Marie Lepioufle was born in an inland village of the Morbihan in 1890, the fourth of six children whose father worked as an agricultural laborer. Without warning, Marie was taken out of school and away from home at the age of eleven to work as a farm servant at a nearby château. She suffered spiteful treatment at the hands of other servants, but lasted a year working in the barnyard, caring for chickens and cows, and cleaning out the henhouse. This would be the first of several year-long jobs close to home that followed the path of her older sister. By 1905 the sisters lived on the eastern outskirts of Paris, not far from their aunt; they worked as store helpers while their aunt hosted them on Sundays, advised them, and opened savings accounts for them. Against her aunt’s advice that she avoid such a disreputable milieu, Marie followed her sister into the Salpêtrière Public Assistance Hospital in 1909. There she found hard work as an aide but also made friends with whom she discovered Paris on her days off. At her sister’s wedding in 1910 she met a male hospital employee, François Michel, who had been born in another French-speaking village near her own in 1882. Younger son of a peasant, François had found life at home difficult when he returned from army service to the family land farmed by his authoritarian father and his older, married brother. He had joined his second brother in Paris, where they both worked in the Pitié Hospital. Starting as an aide, he left unskilled work behind him and trained to become a nurse by 1909, although he preferred to work with horses and carry out the many transport needs of the hospital.

The wedding of Marie and François in February 1911 took place near their hospitals in the Thirteenth Arrondissement, with siblings from near and far in attendance. They celebrated at a nearby inn and then, for the
benefit of their Breton guests, visited the Eiffel Tower and the great Ferris wheel that was a vestige of the Universal Exposition of 1900. They would spend their lives in service to the public hospital system. How do Marie and François fit into the community of Bretons in Paris in the years before the First World War? How did they conform to and contradict the image that Parisians had of Bretons at this time? In the year of their marriage the number of Bretons had reached over 109,000 in Paris (well above the 87,000 of the turn of the century and the 68,000 of 1891) and nearly 160,000 in greater Paris. This surge of Bretons in Paris made them a notable and well-documented presence in city and banlieue.

By the turn of the century Bretons had the worst sort of reputation among newcomers in Paris. In the space of a few years they were the subject of newspaper articles, dissertations, a constellation of church organizations, a well-known salacious novel, and a sociological study. The idea that Bretons should stay away from Paris was embedded in a core narrative—a narrative of ruin and even death—that informs many of the writings by doctors, clerics, novelists, journalists, and academics, writings that were used almost invariably to illustrate how unsuited were Bretons to city life and warning them off attempts to settle in Paris. The poverty of Bretons was studied from every angle, and that of Bretons in the countryside was scrutinized from faraway Paris. In 1902 the weekly Illustration ran a series of articles called “La misère bretonne” that graphically detailed the wretched conditions of Breton sardine fishermen and canneries workers, representing them as the most miserable of all the French. The questions that were posed about Bretons were remarkably uniform (except in the case of the novel mentioned above), and nearly always included a pair of inquiries: Why did Bretons leave home? And how can they be dissuaded from doing so?

When Parisians thought of Breton women they thought first of domestic servants—those ubiquitous workers in the Parisian home who labored behind the doors of families of every status, from clerical workers to the grand bourgeoisie. Breton women made a mark in this area, numbering more than twelve thousand at the turn of the century and anticipating the Spanish and other foreign domestics who would follow. Their cartoon manifestation, Bécassine, made her appearance in 1905. Before that, a more sexual character, in keeping with a second image of Breton womanhood, appeared as Célestine in Octave Mirbeau’s Diary of a Chambermaid. Distinct and striking images of Breton men and women thus became part of Parisian life in the Belle Époque.
These images both corroborate and contradict portraits of Bretons from Parisian censuses and marriage records, but it remains clear that there were no shortages of ideas about Bretons in Belle Époque Paris. Their importance is reflected not only in adult and children’s fiction but in the concerns of the religious and medical establishments. Objects of religious fervor and butts of ridicule, the Breton community in Paris grew into an articulate community with regionalist interests, all the while blending, at least in part, into Parisian society. This heterogeneous community included the wealthy and the poor, the educated and the illiterate, and men and women of Saint-Denis and the Fourteenth Arrondissement, whose experiences varied widely.

CÉLESTINE AND BÉCASSINE: BRETON MAIDS IN THE PARISIAN IMAGINATION

In July 1900 Célestine R. made her appearance between the covers of what would become Octave Mirbeau’s best selling novel, *Journal d’une femme de chambre*. This long-term hit, and its salacious reputation, would overshadow Mirbeau’s considerable body of literary and journalistic work, perhaps to the author’s detriment. In any case, his sensual heroine was not simply a chambermaid but a servant in Paris who had worked “from the Bois de Boulogne to the Bastille, from the Observatory to Montmartre, from Ternes to Gobelins, everywhere.” Souvenirs of her placements in Parisian bourgeois families, written while she was in a provincial post, constitute the stuff of the novel. And Célestine was a Bretonne.

Célestine permits the reader to look through the keyhole, into the life of a chambermaid with blonde hair and deep blue eyes whose story of sexual sensibilities falls into a long history of fantasy literature. Yet the novel also allows a lucid and critical look at bourgeois morals and reveals odious bourgeois traits: hypocrisy, materialism, and cruelty, with a focus on the sexual exploitation of the serving class. Célestine makes the case that “domestics learn vice from their masters.” She is able to avoid one master who sleeps with every servant (only because she is in bed with his son) and another who impregnates every one (only because she is partnered with the gardener). Like Émile Zola, Mirbeau intended to expose bourgeois vice, and like Zola he was perceived as a “vulgar naturalist” when the book was published. Mirbeau successfully portrays ugly exploitation, and the best-known film adaptation of *The Diary of a Chambermaid*, directed by Luis Buñuel in 1964, is able to do the same. But it
is not only the bourgeoisie that is corrupt: there is a certain moral baseness in Célestine, who appears at first to be a sort of sexual Candide but by the end of the novel is clearly possessed by an appetite for sexual pleasure. Mirbeau places the roots of Célestine’s “depravity” not in the circumstances of the domestic or the exploitation of the bourgeoisie but in specifics of her childhood in the Finistère at the tip of Brittany—her fisherman father’s gruesome death at sea, her mother’s consequent alcoholism followed by the rapid departure of her older siblings, then her mother’s constant cruelty and whoring. Left to her own devices, Célestine has her sexual initiation at the age of twelve on a bed of seaweed with a smelly foreman from the sardine cannery, with the prize of an orange. Mirbeau presents her background only in the fifth chapter of the novel, when Célestine learns of her mother’s death and recalls her childhood; she has no one with whom to share this news, since her sister has long since gone off and probably works in a bordello at Concarneau, and her brother is in the navy somewhere—perhaps China. This is Mirbeau’s depiction of the Breton family. The dénouement of the novel shows a certain political baseness on the heroine’s part, one that was eliminated entirely from the films made from the novel: Célestine escapes domestic service by marrying the gardener Joseph and serves as a hostess in Cherbourg at the café he has purchased, named to attract military personnel; tarted up and alluring, she presides behind the counter while her brutal, anti-Semitic husband—a suspected murderer, rapist, and thief—rails against Dreyfus, who has just arrived in France for his second trial.

Although Célestine herself has become an attractive and polished chambermaid by the time she relates her story, Mirbeau also provides a devastating portrait of unpolished aspiring servants from Brittany at the employment agencies of Paris, inspiring the same questions that occurred to concerned men of the church: “Why did she leave her native soil? What folly, what drama, what storm wind pushed out to run aground in this groaning human sea?” Saddened by the sight of a country girl in her telltale Breton coiffe, Célestine comments that “she was ugly with that definitive ugliness that excludes all pity and makes men cruel because really she is an offense to them.” The Bretonne’s thick, beautiful hair—a resplendent red—aggravated rather than attenuated her ugliness, rendering it irreparable. And that is not all: her every movement was awkward. Brought to Paris by an employer who had vacationed in Brittany,
she had left her first job in Paris after sexual advances were made to her. The butt of her family’s cruelty, she could not go home again. “I would rather die!” she exclaimed. In a long interview with an old crone, painful even to read, this young woman was declared too ugly, and then too smelly, to hire—and then was begrudged a job at one-third her asking wage. Another aspirant, Jeanne Le Godec, was greeted with derision: “You’re a Breton then? . . . oh! I don’t like Bretons . . . they’re stubborn and dirty.” This opened a protracted and nasty interview that thoroughly demoralized the widow Le Godec and left her still unemployed. Thus in one chapter Mirbeau portrayed face to face the most unfortunate domestic aspirants and the most arrogant of employers, all under the imper- turbable eyes of a profit-minded mistress of the employment agency. In the end both Breton servants depicted in this popular novel—the sensuous and polished chambermaid and the brutish and distasteful maid-of-all-work—were fair game for novelist and employer alike. Mirbeau had it both ways, taking swipes at the bourgeoisie and denigrating the Bretonnes as well.

Another Breton maid came on the Parisian scene in 1905, one who would outsell Célestine, reach a broader audience, inspire more affection, and ultimately become a much more controversial figure and cultural icon: the cartoon character Bécassine. Her illustrated stories covered a page of the popular girls’ magazine La Semaine de Suzette beginning with its first issue in 1905. By the end of 1914 ninety-seven stories had appeared in the magazine; hardcover comic books complemented and summarized the year’s stories almost annually from 1913 to 1939. The Bécassine volumes, unlike those featuring the character Astérix after the Second World War, for example, find their roots and inspiration not in American comics or transatlantic life but in the experience of the French and the Parisian middle classes (see figure 1).

Bécassine was depicted as a blockhead—a blundering goodhearted girl with no sense. In her employer’s words: “That Bécassine! No brain, but so much heart!” Bécassine’s first appearance, titled “Bécassine’s Error,” reportedly came from the editor in chief Madame Jacqueline Rivière, who related the story of a blunder made by her own Breton maid which was then illustrated by an in-house artist on the eve of the initial appearance of the magazine. This first tale set the tone for Bécassine stories: her employer, Madame la Marquise de Grand-Air, asked her young Breton maid to watch for the delivery of lobsters (homards) to make sure
they were bright red and fresh; not knowing what *homards* were, Bécassine asked her employer to inspect the new arrivals she had put in the kitchen—they were red, but perhaps not fresh. These new arrivals were not the lobsters, but the guest colonel and his three young sous-lieutenants, all in red jackets. Bécassine’s ignorance proved to have great comedic value. 

She certainly enjoyed great commercial success. Joseph Porphyre Pinchon, who provided expert illustrations, was himself an artist who drew for reviews and newspapers, submitted paintings to the salon of 1894, and was the artistic director of the Paris Opera in 1910–14. Maurice
Langereau wrote the stories under the epigrammatic pen name of Caumery; he was a nephew of the publisher Henri Gautier, who possessed remarkable marketing acumen. Gautier encouraged the custom of giving Bécassine volumes to children at the end of the year by publishing each volume at that time. Gautier distributed 100,000 free copies of the premier magazine issue and sent a beautiful blonde doll to each of the initial one-year subscribers, who numbered 20,000. Bécassine herself was trademarked in 1910, and a doll about 7½ inches tall, in a green costume and Breton coiffe, was soon for sale. Dolls were not the only prewar product: a prize-winning toy called the “dish breaker” had a tiny Bécassine (about 5 inches tall) drop the pile of dishes she carried.

Dropping dishes was typical of this character, whose ineptitude was apparent from the time of her birth. In a village where it was believed that a long nose denoted intelligence, Bécassine had only a little button nose, and her given very Breton name, Annick Labornez, was a play on the word for dull-witted. When her father found out that the milk she adored (purchased from another peasant family) was that of an ass, her father exclaimed, “A little one with no nose, and fed by an ass. She’s going to be an idiot for sure!” And Bécassine did pull some idiotic stunts, such as trying to make whipped cream using a whip. But Caumery also created an extraordinarily sweet character in Bécassine, one whose goodness shone from her earliest days. When prizes were awarded at the end of the school year, Bécassine was awarded the prize for “good character.” And when a visiting dignitary offered 10 francs to the student who would declare herself the least intelligent in school, Bécassine rose and held out her hand. “Give me the 10 francs m’sieu. It’s well known that I am the stupidest!” She then declared that she would give the 10 francs to a poor widow whose husband had been lost at sea the previous week. There was not a dry eye in the house. This dull-witted but sweet girl would become the faithful servant of the Marquise de Grand-Air, benefactress to the village and resident of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris.

In Bécassine’s prewar tales for elite girls, class distinctions were strong to a fault, and peasants and village life were clearly inferior to life in Paris. Only a few village people were somewhat distinguished: Bécassine’s beloved Uncle, for example, served as mayor and former groom of the Marquis de Grand-Air. The rest were ignorant peasants in villages where animals and people lived and played together. There was no greater honor for a village girl like Bécassine than to serve the marquise; as her uncle
recounted, “You see this girl who looks like she’ll be nothing—she has entered into the service of Madame la Marquise. . . . I always knew she would have a brilliant career before her.”

