The Great War did not begin for François Michel as it did for rural Bretons when the tocsin—the village church bell alarm—sounded, but rather when he reported to a railroad station in Paris to rejoin his army company in Brittany, with which he had served from 1903 to 1906. He left behind his wife of three years, a secure job, and a baby daughter. François was soon wounded in battle and served both combatant and noncombatant roles over the next few years. Marie remained in Paris, working in a hospital, and for some time her baby girl was sent back to Brittany to live with Marie’s parents. She would constantly worry about François, and he about her—especially during the bombardments of Paris in 1918, after a shell from a “Big Bertha” claimed twenty victims at the maternity hospital in the Fourteenth Arrondissement, and then again when both mother and daughter were struck during the Spanish influenza pandemic. All three survived, however, and reunited after the war in the spring of 1919 to continue their life together in greater Paris and in the public hospital system.

It is hard to imagine anything more different from the Michels’ wartime experience than that of the fictional children’s character Bécassine. In the Breton countryside at the outbreak of war, she was soon in Paris, in Alsace, and even behind enemy lines—an utterly ignorant and equally patriotic and well-meaning servant of France. She learned of the war when her mistress told her that all French people were worried, and Bécassine reflected that she was certainly French yet not worried, which is most puzzling; her confusion continued when she heard that there would be a war against the Boches (Krauts) but could find no Bochie on the map. Once she knew the enemy however, Bécassine was implacably anti-German and protective of her countrymen. She beat rugs with enthusi-
asm, pretending that they were Germans: “Take that, you dirty Kraut!” Her real desire was to serve as a nurse, but her limited capacities caused dangerous mistakes. When her heart was broken at the news that she could not join the nursing staff, her mistress the marquise consoled her with these patronizing words: “You will be a nurse just the same, Bécassine—a nurse for the laundry, sweeping, making beds.” In Paris, to ease her mistress’s expenses, Bécassine took a job with the tramways like many other women (but during a storm she drove off the tracks).

Bécassine develops as a brave and patriotic adventurer—albeit one capable of the misunderstandings and blunders of the old days, as when she attacks an actor who goes after a French soldier, not understanding that she has interrupted the making of a propaganda film. Major Tacy-Turn, a British officer who hates talking, forces Bécassine into an open airplane to take aerial photos of the enemy; our heroine vacillates between terror and a sense of adventure but takes useful photos, although the two are fired upon all the while by German guns. She admires the soldiers, embraces the children of Alsace, and is astonished by the strength of the munitions workers at Billancourt. She reports to the reader that she had chastised a whiny orderly, saying, “It will last as long as it lasts, we will suffer what we have to suffer—but the Krauts, we’ll get them! The others all applauded me, and said that I spoke like a real Frenchwoman.”

Bécassine is a thoroughly loyal citizen of France. This wartime fictional character for children both touched the realities of life during the Great War (by working on the tramways and experiencing the hardships of separations, for example) and made wartime less frightening with her zany adventures and new friendships. The wartime character of Bécassine could no longer be the peasant dolt of the Belle Époque. Breton soldiers demonstrated great patriotism as well. The pairing of Bécassine with the brave soldiers of Brittany seems to be an odd juxtaposition, but as we will see, it becomes an important one between the wars.

The memorable ringing of the tocsin that signaled the outbreak of war in the Breton countryside announced quick transformations—women and children took on the farming; shell and engine production geared up in Rennes and St. Nazaire; the clothing industry thrived as it produced uniforms; the worst unemployment and poverty declined; prisoners of war and refugees arrived; Allied troops landed on Breton shores. But most memorable were the terrible losses. In April 1917 the Eleventh Breton corps lost 1,650 men in 24 hours. Bretons suffered disproportion-
ately—at least 22 percent of the Bretons mobilized were killed, when the norm was between 16 and 17 percent for men from other parts of France, and many Bretons were drafted because Brittany had a particularly young population, with few engaged in industries that would exempt them from military service. Whether the Breton losses are interpreted as a sacrifice for an ungrateful nation or as proof of attachment to the country, Bretons felt their loss especially keenly, and they noted the explicit appreciation expressed for their efforts by Marshal Joffre, who is said to have declared, “Napoleon had his guard, I had my Bretons!” In the opinion of the Breton historian Joël Cornette, the Great War paradoxically bound Brittany to France: subsequently, much more than the holiday of 14 July, 11 November became an important day for Brittany.

The populous department of the Côtes-d’Armor lost nearly 8 percent of its people between 1911 and 1921, but wartime losses accounted for only half of these. The others had left the department, many of them for the Paris basin. This chapter focuses on these other Bretons: those in the Paris basin after the Great War, like François Michel and his family.

