

THE 1947 WELSH DELEGATION TO BRITTANY: PARADIPLOMACY AND PROPAGANDA

KATHRYN N. JONES, Swansea University, UK

The 1947 National Eisteddfod Council delegation from Wales to Brittany represents a highly unusual historical instance of the French state requesting an international delegation from a non-state nation to investigate France's treatment of a linguistic minority within its main borders, and their linguistic, cultural as well as human rights. This case study examines the nature of these centre–periphery relations oscillating between paradiplomacy and propaganda, and explores how the battle to influence public narratives surrounding the visit was played out in the press in France and Great Britain before the delegation's arrival in Brittany, and in its multilingual report after its return.

The post-Liberation fate of Breton nationalists sparked considerable interest and elicited a strong response in certain circles in Wales, which had forged longstanding ties with its 'Celtic cousin' Brittany. Indeed, Erwan Chartier affirms that Wales offered 'les plus importants soutiens à l'égard des Bretons inquiétés à la Libération',¹ and Daniel Leach has characterized Welsh moral and practical support for exiled Bretons as 'real Pan-Celticism'.² From the end of 1945, a series of critical articles and mostly anonymous letters appeared primarily in the Welsh weekly newspapers *Y Fanner* and *Y Tyst*, as well as in the British dailies *News Chronicle* and *Liverpool Daily Post*, and the weekly magazine *The Spectator*. These contained allegations that some Breton nationalists and language activists, such as François Jaffrennou and Roparz Hemon, were being unjustly persecuted by the French authorities on cultural rather than solely legal grounds. The claims of anti-Breton bias in the French justice system went largely unchallenged in Wales, and under assumed names and using false passports, relying on pre-war pan-Celtic contacts, Bretons fleeing French courts began to arrive in Wales in search of refuge with individual Welsh nationalists. As the numbers of Breton fugitives travelling to Wales grew, the Welsh nationalist party Plaid Cymru (the Party of Wales) became more coordinated in its efforts to clandestinely assist the new arrivals. It formed the Welsh–Breton Committee, which in turn launched a Breton Aid Fund to organize and support the exile of Breton nationalists to Wales, and in December 1946 set up the monthly bulletin *The Breton National News Service*.³ Prominent Breton nationalist exile Yann Fouéré, convicted of collaboration due to his roles as general secretary of the Vichy-authorized Comité consultatif de Bretagne and as editor of the Pétainiste regional newspaper *La Bretagne*, played an instrumental role in establishing this Welsh support system after his arrival in Wales in July 1946.⁴

In this context of heightened press interest and clandestine assistance, an official state invitation from the French ambassador to Great Britain, René Massigli, was sent on 10 January 1947 to the National Eisteddfod Council, proposing 'qu'une délégation de personnalités vienne constater d'elle-même la réalité de l'épuration en Bretagne' 'pour enquêter sur les excès de la justice française vis-à-vis du mouvement breton'.⁵ Indeed,

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issuing such an invitation had been recommended to the Ministère de l'Information as early as 21 December 1945 by Maurice le Nan, the Interregional Director of Information for Brittany, in order to alter the nature of British press coverage of Breton nationalists.⁶ In his letter, Massigli hoped that the visit by representatives of this leading Welsh cultural organization would ease ill-feeling towards Paris and 'dissiper les malentendus qui paraissent s'être créés dans l'opinion galloise au sujet de la Bretagne'.⁷ Tellingly, 'dissiper' is translated as the far stronger 'chwalu' (to 'demolish' or 'dispel') in Welsh in the delegation's subsequent report. The translation by Morgan Watkin thereby partly distorts the ambassador's words, and this insinuation of the French government's propagandistic intentions in fact highlights those of the Welsh delegation.

After accepting the invitation, an eight-man delegation of prominent Welsh cultural and academic dignitaries travelled to multiple sites around Brittany between 21 April and 1 May 1947.⁸ Ostensibly, this visit could be interpreted as an entirely state-approved venture. The 'Royal National Eisteddfod of Wales', as it was then known, facilitated intercultural Welsh–Breton exchange under the respectful veneer of central state patronage. However, the National Eisteddfod Council members constituting the 1947 delegation emphasized the very different nature of this politicized endeavour from the outset, namely an investigation to gather testimony through private meetings with select individuals. In their acceptance letter to Massigli, the Council defined the National Eisteddfod as 'le gardien et le défenseur reconnu de la culture galloise', and implied that the delegation would adopt a similar protective role for Breton culture. Another way in which the delegation attempted to 'bypass' Paris was by setting out several conditions prior to accepting the invitation, including the freedom to undertake an unrestricted investigation into language and cultural education in Brittany, and talk to Breton leaders 'sans surveillance d'aucune sorte'.⁹