It is certain that the fictional comic character had a great career; it would flower during and after the Great War, but it would inflict a great deal of pain on Bretons in Paris. The name Bécassine comes from bécasse, which denotes a shorebird or snipe but also came to mean a stupid woman and worse. Parisians gave the name of Bécassine to women from Brittany (and Bécassin to the men), who came to be regarded as uniformly stupid, so much so that the *Dictionnaire de patrimoine breton* declared Bécassine to be “silly, naïve, ignorant and clumsy, faithful maid of all work, is the archetype of the backward Breton woman.” Perhaps the most effective defender of Bretons against this image, and against the realities of suffering and isolation, worked through the church.

**A CHAMPION OF BRETONS:**
**FRANÇOIS CADIC AND LA PAROISSE BRETONNE**

So engaged was the cleric François Cadic by Bretons’ situation that in 1897 he founded the Breton parish, which would last until his death in the 1920s. Cadic was the youngest of ten children born of a peasant family in 1864 in the Breton-speaking Morbihan. Ordained shortly before he had come to Paris to finish his training as a historian, Cadic had taken a post at the Catholic University of Paris when the plight of Bretons in Paris persuaded him to form a parish and take up tasks which included fundraising for charitable enterprises, operating a clothing bank and an employment agency, holding meetings for Breton men and women, and publishing a monthly journal. Cadic was an energetic organizer and writer whose *Contes et légendes de la Bretagne* continues to be published and marketed today. Other church organizations devoted themselves to the aid of Bretons, as we will see below, but the Breton parish was the most visible and efficacious.

The monthly *Paroisse bretonne de Paris* began to appear in 1899, providing a bully pulpit for Cadic and to us, a view into the world of the faithful social Catholic that was of premier importance in France, especially to the Breton community. The masthead announced two clear messages. The first, “Evit Doué a gar vro. Pour Dieu et le pays,” used the Celtic Breton language translated into French in an otherwise French-language pub-
lication; this testified to Breton and Catholic loyalty together as one, in Cadic’s words, “brotherhood in the shadow of the parish bell.” The second offered a more complex message, “the Breton Parish is the enemy of emigration. It only cares for Bretons already established in Paris.” Like Cadic, the organization and journal deplored departures from Brittany, yet were devoted to helping compatriots in need of aid.

Cadic himself wrote some telling lead editorials, beginning with one discussing the identity of the new organization. “Brotherhood in the shadow of the parish bell” meant to Cadic that the “instrument of discord,” politics, would be strictly forbidden in the review, yet the organization was of a very particular political stripe. “Here there are only Bretons,” Cadic wrote, “disposed neither to Jews, nor Protestants, nor Freemasons. Sons of French soil, issued from old Celtic stock, we aspire to remain untainted by foreign alloys more than other provincials. That is to say we reject all heterogeneous elements.” Within this exclusively French Breton and Catholic context, Cadic put forward two goals—to provide a place for Bretons, and to be practical. To the first end, news from home, history, legends, and even songs would be published in the review. Second, the charitable works of the Paroisse would help poor compatriots, establish links among middle-class Bretons, and give wealthy Bretons a way to help the less fortunate. Cadic explicitly recognized that the Bretons in Paris included the wealthy, the middle class, and the poor.

A variety of leaders reported on the meetings and fundraising events in the Paroisse bretonne; others contributed poetry and stories, and still others wrote what would become the local news pieces. Brittany was a source of pride as well as of sorrow: Charles Vincent, editor of the Gazette de France, referred to two themes of Breton writing when he claimed that “no other province of France has furnished an equal quantity of great men to all ranks of society,” and moreover that the Bretons’ “grace, vigorous of spirit and body, rich in heart and energy, more fertile than any other, is currently the only one capable of repopulating and regenerating France.” Breton patriots would constantly refer to their great men and their high fertility as points of pride throughout the Third Republic. The famed “barde national” of Brittany, the songwriter, poet, and performer Théodore Botrel, furnished some poetry. His “Breton Wolves” recounted the history of the province in six stanzas, relating how they “bared teeth” at the Roman invader, the Norman hordes, the invading English, the revolutionary enemies of throne and church, and the Prussian invader,
and now, after thirty years of quiet, were ready to avenge once again. The less complex poems by less famous compatriots served as warnings under titles such as “Stay at Home” and “In Danger.”

Good news and bad news from home appeared, with ecclesiastical news taking the lead, including appointments of curés and higher posts. Occasionally there were reports of the opening of religious schools: “in [the diocese of Saint-Brieuc] eight new free Christian schools (two for boys, six for girls) opened in 1898, 4 in 1899, which brings to 208 the number of the schools in the Department; they counted 27,815 students in 1898, making 3,773 more than in 1897,” thus demonstrating the enthusiasm for non-secular education during the Third Republic for which Brittany was well known. Announcements of appointments such as those of notaries and judges appeared. The bad news, with comments of sympathy at misfortunes and disapproval of crime, came in the form of miscellaneous items listed by commune: house fires, murders, thefts, and injurious accidents. Ordinary Bretons like Honoré Guitton furnished almost all the news. Guitton was coming home from the fair in Broome with his wife, son, and two neighbors when suddenly his horse bolted on a bridge and threw itself against the railings; the two neighbors were thrown into the river and got out unwounded; Guitton fell to the road and was killed; his wife broke two legs; “the son is safe and sound.” Other tragedies provoked less sympathy from this Anglophobe and anti-Protestant publication, as with the death of an Englishman at the oyster capital of Concale who had won his bet with friends that he could eat four dozen oysters for lunch but had not lasted the next day.

Cadic saved his real fire for his essays on the situation of Bretons in Paris. An opening essay on the causes of emigration made the fundamental point that Brittany could not support its children, but at the same time Cadic, like other men of the cloth, deplored the “terrible plague” of depopulation and held up Brittany as a region that did not abdicate its duty but rather maintained its fertility. Nonetheless, he cited a paucity of resources for too many people as the first cause of emigration. To this he added a more recent cause: the importation of grain from the United States, Russia, and Canada was undermining the peasantry: “The bread that we eat in Paris is foreign bread.” Third, emigration was among the “traditions de race” in Brittany, for Bretons had gone to sea and explored since the time of Jacques Cartier of Saint-Malo. With the Revolution this stopped, since in this version of French history the Revolution brought on a period in which “the young people stayed home. It was a question of
defending their priests.” Brittany was thus a historical land of potential adventurers, waiting for their next opportunity. The newspapers with word of high urban wages and the railroad provided the way.

Cadic described in loving detail the life of young men before the age of military service—a description worth noting for its images and idyllic understanding of Breton life. Between the ages of ten and twelve, he writes, the boy faithfully follows catechism lessons and perhaps even school taught by the priest (not the secular teacher). He may pick up some notions of the French language that swim around in his head among Breton expressions, “but no matter! To live and die well, a baccalaureate is unnecessary; and then, there are so many Bretons saints [in heaven] who never spoke French!” From eight to fourteen, Cadic continues, the boy’s occupation is to watch the sheep in the meadow. “Ah! The good life!” he wrote, extolling the beauties of the dawn, birdsong, and the meadows. From fourteen to twenty comes the apprenticeship for fieldwork, no less joyous, with harvests spent working alongside compatriots, attending village wedding celebrations, and especially taking part in the pardons, at which one might have the honor of carrying the statue of a saint in a Breton penitential procession. After this hymn of praise to rural youth, life in the army is described as an exile that introduces young men to a life away from home, combining damaging discoveries and the luxury of high salaries, white bread, and meat.

The reasons why young women leave home get short shrift: Cadic writes only that “as for the girls, the reason is altogether different.” He then observes that it is the fashion for Parisians to vacation in Brittany, and then to bring a maid back to the city, and so the naïve women go along. It is orphans who should go, Cadic suggested, once they are convent-trained: “It seems that the religious houses themselves could take on the task of developing their orphans as a prize for export.”

Cadic put himself in the shoes of the newcomers, sensitively imagining their experience as newcomers who lose their faith. The initial step was the first Mass in Paris, where the church and its elegant parishioners provided a grand contrast to the simple and modest village church. The organ and its majestic voice had nothing in common with the liturgical chants of the Breton church. Could the newcomers talk to a priest? Even if they could approach someone so distinguished, they did not dare, lest he not understand their Breton. The standard Parisian Mass was an intimidating first step away from religious practice.

And the interview at the bureau de placement was even more demoraliz-
ing, Cadic wrote, a theme also followed by Mirbeau in *The Diary of a Chambermaid*. Waiting in line, being interviewed by a stranger who seemed to catalogue the applicant’s qualities and inadequacies as if she were a slave on the market in ancient Rome, having her timidity and ignorance of French bring her intelligence into question—all of this was profoundly intimidating. The next step was the street—sleeping on benches, competing with dogs for crusts of bread, and risking arrest. Those able to find a place as a domestic often had the “ill fortune” of finding work for “Jews, Freemasons, or perhaps Protestants.” Employers who tolerated religious practice often left barely enough time for Mass, and others derided their servants’ faith; the Protestant pastor “leapt at the chance to get Breton servants to Temple.” Employers offered no spiritual advice, nor did they attend to the “shameful promiscuity of the sixth floor”: a contrast with the good Breton farmers who would go to Mass together with their servants. The circumstances of domestic work therefore marked the second step “away from God.”

With the search for a more secure life with a spouse and a family came the final departure from faith. The desires of Bretons being modest, they sought work with the railroad or gas companies. This, though, brought the kind of constant labor that destroys dreams, and even worse were the excavating, laboring, and factory jobs. This is why Bretons were regarded as “the pariahs. For them, the gross jobs, the heavy loads, and the extra duties. Their beliefs are the object of public mockery. . . . Riveted to the earth by the labor of a slave, their eyes no longer have the strength to lift toward God.” Alcoholism and moral deprivation on the “vacant lots in Saint-Denis” meant that after fifteen years in the factory, the Breton worker was finished at forty, dead in the hospital, and buried in the common grave of the banlieue. What a contrast with the calm of the Breton cemetery, where the deceased sleep under a granite slab and the eyes of God, side by side with those he knew in life. The nasty end and tragic death found echoes throughout the writings on Bretons in Paris.

As for what had been done for Bretons in Paris before the *Paroisse bretonne*, Cadic was forthright, dramatic, and sarcastic: “nothing, or almost nothing.” Turning to the solid accomplishment of the employment agency under the charge of the Soeurs de la Croix—in principle a service for all young women, but in fact one offered especially for Bretons—the chaplain and sisters themselves came from Brittany for the most part. They fed, housed, and placed domestics for the fee of one franc
per day. Figures attest to the need for such an institution, since six hundred young women had come to the bureau in the past year. With scorn, Cadic attacked the charitable effectiveness of the Sociétés Provinciales, which were multiplying at the turn of the century. His opening salvo was directed at Ernst Renan, apostate writer and founder of *Le dîner celtique*, “born with rays of eloquence, it was extinguished without a sound. May the earth rest lightly upon it.”44 Leftist organizations came in for special ire, branded as relics of 1793 for their “Dreyfusardism,” masonry, anticlericalism, and cosmopolitanism. Ineffectiveness came in for the worst: “the Catholic chapel, the Blancs, Medieval style . . . there everything was old, old people, old ideas, old methods—a real Cluny museum.” This group announced that it would repatriate Bretons, but in five years the association sent home only twenty-five Bretons, at a time when fourteen hundred a year arrived in Paris.

Other tasks were more urgent, Cadic observed. First, one must fight the socialists, competitors for the Breton soul. Socialist journals had recently published a call to Bretons, understanding both their powerful numbers (some 150,000) and the importance of what was called the “Breton question” of the day. Lest the enemy harness the energy and proverbial stubbornness of the Breton, Cadic enunciated a call to action: “repatriate the unhappy, place the workers, evangelize the ignorant, organize Breton parishes.”45 As for the Breton parish, it could not hope to send Bretons home, especially because “workers constitute the noblest portion of our Breton colony.”46 Centralization was an affair for elites, Cadic wrote, but *le peuple* are set in their provinces, be they Auvergnats, Gascons, Savoyards, or Bretons. Bretons are people of a clan, in Paris or anywhere else far from home—and the parish is like the clan. Like French Canadians whose morale had been saved by French priests while working in New England, Bretons in Paris could be saved the same way, “resolving the Breton question.” And so Cadic made an appeal to the Breton-speaking priests of Brittany to work in Paris: “if only . . . 10 would come to Paris, but 10 active, intelligent men resolved to succeed.” “To work, Breton priests, it is time!”47

The Breton parish had hardly a “brilliant beginning” with a February Mass in 1897 attended by twenty people. But from this modest beginning, by the fall of 1899, the parish boasted six hundred active members out of about twelve hundred inscribed. Cadic attributed his success to the ways he went to the people, and to the excellent location, at Notre Dame des
Champs on the boulevard Montparnasse, not far from the station where Bretons disembarked, in a reputedly Breton neighborhood for wealthy and poor alike. The time of the Mass was changed to Sunday afternoons so that domestics and workers could attend. A process of admission was established: one had to be introduced by another Breton, employed, and either born or married to a Breton. The greatest need, and success, was in the placement of domestics. Begun as a society for workers, the parish had become a “Breton society” in the fullest sense of the word.