Demobilized in the spring of 1919, Michel returned to the public assistance retirement facility at Arcueil-Cachan, south of Paris, the Cousin de Méricourt, where he was the sole carter for the institution that had been built on the grounds of a château. It was to a peaceful, rural atmosphere to which François returned after the war. At Arcueil the Michels worked side by side with religious personnel—Marie in the kitchens and with the patients; François, as the only carter, picking up provisions, delivering laundry, and moving hospital goods to and from central stores in Paris. After the war he was most content working with the horses, keeping a few chickens, and cultivating a garden. The following year the couple’s son Jacques was born and the family was complete—with the provision of private school and a piano for the daughter and trips to the department stores for Marie and to the Montsouris and Luxembourg parks for the children. There would be one more move, when the department of public assistance eliminated its use of horses in 1924 and therefore had no further need of a carter. The family then relocated to the enormous Bicêtre hospital, in the banlieue of Kremlin-Bicêtre just south of Paris, where Michel worked as a guard and carter while Marie took a second shift to be with the children until 3:00 p.m.

This Breton family history has two striking features. As a family of fonctionnaires, it performed labor much more “modern” and regulated
than the farm service in which Marie had spent her childhood and less
grueling than the peasant work of François's family that was recounted in
chapter 3. Although it is common to observe that newcomers to the city
desired this kind of protected work, it is also true that in the long-term
history of the labor force this move represents a transition from what we
think of as an atavistic form of labor to a modern one. Most funda-
mentally, this work allowed the Michel family to live together with their
children—a privilege denied married domestics like Yvonne Yven, whose
story illustrated chapter 1. This hospital work not only allowed the
family to pay for schooling, a piano, a family portrait, and other con-
sumer goods but also allowed François Michel to build his own house
in 1925. A key signal of this employment was that the Michel family
could take vacations; in addition, François Michel could retire at fifty be-
cause he had served in the war, and Marie could retire at the same time
because her health suffered from long years of work. Their working days
ended in 1932.

Their relationship with Brittany was complex. Marie’s brother Au-
guste moved to Paris after his own army service in the mid-1920s; soon all
the surviving siblings of both François and Marie lived in the Seine dé-
partement. Although some aunts and uncles remained in Brittany, the
family and its social life was essentially relocated to the Paris basin. Its
members belonged to no Breton organizations and were not practicing
Catholics. Although François was attached to the land and would have
liked to retire in Brittany—his garden came to include a chicken coop and
rabbit hutch as well as fruit trees and a vegetable garden—Marie refused
to retire there, because her painful memories of childhood humiliations
would not allow her to return. On the other hand, vacations would take
the family to Brittany during the summer, where François enjoyed help-
ing with the harvest. Finally, with the defeat of France in the summer of
1940, Marie left Paris for Brittany and François stayed to guard the house
in Paris. This was, in short, a Breton family transplanted in Paris whose
primary social life was with relatives and that retained familial ties in
Brittany, but did not develop broader social or political ties with Bretons
in Paris.

How do François and Marie fit with the many Bretons in Paris after
the Great War? Were other newcomers as fortunate as they? Did others
eschew a Breton collective identity as well?
The Great War altered and traumatized Paris in ways that can only be touched upon here. As a city with an unusually high proportion of migrants from elsewhere in France—most of them adults—it suffered from an immediate exit of over one million people with the outbreak of war and the aerial bombardment of the city at the end of August 1914. The government itself departed for Bordeaux that month, to return in December 1914. As refugees arrived from the north, mobilized soldiers like François Michel and many other provincials returned to their home pays. The departure of the bourgeoisie in particular spelled the loss of employment for many working people, particularly servants, so the immediate result of the war was considerable unemployment. However, the “slow, massive reshaping” of the labor force that followed put people to work, and by the beginning of 1917, 20 percent more people worked in Paris than before the war. Paris was the center of war production, and the inner suburbs were the site of most work, where French women and colonials worked alongside French men in munitions factories in a wartime economy “second to none” in 1918. In suburbs like Saint-Denis and the center city, people suffered through dangerous working conditions, pay inequalities, skyrocketing food costs, fuel scarcities, and wartime dangers. At the end of the war 77,000 people were again out of work in the spring of 1919; this unemployment crisis was quickly solved as women were pressured to leave munitions factories, foreign workers were laid off, and colonial workers were sent home.

