a shop were also withdrawn under pressure from the parish priest. He left Pluguffan and spent the rest of his life in poverty in and around Quimper, finally being driven to attempt suicide. He seems to have been disowned by his children who, he felt, were persuaded against him by his wife's relatives. His eldest son, after service in the Army, secured a position as a notary's clerk in Pont L'Abbe where he married without inviting his father to the either the marriage or the wedding meal. To Déguignet he was 'an ingrate, a traitor, and a liar'.

Déguignet began his memoirs and gave the first

version to a noted Breton folklorist, Anatole Le Braz, who finally, after some delay, secured the publication of the first part of them in a Parisian magazine in 1904: but having lost them to Le Braz, he started again and filled some 43 surviving notebooks and 4,000 pages with his memoirs, but also rants against the church (and Le Braz), and his reflections on philosophy, politics, sociology and even mythology. To the end of his life he remained bitter, denouncing those newly interested in Breton folk law and culture as 'monarchisto-Jesuitico-clerico-Breton regionalists': 'Your goal would be to lock the poor people of Brittany into their primitive old traditions, their barbaric language, their foolish beliefs, so that through your art and your "unique industry" you can go on for ever exploiting them, sucking from them as much juice as possible' (p.400-01). For Déguignet their sponsored revival of Breton culture was a form of feudal reaction akin to the profusion of 'No Fishing', 'No Hunting', 'No Trespassing' signs he noticed at the end of the century. And, of course, this was another world from which he was excluded. It was the new professional Bretonists who criticized his Breton when he submitted a treatise on apiculture to a competition in 1903. His notebooks, ironically, are written in French.

For all his education and experience of the world, Déguignet could never shake off the fact that at home in Quimper, he remained a peasant. He recounts how, right at the end of his life, he was turned away from the public library in Quimper and given books from the pile of library discards. He was a man of stubborn principle, and he held to his principles even when they went against his own best interests. It is all too easy, from his memoirs, to identify his flaws. Three turning points can be detected. The first was his unintended and unwelcome marriage in 1868 on his return to Brittany: here he seems strangely passive, accepting his fate, as his relatives made the marriage agreement for him. He calls himself 'stoic', but wandered off from the marriage feast and missed his own ceremonial bedding. The second was his eviction from Toulven: having been given notice as a result of his political views, his landlord made overtures which Déguignet recognized were an attempt to save face and offer him the tenancy again. After all, Déguignet mentions in passing that he was paying his rent before his due date; he was plainly a successful improving farmer; but he would not compromise and go and see his landlord to admit error – or receive an admission of error. Principle came before prosperity. Nonetheless, his landlord and his landlord's wife looked after him in the convalescence after his accident. Then, having secured his tobacco licence, he advertised for a housekeeper for himself and his children in a newspaper (one of many fascinating details) and secured a widow

who had money of her own. Her Catholicism helped make Déguignet acceptable in a reactionary commune and she plainly loved him, but misunderstanding gossip in Breton (which she did not speak), thought he was going to marry a local girl when it was another Jean-Marie who was the groom. She packed and left, but then wrote saying that she wanted to return to Déguignet and implying marriage. But he would not take her back, lost his toehold in Pluguffan and spent the rest of his life in increasingly meagre and squalid lodgings in and around Quimper.

The Brittany he was born into and describes was one of terrible poverty, superstition, magic, Catholicism and conservatism. The first part of his autobiography contains much on the 'mental world' of the nineteenth-century Breton, the belief in a parallel world which could not be seen, of goblins and elves which sometimes impinged on the world of people. It was a world in which the Devil could take the form of a black cat which would bring great riches, but unless the cat had been sold on before the end of six months, he would take the souls of whoever possessed him. When in 1868 he told his uncle of his intention to clear land in the Stang-Odet – the woods above the estuary of the River Odet – to make a smallholding, he uncle maintained the old beliefs that the stang was inhabited by ghosts and the Ugly Fairy. It was also a world of grinding poverty in which child beggars had their rounds. Pardons, the annual commemorations of the Breton saints, attracted crowds of beggars who made themselves up to appear disabled. (It was also one in which older women could play with children for their sexual gratification, and he describes the orgies – his word – amongst the farm servants at the model farm at Kerfeunteum.) There is much comment about the casual drunkenness of Breton society. Déguignet became an observer of the peasantry, well aware of its failings and limitations. He is critical for instance, of those who had children without the means to support them. He deplored its fatalism and hopelessness, its conviction that little could be done by people to help themselves.

Déguignet brought nineteenth-century rationalism and knowledge to bear in ways which were simply not understood by those about him. His first steps at Toulven were to clear the farmyard of its filthy pools. He then had the stone trough in the kitchen, into which domestic refuse as well as dirty crockery was thrown and which he recognised as unhygienic, bricked up, a cupboard for the cooking vessels and a tall clock installed in its place. He did this when his wife and mother-in-law were out: they were predictably apoplectic when they returned. He set about draining land. Throughout his farming at Toulven he describes how he had a constant barracking from his

mother-in-law, wife and, in the time he was living there with them, his uncle. There is a long anecdote as to how he grew fodder carrots to the sneers of his uncle who, when finally confronted with 'carrots of a length and thickness never seen before in the area', left Déguignet and billeted himself on another nephew. He was also a gardener and made a kitchen garden at Toulven. At Pluguffan he rented some land for a vegetable garden. The nuns who lived opposite bought some of his surplus produce. They had their own vegetable garden but from his account, they had no understanding of the need for manure.

At Toulven, Déguignet built a shed to which he retired for his siesta, to escape the women and, as he says, to read the agricultural paper which gave him some contact with the wider world, its politics and ideas. His was a life full of ifs. Some of the turning points we have already mentioned. But what if he had remained in the army, or on being demobbed, had disappeared into the hubbub of Paris? What if he had remained a prosperous farmer at Toulven? He introduced himself to Le Bras as 'as peasant who has moved about a great deal whereas the others stayed put'. To make sense of his life, Déguignet pointed to the kick in the head which, he believed, had endowed him with an unusual intelligence and yet one suspects that every late nineteenth-century European community had its Déguignet, in their own times politically, socially, culturally and religiously out of step with their contemporaries, infected by science (and ideas of agricultural improvement), modernism, rationalism, and anticlericalism, some of them gained through military service. For those he knew him, Déguignet was almost certainly an insufferable oddball and it cannot be denied that his stubbornness was his enemy: but he lived his life with the confidence that the future belonged to him and his sort. Not that he cared a great deal for the manifestations of the future which he saw about him – as his acid comments on Breton folklorists and the appearance of factory capitalism around Quimper show.

Odd to say, Déguignet may also become one of the best known children of nineteenth-century Quimper, for his story, of a peasant made good (and never forgiven for making good), who was recognizably modern, is of international importance. Read it at home: read it, as this writer did, in a gite only a few miles from Quimper and Kerdévot, whose pardon Déguignet attended as a beggar and again on his demobilization from the army. But do read it, both as a remarkable story, but also as one of the fullest descriptions of nineteenth-century peasant society by who one who was born into it, and spent his life kicking against it. But then, he would not have liked the twentieth any better.