Cadic catalogued the services of the parish for its members of all classes. First, because Bretons, unlike Auvergnats and Normans, were poor at saving (here Cadic was in agreement with the popular press), there was a société d’épargne, founded in December 1897. Every worker was given a savings book and encouraged to save 1 to 10 francs per month. By the fall of 1899 four hundred members were subscribed; the women were more assiduous savers than the men, and the poorest workers, domestics, had put aside over 1,500 francs. In addition to encouraging savings, the parish arranged discounts with physicians and pharmacies. Wealthy women were the force behind the clothing bank, a vestiaire, also created in the fall of 1897. A consumer’s cooperative gave a slight reduction at bakers, butchers, grocers, and a department store. Members paid to belong and reap these benefits, but fees were in proportion to income—from 10 centimes a year for women domestics to 20 francs for patronesses and “personnes fortunées.” Benefits also accrued to the wealthy, who were granted the same product discounts and had their choice of servants at the employment agency, and to producers, who had an outlet for Breton products. Finally, at the end of 1899 the parish was about to establish a caisse de capitation so that those with a little money could increase their capital.

Cadic’s concern was a united community of the faithful, regardless of their economic station. Consequently, he reminded the wealthy time and time again that they were brothers in Christ of the poor. “In the name of Jesus Christ, children of Brittany, let us love one another!” he exhorted. “Have pity on the poor,” he wrote, “you who are privileged: pity, masters for your servants; pity, employers for your workers.”

Cadic gave a good deal of thought to the emigration of Bretons from their home territories—not only why Bretons departed, but where they should go. As a realist, he rejected repatriation as a solution, seeing that at the close of the nineteenth century about 100,000 Bretons were in Paris, 32,000 in Normandy, 22,000 in Anjou, and 21,000 in the Paris basin.
département of Seine-et-Oise. Cadic loathed, however, the idea of Bretons spending their “endurance, sturdiness, energies and male virtues” beyond the borders of France, where they were sought by emigration agents from Canada, Brazil, and Argentina. The greatest scourge was emigration to the Channel Islands, where Bretons from the Côtes-d’Armor and Ille-et-Vilaine worked by the thousands at vegetable harvests, and to as far north as Edinburgh, where they sold their fresh vegetables. “And who benefits from this force lost to the mother country? The national enemy, the Englishman, and with him Protestantism . . . religion of hypocrites, Tartuffes, and pretenders.” Brittany being a province that produces an abundance of people, this abundance should be kept for the French. Let the English, Germans, and Italians take to the road by the millions to America and Australia, he reasoned: France doesn’t have too many people and can use its own. Cadic suggested two kinds of destinations: those within France ravaged by depopulation (like the Beauce or the Perche, where birthrates were low) or by bad doctrines, like the Saône-et-Loire in Burgundy, where “workers prefer to talk politics than to use their tools.” If Bretons did not remain within France, there were the sunlit alternatives of French colonies: Tunisia, Madagascar, and the grassy highlands of Guinea in West Africa, called Fouta Djallon. In such places the earth would respond to the least efforts of cultivation. Finally, with a priest and parish, Bretons would thrive, “they would found a solid race, rooted to the soil, strong as the rocks of Brittany.” Here, in a few paragraphs, Cadic expressed his eagerness to help his compatriots, his anti-English animus, his anti-Protestantism, his belief in the power of the church, and his faith in the colonial project.

François Cadic wrote out of genuine caring for the poor Bretons in Paris; his concern extended to their bodies, wracked by hunger, alcohol, and disease. He was not alone in pointing to tuberculosis, about which he warned: “Watch out! Paris is the city that kills.” For those concerned with Bretons’ health, tuberculosis took center stage. François Cadic did not stint on dramatic prose when he took up the topic of “an illness, more terrible than the plague, more frightening than cholera, attacks the marrow, exhausts the blood and devours lungs . . . this illness rages particularly among Bretons: it is tuberculosis.” The nurse passes, sees that the patient is no longer breathing, and coldly calls the gravedigger. “Look at the name: usually it’s a Breton.” Citing the work of the doctor Léon Renault, an associate of the Breton parish, Cadic offered shocking morta-
ity statistics for four hospitals in Paris in 1899: 25 Bretons among the 143 tubercular deaths at Cochin (the public assistance hospital for the poor in the Fourteenth Arrondissement), 33 among the 179 at La Charité, 30 among the 107 at Laënnec (also in the Fourteenth), and 43 among the 143 at the Necker (in the Fifteenth). Cadic himself succumbed to tuberculosis in 1929.

Medical Science and Breton Health

Interest in tuberculosis was especially intense in the early years of the twentieth century, when more than thirty-five books on tuberculosis were published each year. France had a higher death rate from tuberculosis than England or Germany, and although tuberculosis mortality had been on the decline in the last decade of the nineteenth century, the decline was slow. David Barnes acutely summarizes the “successive truths” about tuberculosis: in the 1820s it was consumption, or phthisis, viewed as an inscrutable, random killer; in the 1830s it began to be seen as socially discriminating, haunting certain professions and poor neighborhoods; beginning in the 1840s consumptive women were seen as highly sensitive and redeemed by their suffering; and as the Third Republic became established, the disease was understood to be possibly contagious. By around 1900 “tuberculosis was a national scourge, highly contagious, lurking around every corner and symptomatic of moral decay.”

Turn-of-the-century reports targeted slum housing and immoderation in drink as the sanitary and moral roots of tuberculosis, along with practices such as spitting. These foci were part of a larger concern with low birthrates, moral decay, and dangers represented by the working classes, and “tuberculosis allowed all these diverse and threatening themes to be assembled into a single coherent package.”

Newcomers to urban life were regarded as especially crucial to this “single coherent package,” since by leaving home they were particularly likely to lower the birthrate, cast aside their virtues, drink too much, and live in slums, where they were vulnerable to the poverty that bred tuberculosis. And no one was more likely to turn from a healthy rural dweller to a dissolute and sickly city dweller than the Breton, whose poverty was legendary. In Le Havre, the tuberculosis capital of France, according to Barnes, Bretons were at the top of the list of consumptives, reported in 1868, and Breton tuberculosis was the topic of more than one medical
dissertation. That by Georges Bourgeois in 1904 linking the rural exodus to tuberculosis saw Breton migrants as especially vulnerable, because they were characterized by “poor hygiene, alcoholism, and lack of moral resistance.”

The physician Arsène-Guillaume Trégoat wrote in the spirit of the times with his thesis *L’immigration bretonne à Paris: Son importance, ses causes, ses conséquences intéressantes au point de vue médical, de quelques moyens propres à la diminuer* (1900). Like Jean Lemoine, who had written about Bretons in the previous decade, Trégoat opened with a recollection of vacations in Brittany, and like Lemoine he claimed a Breton identity; in this case, he was also a medical student and so doubly interested in writing his thesis on peasant departures for cities, especially Paris. In the little spots in the Côtes-d’Armor, he began, where everyone knows everything about everyone else, hardly a week goes by when you don’t hear “Guillaume or Yves Marie so-and-so just left for Paris.” The few who do return, he continues, usually do so on doctor’s orders—pale, thin, and in search of better air for their health, which was compromised in the big city. Some do better, of course, returning for a pardon or a vacation, former peasants and farm boys now spruced up and proud of their bourgeois clothes, and leaving again with a brother, sister, or neighbor in tow.

As a physician and a Breton who remained in contact with his home territories, Trégoat demands our attention. He opens his thesis with thanks to his thesis director, doctors, librarian, and the chaplain of four Breton parishes in Paris. In assessing the causes of emigration, he points to military service, for taking young men from home and exposing them to other ways of life, but he rejects notions of easy money and distaste for agriculture; rather, he emphasizes the poor soil of Brittany and Brittany’s extraordinarily high birthrate, which produced families so large that they were difficult to support. In his negative view of high birthrates, the doctor differs from the cleric. He also departs from Léon Renault’s findings of alarmingly high mortality from tuberculosis in Breton hospitals in 1899 by adding findings presented to the Medical Society of Hospitals in January 1900; he showed that immigrants and Bretons did have very high mortality, but also that the very highest mortality was in hospitals in Breton neighborhoods. There was an urban geography to immigration and tubercular mortality in Paris.

A core narrative, an archetypal tale of decline and death, has a strong
presence in Trégoat’s thesis; in this narrative migration to Paris is followed by decline, physical and moral disintegration, even death. Contagion rather than inherited weakness is responsible for tuberculosis, and Paris itself is at fault, since the vast majority of victims are newcomers, most of whom have healthy elders. Trégoat would agree with Cadic that Paris is the city that kills. Indeed, migration from countryside to city is one of the “two fundamental dangers” behind tuberculosis. The second is alcohol: according to a report to the Medical Society of Hospitals in 1899, 88 percent of tuberculars abused alcohol. And, Trégoat reasoned, “When he leaves Brittany, the Breton, however, is not an alcoholic. He likes to drink, it’s true; he has a very strong penchant to get drunk, that’s incontestable; and too often, market evenings or in the weighty circumstances of the draft lottery . . . you see him shouting and making a ruckus, being in a state of great intoxication in this period of excitement; but that only happens on occasion and the rest of the time he doesn’t drink. In Paris, he becomes a chronic drunk and here again we have seen it’s often tuberculosis that ends the story.” In the end Trégoat goes to a physician in the Côtes-d’Armor, whose stories relate the deadly combination of back-breaking urban work, poverty, and a lack of moral fiber. The first is the story of Jean H., valet de chambre in Paris for five years after his military service, who was sick for three months before he returned home; from a healthy family, he was dead within two months. The second story is that of Marie H., a single mother who went to Paris to work as a wet nurse and then stayed on with her employers as a cook after her term as a nurse had finished; four years later she was back in Brittany at her sister’s home, where her health only went downhill. Marie is the only woman mentioned in this thesis and not a drinker, but as a single mother she was, Trégoat implies, on the slippery slope of moral degradation even before she left Brittany. Trégoat concludes that tuberculosis is likely to be contracted in Paris, either because these Bretons were particularly exposed to the disease or because they were weakened by their urban ways.

**Breton Religion:**

*A faith to promote, to ridicule, to protect*

What could protect the Bretons in Paris? The abbé Cadic and Catholic conservatives would advise adherence to Christian standards. To the Société La Bretagne, founded in 1884, faith was the answer, particularly if
accompanying by virtue. Like the Breton parish, the Société embraced a paternal concern for the poor Bretons of Paris, yet it had a less social orientation than the abbé Cadic, and its leadership was drawn from the conservative Breton nobility. At the turn of the century the count de Chateaubriand served as president and the baron de Kertanguy as treasurer; the vice-presidents were the count Albert de Mun and the count Alain de Guébriant, and the baronesse de Kertanguy and countesses de Quelen and de Kermaingant provided leadership as well. The society journal came to advertise a genealogical and nobility researcher on the back page, a M. Le Dault, who could provide historical documents on Breton families.

The vulnerable faith of the poor Breton in Paris was the focus of the Société. The loss of faith was something of a puzzle, reflected the abbé Guillevic, head of the school in the inland bretonnant Morbinnais village of Priziac, particularly because Bretons were justly known worldwide “for their capacity to undertake the harshest of tasks; they are good workers, good soldiers, good sailors; they confront fire on the field of battle without fear and gladly face storms at sea; they back down neither to fatigue, nor illness, nor death. But when it comes to religion, when God is in question, their soul, their eternity, then they are afraid, they tremble and hide; a joke disconcerts them, teasing makes them blush and . . . they abandon the cause of God.” The occasion for Guillevic’s speech was the annual pardon—the Breton religious ritual procession—in celebration of the mother of the Virgin Mary at the Church of Sainte-Anne-de-la-Maison-Blanche in the Thirteenth Arrondissement. Not unusual, such occasions were faithfully reported in the society’s monthly publication, Bretoned Paris. For example, it featured in a special issue the pilgrimage in March 1908 of Parisian Bretons to the Basilica of Sacré-Cœur in Montmartre, presided over by the archbishop of Rennes, himself a Breton, where over eight thousand attendees sang Breton hymns. One heard from leading members of the society: the following summer, a report of M. de Estourbeillon’s discourse exalting Joan of Arc and her love for Bretons was followed by an article by the Vicomtesse de Pitry on the virtues of Joan of Arc—who began by noting her modesty and remarked on “the contrast between Joan of Arc and most women today.”