The years between the Great War and the German invasion of spring 1940 are less homogeneous or bland than the term “interwar period” suggests. The 1920s brought recovery and massive immigration, when French provincials and foreigners alike found employment in the nation’s cities. By 1931 a record number of foreign-born lived in France, because it had encouraged the immigration of foreign labor after its wartime losses and decades of low birthrates. Economic crises in the 1930s changed all that, transforming France from a welcoming and integrative liberal state into a suspicious and persecutory regime that would be marked by popular anti-Semitism and xenophobia. By 1936 over 630,000 foreigners had left France, and the number of foreigners in Paris was reduced by a third. These were hard times for French workers as well, as one Breton exclaimed: “Work in town?! My poor friend, one hasn’t been able to find
work in town for a long time: the crisis there is more acute than in the countryside, and the misery greater.” Census data from 1921 to 1936, then, mask a complex reality.

The city of Paris grew to its maximum population of 2.9 million in 1921; Bretons continued to arrive: within the city limits alone there were over 117,000 in 1926 and over 125,000 in 1931. Those from the Côtes-d’Armor—already so numerous in the département of the Seine—increased from nearly 26,000 to 28,000 in 1931. Those from the Morbihan went from nearly 22,000 to nearly 27,000. Most striking: the most remote département of Brittany, the Finistère, shot from being the one with the fewest residents in Paris to the one with the greatest number in the thirty-five years between 1896 and 1931. By the early 1930s over 30,000 Finistériens lived in the capital. By contrast, the number of people from upper Brittany in Paris declined after 1911. The newcomers to Paris after the Great War originated increasingly from Brittany’s more remote areas.

These newcomers tended to concentrate in the peripheral arrondissements: the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth on the left bank, and the Eighteenth and Nineteenth on the right bank; over eleven thousand Bretons resided in each of these five arrondissements by the mid-1930s. Even more than the peripheral departments, the communes of greater Paris in the département of the Seine such as Saint-Denis grew between 1921 and 1936, attracting Bretons like the Michel family. And there they remained.

“Investing in the banlieue, these new urbanites invented a new way to live in the city,” Elise Feller writes of retirees. “This Far-West was the banlieue where one found a sort of village economy and sociability while retaining the more individualistic and free manner of the big city.” Like the Michels, other Breton retirees who had found steady work in Paris could not do without their gardens on their modest retirement incomes. The pioneering generation of Métro workers hired before the Great War retired between the wars, and Bretons more than others did not return home after retirement, “marked forever by the poverty that work in Paris had allowed them to escape.” This is precisely the story of the Breton Métro worker Jean-Marie B. and his wife Eugénie, who arrived in 1905 soon after their wedding and lived in a hotel room where the first of their four children was born. The illiterate Eugénie cleaned houses, and the two saved enough to buy a little pavillon in the early 1920s in the banlieue of Sarcelles north of Paris, helped by earlier arrivals: a sister who
worked as a domestic and a brother-in-law with the railroad. Farming their small plot, they grew and sold vegetables and fruits, expanding to the surrounding gardens with their retirement in 1933 and joining with their Italian son-in-law who bought land next door. Bad memories kept them away from Brittany, and the family transplanted to the good soil of Sarcelles.  

This generation of Métro workers, which included many Bretons, was primarily French and became even more so in the 1930s, when employment with the Métro was designated as municipal, requiring French citizenship. The regular and regulated work of the Métro employee—with a workday restricted to ten hours and given ten days of vacation, then restricted to forty-hour weeks and given thirty days of vacation in 1937—became the privilege of the French national. Many of these jobs, in the broad range from unskilled laborer to depot manager, paid little and did not require much education, but at every level they required literacy, good vision, and good health. As the Great Depression deepened, 517 applicants signed on for 100 available jobs, and in 1938 five years of residence in the département of the Seine became a job requirement. Despite these hard times and restrictions, over 16,600 men and women worked for the Métro by 1939, and among these, Bretons from the Côtes-d'Armor, Finistère, and Morbihan were the largest group.  

ARRIVING IN PARIS

Scholars have produced interviews and testimonies of Bretons in interwar Paris that enrich perspectives on their lived experience and life trajectories. Françoise Cribier and her team of researchers interviewed a generation of Parisians facing retirement in the 1970s—a generation that included many provincial-born workers who had arrived in Paris between the wars. Catherine Omnès used retirement and employer records to study the historical experience of female workers born between 1882 and 1911. In the 1990s Didier Violain tirelessly interviewed Bretons who had arrived in Paris since the 1920s, gathering fresh and frank comments on their experiences.  