The delegation set out with a series of questions aiming to monitor the French justice system and interrogate the post-war situation of the Breton language and its teaching. It acknowledged the French right to prosecute collaborators, but stated their concerns that Bretons might be 'persécutés pour des raisons culturelles, ou pour avoir défendu des idéaux Bretons, et persécutés pour ces raisons seulement'.¹⁰ Their acceptance letter also sounded a warning note that the delegation would be regarded back home as official representatives of the Welsh nation, and as such a full report of their findings would be expected.¹¹ Moreover, it is telling that whereas the French version of the report underlines that some of the delegation members suspected that 'l'intention du gouvernement français était d'exploiter notre visite dans un but de propagande',¹² this sentence does not appear in the original Welsh version, suggesting that the report deliberately strengthened its tone for its official French readership. It is likely that the delegates were influenced by claims of cultural oppression by the French state made in Yann Fouéré's book *Breton Nationalism*, published anonymously by Plaid Cymru shortly before their departure in April 1947.¹³

Conversely, French government influence may have subverted the public narrative regarding the portrayal of the delegation's aims, as can be perceived in articles published in the Welsh newspapers the *Western Mail* and *Daily Post* on 22 April, the day after their departure for France. A photograph of the delegation was accompanied by the following caption, which seems to repeat a French embassy briefing verbatim: '[A] delegation of eight representing the National Eisteddfod Council, who left Victoria Station, London, for France yesterday morning as guests of the French Government to study especially the extent to which Breton Nationalists collaborated with the Germans during the

Occupation'. Moreover, the French government's attempt to control and shape the visit's public narrative by subverting its purpose and pre-empting any observations made by the investigative delegation had begun prior to their arrival in Brittany, at a press conference organized by the Ministère de l'Information in Rennes on 18 April and led by Maurice Le Nan. An ensuing Breton newspaper article denies any suggestion of cultural oppression in post-war Brittany, asserting that the delegation will hear Breton being spoken freely, and witness Bretons being able to 'porter le costume et jouer du biniou sans que cela entraînaît des peines de prison'. It contends forcefully that their observations will amount to 'un démenti formel' of allegations in the Welsh press.¹⁴

By breaking their journey to and from Brittany in Paris, where an official reception was held in their honour by the Parisian municipal authorities and the Sorbonne university on 30 April, the delegation was quite literally unable to 'bypass' the French capital, let alone avoid being confronted with the political agenda of the centre. Organized and financed by the culture department of the Ministère des Affaires étrangères, the delegation's itinerary was reported widely in advance in Breton newspapers, in minute detail, down to the exact arrival time of 13.43 of their train from Paris to Rennes on 23 April. Their visit began with official receptions at Rennes town hall and university where they met with Celtic language and literature students, and included demonstrations of traditional Breton folk dancing and music by the Cercle Celtique. A further sign of the French government's attempt to influence the delegation can be found in the guide chosen to accompany them on their three-day coach journey to towns including Saint-Brieuc, Morlaix, Quimper, Lorient and Vannes, namely the teacher, regional councillor and renowned resister Xavier Tréllu, whose Gaullist credentials were highlighted in the press through the syntactical emphasis of 'et, lui, gaulliste de la première heure'.¹⁵

In a final attempt to shape the visit's public narrative, following their return to Wales the delegates drafted their report, which led to significant internal conflict regarding the conclusions reached by Rev. Dyfnallt Owen (editor of *Y Tyst*), the translator Prof. Morgan Watkin, and those of the remaining delegates, who disagreed with Owen and Watkin about the extent of state repression they had witnessed during their journey.¹⁶ Owen and Watkin's narrative of Breton nationalist victimhood prevailed, and the final report substantiated the allegations of judicial bias and cultural oppression in Brittany, concluding that: '[L]e simple fait d'avoir eu une activité bretonne, de quelque ordre qu'elle soit, a été pour le gouvernement français motif suffisant à persécution'.¹⁷ The report called for a general amnesty for Bretons sentenced for such offences, as well as immediate measures to introduce the teaching of the Breton language in schools. The National Eisteddfod Council promised to continue Welsh support to keep the Breton movement alive. The delegation's multilingual report was published in August 1947 and distributed to the press and the French embassy in London, which responded by underlining 'la fausseté de ces accusations formulées contre le Gouvernement de la Quatrième République', and asserting that 'le bilinguisme est contraire à sa constitution'.¹⁸