Virtue was a key to the Société La Bretagne. The journal extolled the virtues of Bretons like the boy of seventeen who walked from Quimperlé in the Morbihan to Paris to seek work; the trip took four weeks and cost
the boy his only 20 francs, and he never missed a Sunday Mass en route. Bretons needed to help each other, the association’s placement bureau urged—but it added that one could only recommend the right kind of Breton for jobs, because if a drunk were hired the reputation of Bretons would be ruined. “On the contrary, if only good ones are recommended, the quality of being a Breton will become synonymous with an excellent employee, the Office will prosper, and businessmen and industrialists will use it more and more; that is the goal that each Breton in Paris should seek to attain.” The same was true in the employment office for domestic servants, where “it is necessary to be very circumspect and well-informed, because obviously you cannot push charity to the point of recommending persons who are not recommendable.”

A clear virtue of the Bretons was their high fertility, a point of pride in the Bretoned Paris in this age when French social policy was so concerned with depopulation. One article published in 1909 on the population since 1906 included detailed birth and death data along with the argument that France owed its good health to Brittany: without Brittany, France would have 6,722 more deaths than births every year, but as it was, France gained 24,997 people. Brittany, in short, saves France. “We will only know the [exact number of emigrations] in 1911, with the next census. But in the meanwhile . . . let us confirm, and rejoice in confirming that Celtic blood is not thinning out, because it gives in Brittany alone an increase of 13,864 and we are not talking about Bretons who are born of Celtic blood in the other Breton cities: Paris and the Seine, Le Havre, Angers, le Mans, etc.” The author of this article denigrated lazy people from other regions, who no longer had children and left for Paris, turning their work over to foreigners.

Aid provided by the society was meant to help people stay on the right path: it included an employment bureau for women in domestic service, another for men in search of work, a clothing bank, and meetings for Bretons in Paris. There was the Association of Saint Anne for domestic servants, and monthly Sunday services for Bretons in several parishes throughout the city. Six nuns carried out home visitations in these parishes, which were enumerated in the society publication, along with baptisms, first communions, repatriations and placement of children, and visits to families and the ill. Visits were expanded to Saint-Denis in the fall of 1905, where all Bretons reportedly got to know Sister Anne, because she was celebrated there in July 1913 in a Breton program with
singing, a speech, and a raffle. \footnote{93} In the meanwhile Saint-Denis was an area of real concern, because it was poor and had a strong socialist impulse—so Breton services there in the crypt of Saint-Denis-de-l’Estrée were reported with special interest. \footnote{94}

The Société La Bretagne was virulently opposed to departures from Brittany, and it had its own analysis of emigration. A series of articles in 1909 did not blame the experience of military service for emigration as many others had done, particularly because over half the compatriots who went to Paris were women. Rather, the Capitaine de Courcy, secretary of the Société and author of the articles on Breton population, laid the blame at the feet of primary education—or rather primary educators: “Because they wear a *redingote* and a melon hat, imagining themselves be a superior race to country people, they cram a hodgepodge of summaries into the heads of their unfortunate pupils . . . persuading them that their ancestors were nothing but dunces, their parents are imbeciles.” These were the urban, anticlerical teachers, but even the good ones, the *instituteurs libres*, were obligated by the curriculum to impose a crushing program on the students, neglecting the perspective of life in the fields. \footnote{95} A second article blamed large industries, “especially in the factories around Paris with their fictive bait of large salaries.” It was rural industry which must be resuscitated with electrification: this would put small machines in the home that could employ not only the father but also the wife and daughter. \footnote{96}

The advice to readers, to priests in Brittany, to nuns: when you hear about young men or women who want to go to Paris, have them contact us and do not hesitate to ask for advice—we will never refuse. But we will suggest that they remain *au pays*. Women’s emigration was a particular danger, because it had been on the increase for the last twenty years. “Women, especially girls, are devoured by that sickness that is the need to change place and it persists during immigration.” \footnote{97} “How many, among the hundreds of Bretons who arrive each year, so kind and so good,” de Courcy had asked years earlier, “do we find in the hospital or wandering the streets of the big city with no resources, the city which is, for girls left on their own, what the sea is for sailors: the great devourer of human lives!” \footnote{98} The solution was to stay at home, to stay in the fields, and remain devout.

Yet faithful Catholicism was hardly a given in turn-of-the-century Paris; religion was controversial, as separation of church and state was
debated. Satirical journals such as L’assiette au beurre, published from 1901 to 1912, had a field day with the abuses of the church. Designed for artists, intellectuals, and members of the liberal and intellectual bourgeoisie, it had a circulation of 25,000 to 40,000 copies per weekly issue, reaching many more readers than Breton publications of any stripe. With a focus on “current social problems,” it kept alcoholism as a “a permanent theme,” yet critiques of the church and advocacy of the separation of church and state were central, particularly until 1905. The journal was best known for its subversive and destructive humor, and the bitterness—if not nastiness—of its illustrations, L’assiette au beurre chose as its target “Bretagne—le people noir” for an issue in October 1903, the sole issue devoted to one province of France. The anticlerical essayist and poet Laurent Tailhade provided a two-page text and some captions for thirteen illustrations by Evilio Torent (see figure 2).

The main target of the issue was Breton Catholicism, the “Christian fetishism” that had marked Brittany and Bretons with “their filth, their piousness, their taste for the Eucharist and strong liquors, the stink of their huts, their aversion to baths. . . .” The author opens his detailed attack on the clergy by calling the congregations “swarming vermin . . . that make us blush to be classed in the same species.” Alcohol and the church both come under fire, and in the end the focus turns to Bretons themselves: “sad little groups, irresponsible victims of the priest and of alcohol!” A series of insults follows: “There are no better Christians than this Breton trash; none is more refractory to civilization. Idolatrous, miserly, sloppy, sneaky, alcoholic and patriotic, the amoral hypocrite doesn’t eat, he feeds; he doesn’t drink, he gets drunk; he doesn’t wash, he greases himself; he doesn’t reason, he prays, and carried away by prayer, he falls into the deepest abject state. He is the Negro of France.” The author holds out hope in the end that “the dawn is breaking” in Brittany and that the Brittany of Renan and Lammenais will reject the evil shadow of its present Christianity. The illustrations depict a Brittany of sexual and religious hypocrites, alcoholics, and stink, and clergy who are “insolent black crows.” Envy is the “very Christian saint”; sleeping alone is torture; the sailor tells his wife “try to be faithful”; God is the “last lover of naughty old women”; cider is confused with holy water; and the priest finds a husband for the mother of his child.

The more mainstream press had also featured Breton religion the year before, when L’Illustration—an important weekly that gave great atten-
tion to royal families, colonial affairs, and reflections of high society—
published long articles about parishes in revolt against the series of laws
that secularized French public education.94 During its long life from 1840
to 1940 L’Illustration did not use satirical drawings but rather realistic
drawings, engravings, and photographs for articles on life in Paris, in
France, and throughout the world.95 The Law of Associations, passed in
1901, demanded that teaching congregations seek authorization from
Parliament or face dissolution, and banned members of unauthorized
orders from the classroom. By the end of July 1902 the unauthorized
schools run by male religious orders were closed without incident—but
the Bretons of the Finistère mounted great collective and even armed resistance to the closing of schools run by a valued Breton female order, the Filles du Saint-Esprit. This resistance made the Paris press: it was the object of three running issues of *L'Illustration* in August 1902.

The Breton correspondent Rémy Saint-Maurice (who had published a series of articles about Breton poverty earlier in the year) reported that the region of the Léon in the northwestern Finistère was alive with rumors of violence at the beginning of August; he was advised to stay away, lest he be shot before he reached his destination of Ploudaniel. This commune was known to be one of the Catholic bastions in the Léon area of the rural Finistère. In the town of Landerneau, where Saint-Maurice wrote, a woman in her sixties predicted that the decrees would be carried out, and then showed Saint-Maurice the revolver in her shopping bag with which she promised to shoot the first man who crossed the threshold of the congregation. In front of the building women of the people, the bourgeoisie, and the aristocracy were stationed on benches, doing needlework while they guarded access to the convent and awaited the troops. The next week Saint-Maurice’s story was accompanied by six photographs, and related the “Execution of the Decrees in Brittany.” On 7 August troops were heard arriving in Landerneau at 2:00 a.m., and by 3:00 a.m. peasant coiffes and Breton hats were already in the main square, the crowd blocking the way of the troops and shouting, “Vive les sœurs!” The government deputy read the decree of the law in front of the convent door once the troops had cleared the way, and then read it again to the mother superior once entry had been gained. The mother superior called the sisters, who came out of their cells weeping, knelt, received a blessing from her in front of the troops, and left—taken into the homes of their supporters. Illustrations included a full-page drawing of the mother superior blessing the sisters before their dispersal, with officers standing along the wall, and another drawing of the sisters and their protectors in the town square. Saint-Maurice also reported on the village of Crozon, to the west, and included illustrations from Crozon and Ploudaniel, where barricades had been mounted.

A final story in *L'Illustration* recounted what the author called a “typical expulsion,” summarizing the closures in Ploudaniel, Saint-Méen, and Folgoët, as well as other locations in the region: announcements from lookouts posted in the belfry, summations at the doors of the convent, cries in response, the demolition of the door, followed by the meeting
inside with the mother superior, the rector of the parish, and the deputy or senator—and at the end, the moving exit of the sisters, “saluted as respectfully by their expellers as by their defenders.” There were battles, Saint-Maurice noted, but fortunately no blood; some rocks were thrown, but the principal arms were the Bretons’ buckets of dirty water and garbage thrown at the troops. A sympathetic reflection closed the story: “It’s finished for the present, these expulsions of the sisters for which the broader public does not understand the necessity. No more than it can understand the tactic of the congregations that ceded with good grace here and resisted there, without this difference having been explained. The decision goes to the court of the Conseil d’État. When it will have made a judgment perhaps we will know what really is the law and legality in this deplorable conflict.” The mainstream Parisian press was amazed but not distressed by Bretons’ show of support for the church. This expensive illustrated publication, whose subsequent issue featured a cover illustration of a baron’s “Mass at 2700 Meters” in the Pyrenees, purported to be as puzzled by state actions as by Breton sensibilities, however unusual those Breton sensibilities may have been.

Early cinema also targeted Brittany, creating exotic and dramatic tales for the Parisian audience. Between 1908 and 1914, film studios like Pathé and the Gaumont turned out documentaries and stories featuring Brittany more than other regions. Filmed in studios of Vincennes, in the Bois de Boulogne, in southern France, or on the beaches of Dieppe in Normandy, these films related romantic and exotic tales. Eric Le Roy comments on the condescension embodied in these films: “Everyone dies at sea, women only pray to forget their sorrow, illness, alcohol and idleness ravage families and poverty reigns everywhere. But thanks to faith and God happiness makes its appearance and the miserable are aided.”

These simple, benighted folks that Parisians saw on screen were not those they saw in the city. The core Parisian images of Bretons were neither the suffering screen actors nor religious folk in revolt but rather the ubiquitous workers.

**Bretons in Paris during the Belle Époque**

At the turn of the century Paris had a place for millions of workers in its rich and varied economy, an economy in which the banlieue was increasingly important. The city and banlieue were known for their indus-
try and artisanal production, yet a growth of service work also marked the period between the turn of the century and the outbreak of the First World War. More men and women labored in domestic service and transportation services in this increasingly polished capital city. Although working conditions were harsh, and in many cases miserable, the broad range of occupations gave a place for every kind of worker, from the rag picker who lived in the zone on the outskirts of the city to the merchant in the luxurious apartments of First Arrondissement. Parisians were everywhere in this economy, but they certainly had a place of privilege in skilled artisanal work. Many newcomers had their regional specialties: the census testifies to the predominance of the Auvergnats as barkeeps and restaurateurs, and of the famous masons from the Creuse in the building trades.

Bretons too had a particular place in this labor force, but it was not among the skilled laborers or property owners. Most striking was the place of Breton women in domestic service—the single most important service occupation, providing a place for nearly 100,000 women in the city proper in 1901 and in 1911 (and another 150,000 on the outskirts). Although fewer than 5 percent of the city’s people were from Brittany, Breton women were between one-eighth and one-sixth of the domestic servants and cooks in Paris and the Seine in the years before the First World War; half the Breton working women labored as domestic servants or cleaning women. By 1911 over fourteen thousand Breton domestics labored in the city, and nearly six thousand more were cooks like Yvonne Yven, whose story opened chapter 2. They were so important to this ubiquitous occupation that the bonne bretonne became a character whose real existence provided the grain of truth on which this stereotype thrived. Eighteen years after the publication of Zola’s *Pot Bouille*, as we have seen, the Breton maid was portrayed as an exploited but salacious sexual being in Octave Mirbeau’s *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1900), and as the lovable fool in the long-lived cartoon for girls, *Bécassine*. Breton men worked as domestics as well, but in much smaller numbers, and they made up a much smaller proportion of male domestics. It was the Bécassine, like Yvonne Yven, who was most noticeable in Paris.