By contrast, other sources are less revealing: orga-
organizations concerned with Bretons became less voluble in their concerns after the Great War and less descriptive of Breton lives, while census categories obscure detail. Consequently, information becomes less systematic but also more rich. And it is entirely clear that Bretons flooded to Paris in the 1920s.

The great majority of women surveyed by Omnès who arrived in Paris between the wars came to find a job (91 percent). This motivation was underwritten by family situations and poverty worthy of escape. Even the Ministère du Travail knew that “Paris is the great center where all the young women chased from their home town by a sorrow, an abandonment, or misfortune come to seek refuge, anonymously.” Most biographies relate this combination of the desire to earn a living in Paris with an unwillingness to continue an unhappy life at home. Emma Girard was explicit: she came to Paris in the mid-1920s to work her way out of the poverty that had plagued her for years. The eldest of nine children born in 1906 in an inland village of the Côtes-d’Armor, Emma was given over to her grandparents early on, after her parents’ worldly possessions were seized to pay off their debts. Her parents’ marriage then dissolved, and she became acquainted with the shame of poverty and of her parents’ separation as she worked on her grandparents’ farm. Despite the pleas of the teaching nuns that she continue at school, Emma was kept working in the fields, the barnyard, and the house. At the end of the Great War, Emma worked for other farms and then in a hotel and restaurant nearby, finally finding work with a fair and prosperous car dealer, a widower with children in the département capital of St. Brieuc. She took the summer off to work in a posh tourist pension on the coast, where she saw luxury and kindness—but also a life of service. Back at St. Brieuc she grasped at a slender chance, asking one of the car delivery men who went to Paris weekly to find her a good job there, and soon she left to work in a restaurant near the Renault factory in Boulogne-Billancourt. One of her sisters came along. By the summer of 1931 she had married a restaurant customer: an electrician who worked for Renault.

Did many Bretons arrive in Paris at this time knowing no one, like Emma? Or did newcomers operate within the migrant networks that are emphasized by migration historians? On one hand Paris was a well-known destination for Bretons, desirable for its employment (as difficult as were the jobs available), but on the other hand not everyone had a relative or a friend who had taken that path. Over one-third of the
women surveyed by Omnès born in 1901 (35 percent) arrived in Paris alone, and even more (40 percent) had no relatives in Paris—others arrived with their husbands (40 percent), many immediately after marriage. Françoise Cribier studied men and women born in about 1907, of whom about one-fifth had come to Paris knowing no one (17 percent of the women and 22 percent of the men), but many had family in Paris (64 percent of the women and 59 percent of the men), and fewer had an acquaintance (11 percent of the women and 17 percent of the men); a third had married, many just before they moved. Generally speaking, family had a greater presence than friends.

This is certainly true for those who told their stories of arrival to Didier Violain, like Jean-Marie Poupon from the Loire-Atlantique, one of ten children whose brother got him a factory job upon arrival in 1929, and Jules Trémel from a village in the bretonnant Côtes-du-Nord—also one of ten children—whose older brother would pioneer Bretons socialists in Saint-Denis. When she boarded the train for Paris in 1927, Jeannette Favennece from the bretonnant Finistère, who had ten siblings, was responding to the urging of her two older sisters who had gone to Paris and had married there. “They talked to me about this city full of people, noise, and light and they had told me to join them. They had assured me that they would find me work and that they would put me up.” Favennece recalls that her aunt had taken her to the nearby town to put her on the train “with my suitcase, my Pleyben coiffe, and my stomach in knots. I must have looked like a real Bécassine!”

“But it was all so new for me,” continued Favennece, who would marry a railroad worker and spend her life in greater Paris; “I had never been out of Pleyben and I was taking the train for the first time.” Indeed, the train to Paris was a great and memorable adventure, and the compartment a movable liminal space. Although most studies of migration neglect it, that journey was clearly crucial, even for those who stayed within their own country. For Favennece it was frightening: a man entered the compartment and brusquely closed the shades. Petrified, she grabbed her suitcase and went out into the corridor: “It was out of the question to stay alone with an unknown man, and even more so to speak to him. And besides I spoke French very badly.” She saw two nuns on the fold-down chairs (strapotins) in the corridor, and in tears explained what had happened. They invited her to join them, and she did not leave their side until arrival in Paris.
The train that carried newcomers from the Breton countryside to Paris seems to have been the space in which many people realized the import of their departure, and in many cases their lack of preparation for what was to come. Some were fortunate in their fellow passengers, like Germaine, who left her three siblings in Quimper in 1924 at seventeen, knowing not a soul in Paris; she was invited to follow her fellow passengers after arrival, and within hours she had a servant’s job in the banlieue. Many passengers spoke Breton and shared food. The Breton historian Armel Calvé, cited in chapter 2, offers a reminder that because times have changed, it is very hard for today’s reader to understand how naïve, timid, and trusting were those who left their native soil for the first time, many of whom could only babble a few words of hesitant French. Young women remained a major target of concern at the railroad stations even after the war, when it would seem that naïveté would have been on the wane.