Further multilingual research is required in order to evaluate the full transnational significance and longer-term impact of the delegation's report. If we consider its immediate influence in Brittany, Joseph Martray, a journalist and former member of both the Comité consultatif de Bretagne and the Défense de la France resistance network, evaluated the delegation's visit in the inaugural issue of the journal *Le Peuple breton* in October 1947 as, 'au point de vue de la renaissance bretonne, l'événement le plus important de l'année—tant par ses répercussions nationales que par son incidence internationale'.¹⁹ Yet its claims of anti-Breton bias in the French Liberation courts have subsequently been

contested by historians, including Luc Capdevila in his seminal study of the *épuration* in Brittany, which concludes that French justice did not treat Breton nationalists more harshly than other collaborationists.²⁰

The 1947 Welsh delegation to Brittany illustrates the difficulties faced by minorities and peripheries attempting to negotiate and 'bypass' the French political centre. It could be interpreted as a politicization of Welsh perceptions of Brittany, which had hitherto been based on cultural affinities rather than political intervention on its behalf with the French state. Finally, the delegation highlights the paradox of the post-war French government recognizing the status of Wales and its minority language and culture to a far greater extent than those within its own borders.

¹ Erwan Chartier, 'La Construction de l'interceltisme en Bretagne, des origines à nos jours: mise en perspective historique et idéologique' (doctoral thesis, Université Rennes 2, 2010), p. 473.

² Daniel Leach, *Fugitive Ireland: European Minority Nationalists and Irish Political Asylum, 1937–2008* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2009), pp. 81–82.

³ See *ibid.*, pp. 89–90, 93–94 and Sébastien Carney, 'Les épurés du mouvement breton en Irlande: l'interceltisme à l'épreuve de la réalité (1946–années 1950)', in *Pour une histoire connectée et transnationale des épurations en Europe après 1945*, ed. by Marc Bergère et al. (Peter Lang: Berlin, 2019), pp. 71–84 (pp. 79–80).

⁴ See his memoirs: Yann Fouéré, *La Maison de Commemara: L'Histoire d'un Breton* (Spézet: Coop Breizh, 1995).

⁵ Chartier, 'La Construction de l'interceltisme', p. 474.

⁶ Ronan Calvez, *La Radio en langue bretonne. Roparz Hemon et Pierre-Jakez Hélias: deux rêves de la Bretagne* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, CRBC, 2000).

⁷ Cyngor yr Eisteddfod Genedlaethol, *Adroddiad y Ddirprwyiaeth i Lydaw: Ebrill, 1947/ Rapport sur la Visite en Bretagne de la Délégation Galloise: Avril 1947* (Cardiff: William Lewis, 1947), p. 3. An English translation was published separately by the Council of the Bretons Abroad, with an additional preface criticizing the French government as *The Truth about the Persecutions in Brittany: An Official Document* (Cardiff: The Breton National News Service, 1947).

⁸ The delegation comprised: Prof. W. J. Gruffydd (leader), Rev. A. E. Jones ('Cynan', secretary), Prof. Morgan Watkin (translator), Mr D. R. Hughes, Rev. Canon Maurice Jones, Rev. J. Dyfnallt Owen, alderman W. Emyr Williams, and Rev. W. Crwys Williams.

⁹ *Adroddiad*, p. 21.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹³ *Breton Nationalism* (Cardiff: Welsh Nationalist Party, 1947).

¹⁴ A.G., 'Sous le signe de l'amitié: Une visite en Bretagne d'Universitaires Gallois et de représentants de l'Eisteddfod', *La Voix de l'Ouest*, avril 1947.

¹⁵ 'Huit personnalités Galloises entreprennent un voyage en Bretagne', *L'Ouest*, avril 1947.

¹⁶ See Llyr Titus Hughes, 'Astudiaeth o Ddylanwad Celtigrwydd ar Lyfrau Teithio Cymraeg am Lydaw ac Iwerddon yn yr Ugeinfed Ganrif' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bangor University, 2022), pp. 61–66.

¹⁷ *Adroddiad*, p. 28.

¹⁸ Joseph Martray, 'La Délégation galloise vient de publier son rapport', *Le Peuple Breton*, 1 (octobre 1947), 13–16 (p. 15).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁰ Luc Capdevila, *Les Bretons au lendemain de l'Occupation: imaginaire et comportements d'une sortie de guerre, 1944–1945* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 1999).

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