The needle trades were an important domain for women in Paris, but Bretons were barely visible in it, because the couturière lived in her own quarters, and so was usually not a single newcomer to the city but a woman who could rent her own place or live with her family. The Breton
women who made up most of those in the needle trades were part of the longest-lived and best-established migration streams: those from Gallo-
speaking upper Brittany. They came from the Ille-et-Vilaine, home to the
capital city of Rennes, and from the Loire-Atlantique, home to the city of
Nantes. These were the women who were able to make living arrange-
ments through the contacts they had established in the city or by living
with their family. Of the Breton women laboring in Paris, 25 percent
worked in the needle trades, half of these as couturières. Nonetheless, all
the Breton couturières together—3,300 in 1901 and 4,701 in 1911—were
only about 8 percent of the women in Paris who sewed for a living.  

The most pointed specialty for Breton women, albeit a rare one, was
hospital work—the occupation of Marie Lepioufle, whose story opened
this chapter. This was hardly easy work—scrubbing floors, emptying bed-
 pans, cleaning patients—and many people like Marie’s aunt felt that the
hospitals were disreputable places where men and women mixed freely.
Some parents approved of hospital employment, however, thinking that
their daughters would be safe because hospitals offered lodging and in
many cases work with nuns. Before the war hospital nurses were regarded
as being much like maids, with a patina of hygienic principles—“Bécassine
in the hospital,” in the words of the historian Yvonne Knibiehler. Even
in a study of his compatriots, the abbé Gautier remarked that among the
numerous infirmiers and infirmières listed in the medical professions, most
had no formal medical training. Nonetheless, they were thick on the
ground: in 1901 over a fifth of female medical professionals were from
Brittany—nearly fourteen hundred women in the Seine, and over eleven
hundred in Paris.  

As the chaplain of the Breton parish in Versailles remarked, Breton
men did not have the same reputation for rectitude and modesty that
served many Breton women, so the men had more trouble getting jobs,
and many became day laborers working at the worst jobs—shoveling
earth, cleaning septic tanks and sewers, sweeping the streets, and clearing
garbage. When figures for 1911 for day laborers were published, Breton
men numbered 4,300 in the Department of the Seine (about 9 percent of
the total) and nearly 1,900 in the city (about 8 percent of the total). 
Breton women figured prominently among journalières, in about the
same proportions. Journalier was an occupational category that was
nearly twice as important in the banlieue than in the city, which confirms
Lenard Berlanstein’s observation that it was important to the factories of
the banlieue; there the work of hauling, stocking, and piling was assigned to journaliers, who were hired by the job. This was irregular, debilitating, and often dangerous work.\textsuperscript{112}

If Breton men had a specialty, it was transportation rather than manufacturing: the largest single group enumerated was in the employ of the railroads at the turn of the century—over 3,500 in the Seine, and over 1,850 in Paris itself.\textsuperscript{113} To work for a chemin de fer was to have a secure and desirable job: in the opinion of the chaplain cited above, employees were “considered like bourgeois Bretons.”\textsuperscript{114} A decade later over one-eighth of railroad workers in the Seine and in Paris were from Brittany—5,050 in the Seine, and nearly 2,800 in Paris.\textsuperscript{115}

The Chemin de Fer Métropolitain employed a wide range of men while the Métro was under construction; workers built 80 kilometers of track and 155 stations in Paris between 1898 and 1910, to say nothing of tunnels, viaducts, and bridges. About 15 percent of this pioneer generation of workers who were hired before the Great War came from Brittany.\textsuperscript{116} Most were from rural areas, but the company needed employees at all levels of skill and training. One employee, the son of a storekeeper in Rennes, was a navy veteran and graduate of the École des Mécaniciens in Brest who was hired on in 1898 and rose to become a depot chief by 1905. Another, the son of illiterate peasants, arrived about 1900 and worked successively as a groom, a coachman, a machinist, and finally the driver of a gas-engine bus during the Great War.\textsuperscript{117} Not only was there a great range of workers, but the work itself also evolved. Elise Feller, the historian of this generation, observes that “the depots that had immense stables, with the sounds and warmth of horses night and day, with the odors of hay and manure, so familiar to young rural, were transformed or even rebuilt to accommodate the cold electric motors of the trams, and later the multitude of thundering busses.” Men like the groom who became a coachman and then a machinist “passed brutally from a world that still worked at the horse’s pace to an electrified and mechanized universe [and] must have shown an astonishing capacity for adaption and skill acquisition.”\textsuperscript{118}

The world of Paris transport was in evolution. And although hardly bourgeois, carters, coachmen, delivery men, and the drivers of coaches for hire had an important place in the Paris economy and were even more important among Breton men, who numbered over 3,300 in the Department of the Seine (accounting for about 10 percent of the total) and
nearly 2,700 in the city itself (about 7 percent of the total), and whose numbers increased during the subsequent decade. François Michel, a son of the Breton countryside whose story opened this chapter, was one of these men; he passed the nursing exams but preferred to do carting work for the hospitals, which allowed him to work with horses.

**FOURTEENTH ARRONDISSEMENT**

Bretons worked everywhere in the city. Was there a Breton Paris by 1900? “Of course there is a Breton Paris that is, there are neighborhoods where their presence, often dictated by workplace, is more important than elsewhere,” Alain Faure writes. Yet these were hardly enclaves: in 1911 the census counted 108,000 Bretons, of whom 13,600 were in the Sixth and Fourteenth Arrondissements—12.6 percent of the total. Bretons also gathered in the Thirteenth, Batignolles, and Montmartre, but there was no massive grouping. And although there were over 8,000 Bretons in the Fourteenth Arrondissement by 1911, half of whom lived in the crowded Plaisance neighborhood, people born in Brittany accounted for only 6 percent of the Plaisance and just over 5 percent of the Fourteenth.

Their presence was even more scanty on the police blotters of 1910, although the lively nightlife of the Plaisance left its mark. Drunk and disorderly, yes, but Bretons also appeared for emergency hospitalization, work disputes, and loss of papers. They were written up as both perpetrators and victims of theft. Women no longer dominated those who had the attention of the police, but they held their own among the drunken and disorderly and those who had to be hospitalized. Everyone arrested for vagrancy or clandestine prostitution was a woman, and women’s situations reflected the pitfalls of urban life, as shown by the experience of two childless widows: one, fifty-four years old, was arrested for vagrancy and asked for repatriation after four months in Paris without work; the other was picked up at 1:30 in the morning while sleeping out by the fortifications. Things were much the same at the Montparnasse police station, except that men had an exclusive hold on arrests for drunkenness. There Marcel Gestin, a baker’s assistant from a village in the French-speaking Morbihan, first drew the attention of the police in February just before 4:00 in the morning, when he called the police a “bande de vaches” (and those were his most polite words). Two months later he was back, this time for beating up a male nurse in a bar.
tion for docility, they doled out their share of abuse to police, particularly when they were in their cups. They certainly were not eager for police supervision; indeed, a combination of pride and shame was probably behind the behavior of Jeanne Perrier, twenty-two, from a small and remote village in the outer Finistère. Three times arrested for clandestine prostitution, once in the Plaisance neighborhood and twice in Montparnasse, she steadfastly refused to name her parents—in this she was unique. 

The Gare Montparnasse was on the front lines in Paris, and so the neighborhood saw newcomers fresh from the bretonnant countryside, like the farmer Louis Cochard, forty-six; Cochard came in to report that he had met two men on the station platform who followed him to a urinal on a nearby boulevard and lifted his wallet, containing 90 francs and his round-trip ticket. This bumpkin must have caused some amusement: his situation was quite unlike that of most marginal families illuminated by the police blotters, such as that of a woman laborer, fifty-five, who had come to Paris from a village in the central Côtes-d’Armor the month before, first staying with her son in Versailles and then with her daughter, a nurse in the Fourteenth, before being taken off to the psychiatric hospital Sainte-Anne. Other incidents appear—violence between spouses, a father fighting removal of his children to the office of public assistance, a wet nurse seeking assurance that her baby at home, unexpectedly being bottle-fed, was being cared for properly. But for the most part in these neighborhoods, it was a lively nightlife and drinking that did the most to keep the police station occupied.

**Bretons Marry in Paris**

As pointedly as Bretons were set apart in the eyes of men of science, the cloth, medicine, and the pen, were they cut off from others when they married? Was the Paris of 1910 a melting pot, or was it a place for colonies of provincials? And how about Bretons? How had it changed since 1890 for those who married? Alain Faure argues that Paris was a melting pot, even more so in 1910 than it had been twenty-five years before. From his study of over five thousand marriages in 1910–11, Faure writes that “what can be clearly confirmed is that endogamy is a myth. The norm is mixing.” All the debate that remains is about the limits and contours of intermarriage.
married someone from their home department in 1885; Faure found that only about 15 percent married someone from their home department in 1910–11, and only about 25 percent married someone from their home region. But like Garden, Faure also contends that Bretons had stronger endogamy than was the norm.∞≤Ω The Bretons of Saint-Denis and of the Fourteenth Arrondissement demonstrate that marriage patterns could have very different contours even within one group of provincials.

In the Belle Époque the Bretons of the Fourteenth Arrondissement continued to marry “out”; of the 197 marriages in 1910, three-quarters joined Bretons with a partner born outside their home region. As with the provincials in Faure’s study of the Eleventh Arrondissement, only about a quarter of marriages involved regional compatriots. Moreover, nearly a third of Bretons in the Fourteenth married a Parisian.∞≥≠ But the migration stream had changed: more marriage partners from the Finistère and Morbihan joined those from the Côtes-d’Armor, as the proportion from the French-speaking upper Breton departments stayed about the same. The 160 Bretonnes and 89 Bretons in the Fourteenth were distinct from each other, because the men, as in 1890, were likely to marry another Breton and the women were likely to “marry out.”∞≥∞ And these were older brides—older than Marie Lepioufle, the Breton nurse who married at about twenty-one. The brides of the Fourteenth married, on average, when they were nearly twenty-six (see Appendix, table 2).∞≥≤

Like many men and women in working-class Paris, and like Bretons who had married twenty years before in the Fourteenth Arrondissement, many of those brides and grooms had lived together in consensual unions, since half of them lived at the same address before their wedding—a few more than twenty years earlier. Some of these unions produced babies, but fewer than before in 1890, when a quarter of all marriages were also the occasion to legitimize a child. In 1910 this was true of only about 15 percent of marriages. It may be that Bretons were less likely to have children before they married because they were becoming more prosperous, and Breton women were becoming more protected by better earnings and more effective networks. Yet still, only a few lived with their mother or father.∞≥≥

Most Breton brides who married in the Fourteenth Arrondissement married a man from outside Brittany, and these brides earned their living as cooks or needle workers, like the Mouraud sisters from the Bretonnant town of Guingamp in the Côtes-d’Armor. Their parents had died by
March 1910, when the eldest, Victorine, married a mechanic from the Yonne in Burgundy, son of rentiers. Victorine, a thirty-two-year-old cook, lived on the broad rue d’Alésia, just around the corner from the groom, who was five years her junior. All four witnesses seem to have been secured by Victorine: two lived in her building, a government white-collar worker and a rentier (either of whom could have been her employer); the other two lived closer to the center of town in the same building, a widow lady shopkeeper and Victorine’s sister, a dressmaker named Marie, twenty-two.134 Marie too married a mechanic—a Parisian two years her senior who lived across town in the Twentieth Arrondissement with his parents, a mechanic and a laundress. The groom supplied two witnesses: his sister, herself a dressmaker, and a typographer friend who also lived at his address in the Twentieth; Marie’s brother-in-law, now an electrician, and a library employee stood up for her. Victorine probably met her husband in the neighborhood, and perhaps Marie met her husband through her future brother-in-law—we will never know, although it is safe to conclude that these were Parisian courtships. By all appearances, at any rate, the Mouraud sisters, like most Breton brides, had bright and secure futures in Paris with skilled-laborer husbands and, in Marie’s case, a family of in-laws.135

Many of the men who married fellow Bretons worked in delivery, in carting, or as horse grooms, and as many worked for the railroad as well.136 Their brides were less likely to work in the needle trades, and more likely to be domestic servants or cooks than those who married non-Bretons. Typically, Auguste Blonsard, a coachman, seemed to choose a life of work with horses in transportation services. In May 1910 he married Anne Fiquet, from a village near his inland birthplace, also in the Morbihan in upper Brittany; the two were born one year apart, and both lived at number 27 in the crowded rue Vandamme near the Gare Montparnasse, where Anne was a cook. Their parents—village farmers in Auguste’s case, a widowed housekeeper in Anne’s—communicated their permission for the wedding but did not attend. Auguste’s coachman brother Henri, who lived in the same building, served as a witness along with a neighboring coachman. Two horse grooms who lived in the same building across town also served as witnesses. Like François Michel and Marie Lepioufle, this couple could well have met in Paris, but even if they did, their solidarity could also have been rooted in their shared home area.137
of whom came to Paris at the urging of a sibling, does suggest connections among brothers and sisters like Auguste and Henri Blonsard, or Victorine and Marie Mouraud; indeed many siblings were apparent in the remarkable subgroup of Breton brides and grooms who worked as nurses.