Those people interviewed by Didier Violain stayed on in Paris, making a life in the urban area without abandoning their Breton roots. Other Bretons studied by Catherine Omné and those interviewed at the end of their working lives by Françoise Cribier did not demonstrate the same attachment to their provincial origins, and they too lived out their working lives in Paris and the banlieue. If there were long stays at home, these came at the height of the depression or during the Nazi occupation of Paris. It is impossible to know about the comings and goings of those who left, however. We only know about a few of the men—those covered by Jean-Claude Farcy’s and Alain Faure’s study of those born in 1860—and among the French, Bretons were more likely than any other group to leave the Paris basin after a short stay, usually in the banlieue rather than the city itself. We know nothing about the women, except that the Breton migration to the city of Paris was in majority female and that women generally preferred city life. It is clear, however, that many Bretons who arrived between the wars, like other newcomers, were mobile once they arrived in Paris. André Yhuellou was one, beginning in the Renault factory in Billancourt after his military service and then going on to run several cafés on the south side of Paris, in the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Arrondissements. Jean-Marie Poupon provides another trajectory: he started in metallurgy in a southeastern suburb, then laid rails, trained as a skilled carpenter, bought a little café, and ended his working life as a watchman in Saint-Denis.
SAINT-DENIS

The wartime boom brought full production to Saint Denis, along with an increase in population, full employment, terrible working conditions, degraded housing, and unjust pay differentials, as well as the stench of industrial and human waste and widespread rises in the cost of living. A brutal reconversion to the peacetime economy followed in the spring of 1919, when colonial subjects, women, and foreign wartime workers were forced to leave the factories. Companies such as Delaunay-Belleville, which had employed eleven thousand during the war, reduced their labor force considerably, but in general in the decade after the war Saint-Denis solidified its industrial infrastructure, whose success was due in no small part to the freight station on the plain that by 1939 was the most important in all of France. New industries were launched as the number of industrial buildings more than doubled in the interwar period. Established industries expanded: for example, a dyeing company that employed about 600 workers in 1900 employed 1,300 in 1925; a tannery that employed 250 in 1900 employed 750 in 1928; a construction company that contracted with the Métro and produced railroad cars went from 800 to 1,600 employees in the same period.

Saint-Denis solidified its vocation of heavy industry and large factories. By 1929, 44 percent of its companies were in metallurgical industries and 25 percent in chemical industries; among the remainder, textiles were the most important. The basic shape of the industrial spectrum remained about the same as it had been since the turn of the century. More than ever, this was a city of big industry. In 1929, 70 percent of its workers were in companies with over five hundred employees, 80 percent in companies of over a hundred. Its big metallurgical firms meant that Saint-Denis remained the “Manchester of France.” And more important, perhaps, this was a workers’ town: 68 percent of the employed population consisted of workers in 1921. With the depression this proportion was reduced to 60 percent because of the underemployment of women and the young, and Saint-Denis incurred a net loss of four thousand people. Nonetheless, this remained a quintessential worker city, even though the automobile town, Boulogne-Billancourt, outstripped it in size: in 1936 Saint-Denis had over 78,000 inhabitants, Boulogne-Billancourt 97,000.

More than ever, Saint-Denis became a home to Bretons: while they were only 6.7 percent of the population in 1891, that figure reached 9.3
percent by 1936, and the largest group was from the Côtes-d’Armor. The provincial population settled into Saint-Denis and formed families there, so that by 1936 almost half the people there had been born in the département of the Seine. With postwar prosperity, others arrived: as one Dyonisian remembered, “after the First World War . . . Algerians, Italians, Spaniards, Bretons, Africans, and many others came to the poor neighborhoods to move in, one on top of the other.” The memory of foreign immigration is important, because it would have such a bright future in Saint-Denis. Italians, already there in the 1890s, were 29 percent of the foreigners by 1926 and the Spanish, new with the Great War, were 30 percent of the foreigners by then. These groups performed unskilled labor, unlike the Belgians, Swiss, and Russians. At this time there were only a few hundred North Africans, who stayed on after the war—the poorest of all Dyonisians, they would later become the most important of immigrants. But between the wars the city had more Bretons than foreign-born. Of all the social and mutual aid clubs in interwar Saint-Denis—sixty-nine of them, including veterans’ groups, alumni groups, and groups dedicated to sports, music, and hobbies—only one was a regional association, and that was the Bretons of Saint-Denis.