Eighteen Breton nurses, male and female, married in the Fourteenth Arrondissement in 1910. Some married other nurses, others married fellow Bretons, and still others married provincials or Parisians. Many worked for the Assistance Publique, in the St. Vincent de Paul foundling asylum and children’s hospital, or at the Maternité in the Fourteenth, but they also staffed other hospitals and some lived independently. Almost all were women, and most came from the Côtes-d’Armor. Philomène Le Borgne lived at the St. Vincent de Paul hospital when she married her fellow nurse Dominique Burneau, from the Haute-Saône in eastern France. Philomène was twenty-nine, the groom thirty-four, and both were from agricultural families with two living parents, Philomène’s in their village near the sea in upper Brittany. Three nurses witnessed the wedding, including Philomène’s sister and a male nurse who lived and worked at the same hospital; another male nurse lived nearby. What set nurses apart are their ties with their fellow nurses and their siblings, as revealed by wedding witnesses; because many nurses lived in the hospital, they had a sort of workplace solidarity that was rare among other groups of Bretons at this time. The presence of siblings, but not parents, at their weddings signals that nursing—like work with the Métro and the railroad—was a significant entry occupation for the generation that moved to Paris. And like many Bretons in Paris, these came from agricultural families. The trajectory of their lives constituted a true break from that of their parents.

Those Breton men who married women from the provinces or from Paris seem to have been relatively well placed in the Parisian economy. Many had white-collar work, others had skilled jobs, and fewer would be in delivery and transportation. Their brides were often themselves clerks, seamstresses, or cooks. Jules Daniel, twenty-eight, was among these: a Breton man with a secure job, a postal worker from an inland village in the French-speaking Côtes-d’Armor, son of a day laborer. In the spring of 1910 he married a Parisian dressmaker who lived in the same house as he—a young painter’s daughter, seventeen, who resided with her parents. The bride had two relatives at the wedding, and (judging from their
surnames) two fellow Bretons stood up for Jules Daniel. Like Marie Mouraud he had moved from a Breton village to secure work in the capital, married into a Paris family, and was unlikely to return to the Côtes-d’Armor.

SAINT-DENIS

The Breton community in Saint-Denis reached its peak before the Great War. As the city’s population grew from nearly 61,000 to over 71,000 between 1901 and 1911, Bretons became 10.9 percent of the electorate of Saint-Denis. At least among adult males, Bretons were twice as important to Saint-Denis as they were to the Fourteenth Arrondissement. Many of them lived in the crowded and unsanitary houses like those on the rue des Poissonniers. Twenty-three households lived at number 59, for example, over a third of them supported by people who worked at the Combes tannery down the street at number 50—a couple of tanners, a carter, and day laborers. A dozen of the households were Breton, with characteristic Breton names such as Le Goff, Legoray, and Lezoray. A few of the children in the building were born in Saint-Denis. Other adults were from northern France, Lyon, the East, and in two cases Paris. Dwellings like this provided the context for life, if not the melting pot, for the proletariat of Saint-Denis.

People lived in close proximity and knew the details of each other’s lives, and although they may have hesitated to interfere when there was violence between adults (and indeed, did not do so), they came forward when children were abused. In one such case on the police blotter, the concierge living below the tanner from central Brittany, thirty-six, reported on his abuse of his widowed lover’s three-year-old; another woman in the building also testified, and a third opined that the abuser “is a brute and the child should be taken from [the abuser’s] mistress who is lazy, of weak character, incapable of intervening between her child and her lover.” The third report observed that “all neighbors are unanimous in declaring that [the widow] is unworthy of exercising maternal care over her child”; “she merits no pity whatsoever.” Blended families were equally dangerous to children: a case of incest reported by a neighbor on the rue Poissonniers uncovered years of abuse, involved seven other witnesses in the same building, and earned a sentence of nine years in prison for the perpetrator, a thrice-widowed worker, fifty-three, who
had come to Saint-Denis from an inland bretonnant village of the Côtes-d’Armor at least twenty-five years earlier. There was little privacy to be had under such circumstances; the walls were thin, and people talked.

Police blotters usually concerned public behavior, giving some clues about the neighborhood life and relations between the police and residents. Those of Saint-Denis show that although Bretons were a significant presence, they less often came to the attention of the police. And when they did, their appearance often reflected the misfortunes of the poor. Breton vagrants who had been picked up on the north side outnumbered any other group—ranging in age from fifteen to fifty-nine, some out of work and homeless, some taking shelter in the gypsum quarry in Villateneuse to the north. For Bretons theft was most often a matter of food—asparagus, cabbage and other vegetables, milk, and in one case coal; perpetrators included fifteen-year-old boys. Women rarely came on the record, except in cases of sudden death or emergency hospital entry.

Drink played its role—in hospital admissions, bar fights, and explanations for every kind of misbehavior: the only Breton prostitute in all the records would have gone unnoticed had she not broken up a bar and 50 francs worth of liquor bottles on one February night in 1900. Night-life produced street fights and bar fights, so bar keeping had its risks. Under these circumstances Lucie Le Coguiec, a twenty-three-year-old café owner from a town in central upper Brittany, seemed to be both courageous and popular; twice written up for staying open too late in the summer of 1905, she had plenty of customers until a violent quarrel broke out that included her cousin and friends late on the night of 3 September. Mademoiselle Le Coguiec suffered serious cuts, risking permanent damage to her right arm; the police took in the Jutard brothers despite their protestations of innocence and forgetfulness. The elder, Frederic, had been born in a town in the lower Breton Côtes-d’Armor twenty-eight years earlier, just before his parents moved to Saint-Denis, where his father had died and he lived with his mother on the rue de Charronnerie. A drinker and a fighter, he seems to have provided the stereotype of a Breton to the people around him: in June he had been in a street fight with eight men when he left a bar after midnight; in July he was accused of having threatened a railroad worker, who called him “Breton” and implied that he knew something about goods stolen from the railroad station.
Disorder was the concern, and to this end the police reported on public meetings, like that of the Revolutionary Socialist Union in March 1900; they cruised through the crowd of eight hundred strikers at the Combes tannery in December 1905 and told onlookers to move along. Three young Breton workers, part of a group that had gathered to prevent scabs from entering, were brought in for possession of an illegal knife after a dustup with three officers. But there were also more minor affairs, men taken in for swimming in the canal and for riding a bicycle on the sidewalk. The actions of the police sometimes seemed like harassment and those arrested did not always go quietly, like one drunken laborer, whose wife and three children remained in their home village in lower Brittany, who called the officer a sale vache vieux cochon, a not unusual string of epithets.

But as Alain Faure notes, the banlieue was also a utopia—or at least it had that possibility for workers who were attracted to this city on the edge of greater Paris. Faure draws on the work of the Bonnef brothers, who in 1913 recounted a story of a Breton newcomer that is worth attending to for the texture that it gives to the urban experience. A chemical firm recruited young Jean-Marie Le Louël from central Brittany along with seven compatriots and provided simple lodgings—iron beds in a long room decorated only by a table and a mirror scratched with messages from former lodgers. The next morning at 5:00 the men were awakened for work. But this life was hard on Jean-Marie—although his work was tiring, what crushed him was the bad air, the houses, the pavement, and the gray sky. On Sundays he didn’t go fishing with his compatriots but walked; he walked as fast as he could and far as he could but could never get away from the walls, the houses, the streets and the automobiles. One evening, by chance, he met Michel, a former foreman, who had seen homesick Bretons before. Michel remarked on the obvious misery of Jean-Marie, to whom he later suggested outdoor work: “I’m going to tell you, young man, to be closed up is worth nothing. That’ll kill you—if I were you I would work the earth.” Overhearing the conversation, a nearby worker remarked that a company was hiring for an earthworks nearby. Hearing about this, neighbors scoured their basements and their sheds and found six pickaxes and four shovels. Michel chose the best ones and offered them to Jean-Marie. The two spent the evening polishing the rusty old tools, after which Jean-Marie resigned from the factory and was hired as a laborer in nearby Courneuve. Thus the Breton became a ditch
digger—and a much happier worker. The Bonneff brothers meant this to be a story of solidarity and some may have read it as the story of a country bumpkin, but it can also be read as a story of integration into the urban labor force, and the entry of another newcomer into urban life, thanks to the strength of weak ties—connections made outside Jean-Marie’s customary circle. Most Bretons were invisible to both novelists and the authorities, and one of the rare times that they came into official view was on the occasion of a wedding. At the city hall of Saint-Denis they offered a profile distinct from that of other wedding partners in the Paris basin, and from that of the Bretons in the Fourteenth Arrondissement. Like those who married in 1890, those who married in 1910—a hundred Bretonnes and ninety-four Bretons—were much more likely to marry another Breton than their compatriots had been in either general study of earlier weddings: over half the marriages joined one Breton with another. And although a few of those who married out married a Parisian, as in the Fourteenth Arrondissement, marriages with Dyonisians were very common: like the Bretons in the Fourteenth, they married locals as well as fellow provincials. Yet the migration stream between Brittany and Saint-Denis had changed over the past twenty years, since the majority of those from the Côtes-d’Armor was not as lopsided as before. Those from the lower Breton departments of the Finistère and Morbihan were on the increase. And now Breton brides were on the increase as well, so Breton women accounted for most marriage partners in Saint-Denis by a slim margin. Saint-Denis was drawing a greater variety of Bretons than twenty years before, and the gender-specific marriage pattern of the urbane Fourteenth Arrondissement began to hold in this industrial suburb: men married compatriots and women sought a partner from the outside (see Appendix, table 1).

Breton women in Saint-Denis married young compared with those in the Fourteenth Arrondissement, at a median age of twenty-two. Very few lived with their parents, but nearly half lived at the same address as their partner before marriage. The housing in Saint-Denis partly accounts for this, because there were many buildings that were so-called Breton colonies, with many households in the same building. Nonetheless, there had been an increase since twenty years previously, when only about a third of women lived at the same address as their partner, although housing had been similar in Saint-Denis. Consensual unions were clearly
on the increase among Bretons there, since about one marriage in seven was the occasion to legitimize a child, a great change from twenty years previously.

The Breton women in Saint-Denis fell into two primary groups: those who married a fellow Breton, and those who married another provincial or a local. Many of them worked as domestic servants and cooks (30 percent), as housekeepers who did not claim work outside their home (30 percent), and as day laborers (22 percent). Those women who married a fellow Breton were most likely to be housekeepers (34 percent) or day laborers (21 percent). In most cases their work kept them close to home. The significant group of needle workers in the Fourteenth Arrondissement is missing from Saint-Denis, and there is only one woman hospital employee—the ward supervisor Marie Briand, from a French-speaking village in the northern Côtes-d’Armor, who married a hospital gardener from Normandy; witnesses to the ceremony included the hospital director, a medical doctor, and the bride’s sister, a nurse in Paris. Here again siblings worked as nurses across the Paris basin.

The Saint-Denis trajectories are distinct from those of women who married in the Fourteenth Arrondissement because the brides were younger and less skilled, and because both bride and groom appeared to be more connected with their families. Although many parents remained at home, there is abundant evidence of family connections. Louise Thomas and Jean Baptiste Le Peltier represent many a Breton couple: having worked as a cook in Saint-Denis, Louise had taken a job a bit north in Montmorency by the time of her marriage to a bricklayer’s helper from near her hometown in the French-speaking area of the Côtes d’Armor; the bride was twenty-two, the groom twenty-four, and both were from agricultural families. The bride’s older sister, twenty-five, also a cook in the Paris basin, and her soldier cousin were there for the occasion. The groom’s brother and brother-in-law who lived in Saint-Denis (which suggests that the groom also had a sister in Saint-Denis) stood up for him. Although the older generation was not present, members of the younger generation were there in support of one another.

Most Breton grooms in Saint-Denis, like François Le Goff, were day laborers or unskilled workers, and this was even more likely to be true of those Bretons who married a fellow Breton, about a fifth of whom also worked in the transportation sector as chauffeurs or railroad employees. Breton men had a place in Saint-Denis’s industrial and transporta-
tion vocation, but it remained a rather modest place that included only a few skilled masons, carpenters, and metalworkers. Only among the Breton men who married women from outside Brittany did a few have white-collar or commercial work.

**FAMILY AND FRIENDS**

Wedding witnesses reveal a good bit about the lives of couples in Saint-Denis and the Fourteenth Arrondissement—and how they were different from one another. The records from 1910 are richer than those from 1890, because the acte de mariage noted the family relationships between the witness and bride or groom, and because women were allowed to serve as witnesses after 1900. Both changes allow a more complete view of relationships among Bretons and those who witnessed their weddings in 1910; family relationships are the easiest to document (see Appendix, table 3).

Which family members came to the weddings? Most often members of the same generation—brothers and sisters, then cousins, brothers-in-law, and sisters-in-law. Most of the Breton couples who married in the Fourteenth Arrondissement had at least one relative in attendance, most often a sibling of the bride or groom—and in a few cases, more than one. Family members were even more likely to be present at weddings in Saint-Denis. Over four-fifths of five Breton couples had at least one relative in attendance, most often a sibling, and sometimes two, like the cook sister of Louise Thomas and the worker brother of Jean Baptiste Le Peltier. Over half the Breton grooms who married out, and nearly half the Breton brides, had a relative present. In some cases the parents were also in Saint-Denis—widowed and aged parents who followed their children or Bretons who had brought their families to the city when their children were younger. One-fifth of Breton brides had at least one parent living in Saint-Denis. Yet generally wedding records testify to a real and considerable break between generations in this age of urbanization, because the vast majority of Breton parents, if alive, remained at home—and normally in rural locations.

Yet when the witnesses themselves are counted—four per marriage—very few were kin. What about other solidarities—those of work and class? Like Parisian wedding witnesses from four to six decades earlier studied by Roger Gould, those of 1910 reflect only minimal workplace
and class solidarities. Auguste Blonsard, whose witnesses included two fellow coachmen and two horse grooms from across town, was a rarity. Only laborers and housekeepers often had witnesses with the same occupation, but because their occupational labels were vague, one cannot infer shared workplace. Nurses are the exception, particularly in the Fourteenth Arrondissement, where over half the nurses’ weddings were witnessed by another nurse.

Yet clearly Bretons in Paris and in Saint-Denis knew their neighbors. The vast majority of the weddings in the Fourteenth Arrondissement included a witness not simply from the Fourteenth but from the immediate quartier, and nearly half the Breton marriages in 1910 included a witness living in the same building as the bride or groom (46 percent). Like the witnesses for Victorine Mouraud and her husband, many lived on the next street and around the corner, if not in the same house. The same sort of neighborhood network is visible in Saint-Denis, where virtually every wedding included a witness living in the city, and most witnesses lived there. Witnesses in Saint-Denis were much less likely to be repeat witnesses—hangers-on at the town hall—and much more likely to be people who were passed in the street and stairwell, and heard through the walls. Outsiders—from greater Paris or farther away—were often relatives, like the aunt of a bride from a French-speaking village in the Morbihan who came to Saint-Denis for the wedding from the wealthy suburb of Neuilly, where she worked as a cook.

Wedding witnesses of Bretons in the year 1910 reveal a world in which both men and women called on relatives at their weddings, and both enlisted female witnesses. Men and women were roughly equal in having kin witness their wedding; the striking difference is not between men and women, but between the industrial suburb of Saint-Denis and a heterogeneous Fourteenth Arrondissement. Female friends—the married housewife in the quartier, shopkeeper, or concierge—stood up for bride and groom alike. Here again the most important difference is between the two areas of greater Paris: women witnesses were most important when the bride was Breton in Paris and most neglected when the groom was a Breton in Saint-Denis. This may suggest that Breton men in Saint-Denis were more dismissive in their attitudes toward women or that they simply had more male friends. Yet generally the evidence, rather than highlighting gender differences, suggests how interconnected, not how separate, were the social lives of men and women. The records also enable us to
catch a glimpse of the older sister or aunt who helped the newcomer. Without these historical records we would never know that an orphan bride (who would otherwise only appear as a statistic among the unwed mothers in Paris from a Bretonnant village of the Côtes-d’Armor) had an uncle, sister, and brother-in-law in Saint-Denis to lend familial support, or that an aunt (who worked as a cook in Neuilly) had sponsored a motherless woman.

The Breton Community in the Belle Époque

By the close of the Belle Époque a large and heterogeneous Breton community of over 160,000 lived in greater Paris. Like migrant communities everywhere, the Bretons were visible partly through their voluntary associations. As José Moya has pointed out, the migration process itself is the wellspring of organizations, because it “tends to intensify and sharpen collective identities based on national, ethnic, or quasi-ethnic constructs.” In addition, the political opportunity structure in France facilitated and encouraged the formation of clubs, legalizing mutual aid societies in 1898 and enabling the passage in 1901 of the Law of Associations, which applied to general nonprofit voluntary associations, including sports clubs.

Some cultural organizations gathered intellectuals, such as La Pomme, which joined artistic and literary Bretons and Normans. Others were sure to include a banquet, like the earliest and most famous of them, the Dîner Celtique, held in such contempt by François Cadic because it had been founded by the famed apostate intellectual Ernst Renan in 1879. For those who could pay the piper, Breton banquets had a bright future. Léon Durocher, an influential Druid, had been instrumental in founding the Association des Bretons de Paris in 1894. Regional amicales grew and by 1912 included the Children of the Loire-Inférieure, the Children of the Côtes-du-Nord (1910) and the Finistériens (1911). Founded by a lawyer and doctor, these groups had the same kind of members as the professional societies that also took root, such as the Amicale des Médecins de Bretagne. Among the many other mutualist and helping organizations intent on alleviating the painful situation of Bretons were the Union Bretonne and the Prévoyance Bretonne. By the time of the Great War, Bretons had founded cultural, professional, charitable, and sports organizations, albeit primarily for their middle-class numbers. Although social
concern focused on the poor, this community had a significant middle-
class and professional component. Its entrepreneurial café owners under-
wrote gathering places that are reflected in wedding records and neighbor-
hood life. Helping organizations like the Breton Parish and the Société la
Bretagne relied on the good offices of the very elite, the insights of their
doctors and lawyers, and the charitable aid of volunteers.

Breton artists and writers contributed to Parisian culture as well as to
regional associations. Some focused on Celtic culture, like Durocher,
who was responsible for the Breton village at the Universal Exposition of
1900. The result was a true Celtic paradise, a cartoon Brittany with an inn
named after Duchess Anne, dark wheat crêpes for sale, Breton men in
traditional dress, waitresses in local costumes serving pitchers of cider,
and regional instruments playing all the while. And this “typical Breton
town” was complete with prehistoric megaliths, a dolmen and a menhir,
on the Champ de Mars.175 This display reflected the influence of Bretons
in Paris with an interest in Celtic culture.

Middle-class Bretons shared the concerns with newcomers that Fran-
çois Cadic had expressed at the opening of the century, and indeed the
activities of the Breton parish had broadened since its founding. From
1906 it included the Oeuvre des Gares, an organization that welcomed
and protected young people getting off the train; like similar organiza-
tions elsewhere whose great fear was white slavery, it paid special atten-
tion to young women, but it also attended to seasonal workers passing
through Paris. Two years later the Oeuvre des Gares sponsored a shelter
for young Breton women in Paris called l’Abri Sainte-Anne, not far from
the Gare Montparnasse. Bretons were part of the larger effort to protect
and aid poor women.176

In addition, other secular and religious venues now offered support,
especially in the aftermath of the laws closing unauthorized Catholic
schools enacted in 1902.177 The protection of young women, and efforts
to keep them at home, took on larger proportions. The secretary general
of the Oeuvre des Gares wrote to the prefect of the Côtes-d’Armor in
May 1912, offering statistics and urging him to act—since in the four
years from 1908 to 1911 the organization had helped nearly 18,000 French
women, among whom there were nearly 8,000 domestics—626 of whom
came from the Côtes-d’Armor. “We do not need to tell you the dangers to
which these unhappy girls are exposed, generally uncertain of a place-
ment, inexperienced, and too confiding: unfortunately, they too often
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finish by falling into prostitution after a little while.” The secretary general urged the prefect to inform parents that although wages were higher for girls in Paris than in the village, unemployment and all sorts of dangers awaited. Suggesting that mayors and schoolteachers make a systematic campaign to dissuade young women from undertaking a rural exodus, the Oeuvre des Gares offered to contribute to the costs of the campaign. The next month a public poster appeared over the prefect’s name, quoting the letter and his statistics and argument.178

And despite the Breton reputation for faithful Catholicism, anticlericalism had its place, most vividly demonstrated in the lively weekly journal Le breton de Paris: Grand journal hebdomadaire pour Paris et la Bretagne. This lively journal lasted less than a year in 1899, but it resembles other Breton journals in many ways: aphorisms, exhortations to Bretons, news from home, railroad schedules for the return, and Breton-language features were commonplace. Nonetheless, the political anticlericalism of Le breton de Paris made it unique among Breton publications in Paris: A Breton-language poem was a translation of the Marseillaise; long features followed the return of Dreyfus for his trial in Rennes; secular schoolteachers were exhorted to spread the Republican spirit; and the columnist Amoric urged the Bretons of Paris to spread the light of Republicanism at home, because “the Bretons of Paris are numerous . . . over 125,000, a veritable army, very powerful, which could make the nobility tremble in their châteaux . . . Vivent les Bretons! Vive la République!”179 And there were jokes at the clergy’s expense.180

Perhaps the most important organization was formed out of the desire to avoid the Manichaean dichotomy of clerical and anticlerical societies. This impulse certainly lay behind the founding of the Mutualité Bretonne and a second weekly newspaper, Le breton de Paris, which survived from 1906 to the early 1920s.181 Its director and founder, Dr. René Le Fur (1872–1933), a physician from the town of Pontivy in the Morbihan, led the effort to provide a set of services very similar to those of the Breton parish, but with a more inclusive and social tone. The Mutualité created an information office, an employment agency, a bureau for financial aid in case of illness or accident, and aid in the fight against the “principal plagues of the moment,” alcoholism and tuberculosis. Le Fur opened a clinic that favored Breton clients and shortly before the war, a clothing bank. It is for good reason that he is called “a great altruist” by the Breton historian Armel Calvé.182 The son of a lawyer and Republican mayor who
had acquired running water, a new slaughterhouse, and a new secondary school for Pontivy during his administration, Le Fur emulated his father by eschewing professional glory—in his case the role of the “prince of the scalpel” in Paris—in favor of a life of philanthropy and attention to the Bretons of Paris, who called him “the right man at the right place, as the English say.”

Le Fur’s instrument for uniting the Breton community was largely the provision of news for “our numerous compatriots, the 200,000 Bretons of Paris and the banlieue.” He noted that despite their numbers, Bretons did not yet have their own newspaper, and he aspired to rival the other regionalist journals such as *L’auvergnat de Paris* and *Le savoyard de Paris.* *Le breton de Paris* went on sale in at least fifty-two kiosks throughout the city. Until the outbreak of the Great War it included four to six pages of news, features, and advertisements for commercial ventures and for Breton societies and activities. Subscribers would be listed in the *Annuaire des bretons de Paris* and had access to reduced prices at certain Breton businesses and for train tickets back home, medical care at the clinic, and free legal advice. *Le breton de Paris* had something for everyone.

Each issue included a sizable article of interest to Bretons and several short news items on the front page. News continued on the following pages, along with a list of delegates to *Le breton de Paris* from every arrondissement and banlieue of the city, many of them wine shop and restaurant owners—still key members of the Breton community. Letters to the editor and the “Carnet breton” followed—news of the engagements, marriages, and deaths of distinguished Bretons. “L’argus breton” featured documents and curiosities on Breton history; it was followed by a column reporting the activities of Breton societies in cities such as Le Havre and Bordeaux; then came a long section on news from home. One article or poem in the Breton language appeared in most issues. The publishers wanted to give the Breton language a place, but on the other hand did not want to forget that many readers did not speak Breton—in other words, enemies existed on both sides of the language question. This was, in short, a regionalist publication, not a nationalist one. Stories from and about Brittany, advertisements, and a subscription form made it into each issue.

The folkloric concerns appealed to educated Bretons—advertisements for costumes, Breton language lessons, historical articles, features on political regionalism, and articles about and in the Breton language. The
column “In a Breton Library” often included regionalist literature such as Charles Le Goffric’s novel *Morgane* (1898) and *Âme breton*, his best-known work, and the *Grammaire bretonne du dialecte de Vannes* by Guillaume and Le Goffic. The paper published poems by the author, performer, and songwriter Théodore Botrel, another important regionalist figure in his prime during the Belle Époque. Historical articles focused on such issues as the Terror; but the marriages of Anne de Bretagne to Charles VIII and Louis XII at the end of the fifteenth century were of special interest because the terms of these marriages had determined Brittany’s political relationship with France.

Regionalism itself was an issue and a political standpoint for the paper, defined not as particularism, an anti-Paris struggle, separatism, or reaction but rather as “a creative power stemming from the virtues of pride above all, in the elevated sense of the word.” Le Fur articulated the stance against particularism and for a shared Breton identity in his response to a letter from a reader writing as “the Great Druid” who claimed to represent Brittany itself: “We do not confuse Brittany with the bards,” he replied. “In Paris, the Breton milieu is profoundly ignorant of them, insofar as they are discussed at all. . . . The true Breton patriotism, that is to say, regionalism, is greater than your personages and your work.” At a grand banquet at the end of December attended by Brittany’s intellectual elite, Le Fur maintained that his “goal at the *Breton de Paris* is to make known everything that is Breton, to group together the Breton energies in Paris, to develop Breton patriotism, the value and the confidence of our race. . . . We have 300,000 Bretons in Paris.” The point was to unite and promote Bretons, breaking down barriers among them—“our motto should be: a greater Brittany in a greater France.” Thus *Le breton de Paris* affirmed a Breton identity, but a French identity as well.