Bretons worked everywhere in this banlieue. Like the future leader Jean Trémal they labored for the railroad, and like his brother Jules they stained their hands and faces in the dyeworks; they cleared the way for new buildings and moved heavy stock. And some continued to work the land, like the grandmother of René Kersanté, who arrived in sabots from the town of Broons in the Cotes-d’Armor in 1924 to become a market gardener who sold her produce at the Halles of Paris. A survey of electors in 1933 shows that most male Breton workers did not labor at an occupation demanding a real apprenticeship; they were rather, for example (in descending numbers), day laborers and unspecialized workers, gas company workers, factory drivers, earthmovers, carters, and layers of rail. Smaller numbers worked at jobs that required training, such as machinists, mechanics, electricians, skilled carpenters, and tanners. Most Bretons in Saint-Denis were men, who made up more than twice the proportion of the Breton community in Saint-Denis as they did in the city of Paris. But like the men, most Breton women held jobs that demanded little training; as Catherine Omnès has shown, women from the provinces paid dearly for their lack of education and apprenticeships. Many found their first job in services: as domestics, waitresses, or shop
cleaners. When Bretonnes went into industry their work was most often unskilled, like that of the workers producing pharmaceuticals and beauty products for the Thibaud-Gibbs company.\textsuperscript{64}

This home to Bretons was notoriously ugly and unsanitary—more than ever, a contrast with its glorious royal past. In 1929 Daniel Halévy reflected on the irrelevance of the distinguished basilica in the city, on “the bitter human mold that now covers the plain of Abbeys and kings, giving to the ancient basilica the air of an enormous and enigmatic wreck—one of those mammoths that hunters sometimes find intact under the snow and ice of Siberia.”\textsuperscript{65} Others were more matter of fact, like Jacques Valdour, whom Alain Faure calls “the knowledgeable connoisseur of popular milieus of this period . . . who did factory work and lived in garnis just about everywhere in Paris.”\textsuperscript{66} After the war Valdour published \textit{Ateliers et taudis de la banlieue de Paris: Observations vécues}, recounting his work and lodging throughout the Seine département. In Saint-Denis he took lodging in a \textit{hotel garni} with about fifteen small apartments for young people, single men, and households—but children were rare. Dark, worn, drafty, and depressing, his lodging at the back of a courtyard was nonetheless swept clean. Upon entry, however, he was seized by the stench from the outhouses in the courtyard, which followed him upstairs and poisoned the entire building.\textsuperscript{67}

The fascist and future collaborator Pierre Drieu la Rochelle described Saint-Denis in bitter and sarcastic terms when he visited the basilica in 1935, writing: “it’s truly a Royal Avenue. Between the giant \textit{gazomètres} going at full speed lay the open tombs of the forty kings who created France.” And about the basilica: “an absurd beauty, lost, unbearable, disgusting, this beauty that has bubbled up into a foreign century.”\textsuperscript{68} For this author, who was not alone, Saint-Denis was a political anathema as well as an aesthetic one, for this “red city” was a powerful force among the socialist and communist municipalities that would make up the Red Belt around Paris. Jean-Paul Brunet has expertly related the dramatic political story of Saint-Denis, which elected a socialist city government in 1912 and communist councils beginning in the 1920s.\textsuperscript{69} The politics of Saint-Denis were a nightmare for those who wanted to protect the souls of Bretons, as had the abbé François Cadic, and indeed the Bretons of Saint-Denis continued to be an articulated object of concern for the church in the Paris basin. Yet neither the Breton Parish nor the forces of conservatism had much success in Saint-Denis between the wars. Dechristianization
was part of life in Saint-Denis as elsewhere in the Paris banlieue: although almost half the marriages in Saint-Denis had been matched by a religious ceremony in 1910–12, that proportion was reduced to 43.6 percent in 1920–22, then 42.7 percent in 1935–37. The Pardon of the Bretons of Saint-Denis that gathered twenty thousand people in the first annual event of 1938, unlike the Breton Pardons that were penitential processions, was an entirely secular affair.

For many Bretons, worker solidarity offered the best way to help their compatriots. These Bretons became part of the twenty years of workers’ struggles, strikes, and demonstrations that in the end united the workers of Saint-Denis. Jean Trémel from the Côtes-d’Armor decided to take this path, founding the Groupe des Socialistes Bretons in 1898 and going on to be elected to the socialist city government and then elected adjunct major in 1912. As his nephew remembers, “Imagine what it meant for Bretons to be able to explain their problems to the adjunct mayor in their mother tongue!” Difficulties were considerable for Saint-Denis workers like his father, who had arrived to join his brother in Saint-Denis before he was fourteen years old and had labored at the Combes dye works with others who were recognizable on the street on Sundays by their stained hands and faces, working as they did without protection. The brothers Jean and Jules Trémel made a life’s work of political and union organizing with a cohort of militant Bretons who helped to give Saint-Denis the reputation of a combative worker city and the capital of the Red Belt. Jules would be elected to the city government nine times, sponsored by the Communist Party beginning in 1925. In the 1930s solidarity and radicalism went hand in hand in Saint-Denis with the formation of the amicale of the Bretons of Saint-Denis in 1933 and the sale in the streets of the Breton communist paper, War Sao (debout): Organe central des bretons émancipés de la région parisienne. When “Saint-Denis la Rouge” voted in a communist government in 1925, red flags began to decorate the marriage room of the city hall.

Bretons Marry in Saint-Denis

Although more Bretons married in Saint-Denis in 1925 than earlier, the marriage records reveal less: children born before the wedding no longer appear on the record, and the law now called for only two witnesses. Neither age nor relationship to the bride and groom is noted for wit-
nesses, although relationship can sometimes be inferred from the surname. Furthermore, the capacity to sign the marriage records ceases to distinguish one group from another because literacy was nearly universal among the brides and grooms of 1925. Perhaps most serious, either the brides or the city hall of Saint-Denis ceased to distinguish between housekeepers and women who were not in the labor force, so that nearly a third of brides simply declared themselves “sans profession.” This common but frustrating title masks women’s lives as effectively as the lack of notations about children or about witnesses’ relation to the couple. Yet the “sans profession” of the poor mère de famille masked the busyness of her life: bringing up coal from the basement, hauling laundry, raising children, making meals, and an endless round of cleaning and washing, all in a small space.73 The legacy of the Great War added one new piece of information: the record notes decorated veterans. For example, when a meat merchant from the northern banlieue of Stains, Henri Trochu, stood up for his butcher brother at his wedding to a clerk from the Côtes-d’Armor, it was noted that he had earned a Croix de Guerre, the medal awarded for bravery in the face of the enemy.74

Other changes distinguished this group from those who married before the war. Brides in Saint-Denis had always been young to marry, and continued to marry at the median age of twenty-three, but grooms married younger than ever before, at twenty-five; this was a sign of their higher standard of living.75 In this sense François Gourmelen and Marie Morin are typical: both children of Breton peasant families from inland villages, he a coachman on the east side of the city and she a nurse in Saint-Denis, they married at twenty-five and twenty-three. Marie’s sister, brother-in-law, and parents came to the wedding—the sister from the banlieue just southwest of Paris, the parents from their village in the Côtes-d’Armor.76 Younger grooms like Jean Cornet, a machinist from the Côtes-d’Armor who married at twenty-two, and Georges Cervel, a chauffeur from the Finistère who married at twenty-three, tipped the balance; both had fathers who worked the land and both married women who were not from Brittany.77 Other parents had come to work in this booming town. Some marriage partners married young because they were living in the bosom of their family and had no need to support themselves away from home before marriage—the same position in which young Parisians found themselves (see Appendix, table 1).

The migration streams to Saint-Denis had shifted in the years since
1910, so that the Côtes d’Armor no longer contributed more than half of the Breton brides and grooms in Saint-Denis. They remained the largest group, but a quarter came from the Finistère, that westernmost département of lower Brittany, whose emigrants surged into Paris after the war. More came from upper Brittany as well, and about one in six was from the Morbihan. Thus Breton migration to Saint-Denis continued, but it was more varied. In the main, this remained a rural movement that only rarely included Bretons from Nantes, Brest, or Saint-Nazaire.78