Fundraising projects marked the pages of *Le breton de Paris*—and those of 1912 articulate the interests of the Breton community. Three stemmed from Breton pride—and first and foremost among these was a new statue for the capital city of Rennes to replace the “national shame” of the monument unveiled in the fall of 1911 depicting Anne of Bretagne on her knees before the king of France. The “Bretagne Debout” (Brittany Standing) campaign was organized by Bretons of the highest stature, and thousands of signatures had been gathered to demand the replacement of this statue with another already designed by a distinguished Breton sculptor—a statue of the French king Charles VII kneeling in homage
to Anne of Brittany. For those who contributed over 50 francs to raise money for the new statue, the paper offered a plaster miniature of the replacement statue; for those who contributed less, a photograph, a smaller photo, and a postcard, depending on the contribution. The campaign began on 14 January with a call for donations and a photograph of the statue; the contributions were subsequently reported (although many people donated one franc, Le Fur donated 50). By mid-April less than 450 francs had been collected—Le Fur asked his readers, “Bretons, have you no pride?”—and the project was subsequently dropped (as was the project for a Bretons de Paris airplane for the French army). Yet this statue would remain an explosive issue for the next twenty years, as we shall see. Later in the same year funds were raised for a beautiful banner celebrating Les bretons de Paris, “a true marvel from the artistic and decorative points of view,” emblazoned with regional symbols. Again a photograph was promised to those who made a donation (Le Fur offered 20 francs, Madame Le Fur 5), and by the end of the year nearly 420 francs had been donated and the banner realized.

Charitable drives also fueled Le breton de Paris. As a physician, Le Fur was particularly keen on enabling Bretons to enjoy the same advantages as their peers, and for this reason he offered summer camps to the poor children of compatriots stuck in the city. Like the Oeuvre des Gares meant to save young women from danger at the railroad stations, the colonies de vacances were part of a wider rescue and charity movement. The campaign began in February with a report on the other regional societies that sponsored summer camps and had managed to send about twelve hundred children to the countryside in the summer of 1911. Articles emphasizing infant mortality rates and poems about poor children in the city underwrote this effort. The names of needy children were solicited in the spring, and by the end of July the names of the chosen children—all girls and residents of the Eighteenth Arrondissement—were published and members of the society were urged to come to the train station to see them off. “Bonnes vacances, les petites Bretonnes!” In the fall efforts moved to providing a Christmas party and gifts for poor little Bretons in Paris.

Readers not only gave but received as well. Each issue advertised Breton businesses seeking to attract compatriots as customers, sometimes offering discounts, and businesses that offered Breton products such as cider. Notices appeared of fairs and fetes. Beginning in May, a great deal
of space was given to advertisements for discount train tickets and holiday tickets to Brittany in August, with full schedules and prices. How was the home pays represented in Le breton de Paris? The sizable “Nouvelles du pays” featured in every issue offered a full, and fairly sensational, view of life at home, with stories from every département. Accidents and accidental deaths were rife in every département: a five-paragraph story described a fight between two friends in the Finistère, after which one died of gruesome wounds. In the same issue a carter met his death under the wheels of his own vehicle in the Ille-et-Vilaine; a brother-in-law was seriously injured with knife wounds in the Loire-Inférieure; a house burned in the Morbihan; and a child was seriously injured by a dog in the Côtes-d’Armor. Village and small-town accidents far outweighed stories of local appointments. Vehicular accidents involving carts, trains, and automobiles were sometimes fatal; fires always caused gruesome and painful burns, and were sometimes fatal as well. Stories bearing boldfaced headlines such as “fillette brûlée vive” recounted the deaths of children by drowning, fire, and felled trees, much to the distress of their loved ones. Family quarrels were dangerous to wives whose husbands—“entre époux,” went the story—strangled, beat, kicked, or stabbed them in a “discussion tragique,” or, in the case of one “violent,” threw boiling water at her. And young people disappeared, sought by their parents, like the naval official who looked for his fifteen-year-old son, gone two months, and the man whose seventeen-year-old son had left home six weeks earlier on his racing bike. It was the employer who sought a butcher’s helper, aged thirty, last seen at a nearby railroad station on a Friday afternoon and seemingly unconcerned with a return to work. Reports of theft and suicide completed the mix.

Drink was the cause of many a reported accident and death—that of the young mason passed out on the railroad tracks and run over by a train, the farmer killed by a drunken friend with an umbrella in the eye. Drink was assumed to have caused the death of the senatorial delegate found in an advanced state of decomposition weeks after disappearing; it was reasoned that under the influence of drink, disoriented, he wandered into the countryside and fell into the water. When a fifty-five-year-old woman from the Côtes-d’Armor was taken into jail dead drunk at 10:00 in the morning, her husband refused to take her home, claiming that she was fine where she was; the woman herself refused to leave the jail, where
she died during the night. On one hand, the reporting of strings of alcohol-related deaths and accidents may have been the result of the physician Dr. Le Fur’s concerns. On the other, *Le breton de Paris* did not harp on alcoholism or point to it as often as the *Paroisse bretonne* or *Le breton de Paris* did. It recognized the problem of alcoholism, but also reported in an article titled “Bretons Are Not Degenerates,” based on an interview with a physician from the French army, that although Bretons were reported to be alcoholics, they suffered less than their compatriots from Normandy from this plague. Le Fur himself recognized the evils of alcoholism, but also wrote, “It’s not cider that I denounce here, because cider, our national drink, only rarely gives birth to alcoholism”; it was hard liquor, absinthe, and adulterated drinks that were to blame.

If news items did not depict Brittany as a haven of peace and safety, the poetry of *Le breton de Paris* certainly did so, contrasting the good air and peace of Brittany with the infecting and infected air of Paris. The poet Eugène Le Mouel wrote to the Breton child:

> Little man with sweet eyes, little guy of my race  
> Paris, the great Paris is still too narrow  
> For your blood to be pure, for you to grow straight . . .

The message to women was even more dire than the one to children. *Le breton de Paris*, like other Breton publications and organizations, focused its concerns on the young woman new to the city. The poem “Restez au Pays” (Stay at home) warned of the hidden perils of city life: “Stay at home, carefree Breton girl,” it opened. News stories offered a more brutal picture, including the “lamentable adventure of a little Bretonne,” an out-of-work maid of twenty who told her woes to a seemingly sympathetic woman, who in turn set her up to be robbed and mistreated by three male accomplices. The young Bretonne awoke the next morning, half naked on a bench in the place Gambetta in the Twentieth Arrondissement. The dangers facing trusting young women were everyone’s concern in an age haunted by tales of white slavery, but as Calvé points out, “Today’s reader certainly has problems, since times have changed, understanding the degree of naivety, of timidity, and confidence of those who had food left their native soil for the first time, who, for many could only babble in a hesitant French, who had never had contact with the urban milieu—in a word who got off [the train] on another planet from the one with which they were familiar.” Just as the abbé Cadic explicitly warned
girls against Paris, *Le breton de Paris* did the same, out of the same fear, and articulated the same core narrative of the lost and ruined girl. When this newspaper reduced its format with the outbreak of the Great War, it still made room in the issue of 14 August 1914 for a story titled “Les aventures d’une bretonne à Paris.” This was the tale of Marie-Jeanne Floch, sixteen, who had arrived in Paris a week earlier and was staying in a hotel run by compatriots near the Gare Montparnasse while looking for work. A man who said he could arrange employment with a wealthy family took her out for a drink and was joined by a male friend. A little drive before dinner took them to the boulevard Masséna on the southern outskirts of town, where the two took her to an obscure hotel; Marie was subject to “all sorts of violence,” robbed of her purse with 50 francs, and left locked in the hotel room. With the outbreak of war at the end of the month, *La paroisse bretonne* added the news that there were few or no jobs for young women in Paris, and “the simplest thing was to go home.” Thus ended the Belle Époque for Bretons in Paris.

Bretons played a growing role in the city of Paris during the Belle Époque, testified by their increasing visibility and numbers, heralded in 1912 in an article in the popular daily *Le petit parisien* titled “The Capital Counts Nearly 300,000 Bretons.” This figure probably includes Paris-born children of Bretons and is also exaggerated, since the census of 1911 enumerated only about half that number of Breton-born people in greater Paris. Nonetheless this story in such a large-circulation daily paper reflects the importance that Bretons had come to have in the consciousness of the city. For readers of popular literature like *The Diary of a Chambermaid*, the Breton domestic lodged herself in the public mind, either as a beautiful woman without principles or a dull-witted bumpkin without talent. For child readers and their parents, the Breton servant was a lovable dolt who emerged as the comic character of Bécassine. The reader interested in the world of work found in the Bonnef brothers’ story the Breton who preferred to work outdoors if he had to live in an urban environment, exactly like François Michel.

At the same time, social commentary about Bretons, while attacking them, focused on poverty at home as well as the vulnerability, poverty, ill-health, and alcoholism of Bretons in Paris. Some of the visibility of the Bretons originated in their reputation as the least fortunate migrants and
the least well-integrated into city life, a reputation that has been reinforced by scholarship since the Second World War. Measuring the residential segregation of provincial migrants in Paris in 1911, the social geographers Philip Ogden and S. W. C. Winchester found that within a general pattern of integration, some newcomers were outliers—among these the Bretons from the Morbihan, Finistère, and Côtes-d’Armor. Likewise, the historian Alain Faure, while effectively demolishing the notion that immigrants to Paris were more subject to contract tuberculosis than Parisians, notes that immigrants from certain départements were in fact more vulnerable to it, “the Breton departments especially.” Although this research originates in fundamentally different perspectives from that published during the Belle Époque, it finds Bretons’ poverty and ill-health worth emphasizing.

Less objective observers derided the religious faith and practice of Bretons, alleging that they were superstitious fools under the sway of their priests. This derision was characteristic of the age of separation of church and state, when teaching congregations were being closed and both nuns and priests left France in record numbers to serve as missionaries abroad or to resettle elsewhere. Nonetheless, many Bretons placed their faith in people connected with the church, and the church was their biggest defender. The impressively broad effort by Father François Cadic and the Breton Parish provided work and material aid as well as spiritual comfort, explicitly aiding women as well as men. Cadic was not alone, for other church-oriented organizations like the Société La Bretagne came to the aid of the poor and turned to Saint-Denis as well as the city.

Secular Breton communities also organized themselves and took action on behalf of the poor and middle classes in the period before the Great War, becoming a visible force in Parisian organizational life. Under the leadership of René Le Fur and the banner of the weekly Le breton de Paris, the Breton community took on a voice. This voice articulated the interests of many Bretons in Paris, provided a venue for literature and political articles, a source of news of all kinds from home, and information about special rates for vacation trains to Brittany. Finally, like newcomers in cities throughout Europe and the Americas, Bretons themselves formed organizations for mutual aid, charitable activities, regionalist interests, sports, cultural development, and professional advancement.

These strands of evidence about Bretons in Paris offer different views of these newcomers, each of which renders them somewhat distinct from
Parisians and other provincials. Marriage records complicate this picture by testifying to the striking differences between the experiences of men and of women, and to the social and economic integration of many Bretons into Paris life. Faure also reminds us that the city has long been a melting pot and that Parisian neighborhoods offered contacts and work that in turn provided a way out of the society of compatriots. The city offered opportunity not only in the large numbers of jobs but also and perhaps especially in the occasion to connect with new people. This in turn testifies to echoes in postwar France, when many foreigners were greeted with suspicion, but nevertheless interacted with neighbors and came to be seen as members of the community.

Those who married in 1910 show us something of how some Bretons were able to emerge from their well-deserved reputation for misery. Both in Saint-Denis and in the Fourteenth Arrondissement they increasingly integrated with other French citizens, including Dionysians and Parisians. In the Fourteenth Arrondissement fewer Breton women than before had a child before their marriage. Bretons could increasingly sign their marriage documents in Saint-Denis. In both locations Bretons were likely to hold skilled and white-collar positions.

Yet these remain distinct communities with different labor profiles. Most Dyonisian grooms worked as day laborers or unskilled workers, their brides as servants, housekeepers, or day laborers. By contrast, men and women in the Fourteenth Arrondissement were able to obtain some skilled jobs, although many of these, even the secure jobs in the Métro system, did not pay laborers well. For women the price paid for the mobility offered by marriage with a skilled or secure worker was a late marriage—not the case for the women in Saint-Denis.

Marie Lepioufle and François Michel, Breton villagers from birth, hospital workers of the Belle Époque, and bride and groom of 1911, resemble many Bretons of the Fourteenth Arrondissement in their rural origins, the company of their siblings in the city, and their distinctly urban jobs—even though François Michel, a peasant’s son, continued to work with horses to the end of this period. As we follow the couple into the Great War and beyond, we will see how they resemble and diverge from their compatriots. With the Great War in August 1914, the Belle Époque would come to an end and their lives would change. Nonetheless the Breton presence, now established in Paris, would continue.