Marriage with a compatriot decreased: whereas at one time two-thirds of Bretons married a fellow Breton, now only one-third did. This is one signal that the Bretons of Saint-Denis were becoming better integrated with the population of the Paris basin and the community that included children of Bretons. The Breton women in Saint-Denis married out more than before, as the women of the Fourteenth Arrondissement had in the past; in 1925 the largest group of marriages (40 percent) joined a Breton bride with a groom from elsewhere. They married men from Saint-Denis, from Paris, and from abroad, but primarily fellow newcomers to greater Paris. This group, which consisted primarily of day laborers, included Jeanne Guézénnec, from a family of laborers in the village of Plougonver that had sent so many people to Saint-Denis; she married a blacksmith from eastern France at twenty-five, attended by two day laborers at her address, one of whom was a relative.79 Other Bretonnes had more specialized work, like the several nurses living in Saint-Denis; these included Anne Chauvin, a mason’s daughter from an inland market town in the Morbihan who at twenty-three married a mason from the Vienne, southwest of Paris; a fellow nurse stood up for her.80 These women whose nursing career followed an established Breton pattern rarely married day laborers but rather more skilled masons, engine operators, machine fitters, and plumbers. We learn from such couples, once again, that social life in the Paris basin stretched beyond the neighborhood and regional companions. The city and its banlieue served as a melting pot that included Bretons.

In the 1920s some Bretonnes married men born abroad: this was a time when Saint-Denis attracted many foreign workers. The grooms, from Algeria, Italy, Martinique, and Mexico, fit no profile, except that none was an unskilled laborer. Vincent Ducini from the banks of Lake Como in northern Italy was among the southern Europeans drawn to Saint-Denis between the wars. A skilled wire maker, Ducini married Léonie Abiven, a
seamstress and storekeepers’ daughter from the town of Rosporden in the Finistère. The bride and groom were twenty-one and twenty-six. A fellow Italian wire maker stood up for Ducini, a salesman for Léonie. More than ever before, foreigners were part of the horizon of possibilities for all women in Paris.81

Nevertheless, some marriages reflect a close Breton community, like those of Louise and Melanie Poquet, sisters from a small town in the Finistère who married only minutes apart on a November afternoon—each with a worker in Saint-Denis from her home département. Louise married a fellow day laborer from her hometown at twenty-one; her sister, two years older, married a tramway worker from the next arrondissement. The grooms were twenty-three and twenty-five. No parents were in attendance, but the sisters’ widowed mother sent her consent. Their day laborer sister, or perhaps cousin, and her husband served as witnesses to both weddings, and everyone except the tramway worker lived at the same address in the crowded center city.82

By 1925 the Bretons of Saint-Denis had emerged from the insularity they had demonstrated at the end of the nineteenth century. Contacts among Bretons continued to stretch across Paris in the mid-1920s, joining the Breton men and women of Saint-Denis with partners in Paris and the banlieues. More likely to marry with people from other regions, they also came from a greater variety of home places—urban as well as rural, from the Finistère and upper Brittany as well as the Côtes-d’Armor. Nearly all, with the exception of one woman, signed the marriage document. Perhaps more important, the Bretons of Saint-Denis had better jobs than ever before. Only one-sixth of the men worked as day laborers, and 28 percent had jobs classified as unskilled labor—a dramatic decrease from 52 percent in 1910 (and 76 percent in 1890); the trend was similar for women. About one-sixth of both brides and grooms had a white-collar position like those in the railroads and tramways, business offices, and stores. Although many were unskilled laborers, as a group Bretons were no longer the dregs of the Saint-Denis labor force.

THE FOURTEENTH ARRONDISSEMENT

The Great War made its mark on the Fourteenth Arrondissement, beginning with the unemployment of domestic servants whose employers had left the city. François Cadic warned aspiring maids in the fall of 1914 that
“job offers have been reduced to nothing . . . stay at home, oh, you who are in Brittany, you will live there much better than in Paris in this unhappy time of war.” Work for couturières entered a prolonged crisis, exacerbated by the more simple styles of women’s dress. As elsewhere in Paris, the mayor’s office sponsored wartime charities, soup kitchens, municipal butcher shops and grocery stores, and clothing and heating fuel aid. Neighborhood solidarity responded to the German bombardment in April 1918 that killed twenty birthing women, newborns, and midwives-in-training in the maternity hospital on the boulevard Port-Royal. Unlike Saint-Denis, this arrondissement did not maintain the spectacular kind of wartime industry that made the banlieue thrive, but nonetheless the Fourteenth Arrondissement grew, filling out and filling in its rural spaces and seeing its population increase by over 7,700 to 171,292 in 1921.

Change began at the margins, as the old city fortifications were destroyed after the war, exposing the “zone” just beyond the walls to city life. Home to gypsies and colonies of rag pickers, and known to be dangerous for its young “Apaches” and poor of all ages, the zone was an unregulated space of gardens, vacant space, shacks of wood and corrugated iron, caravans, the “Bois de Boulogne of the poor” on Sundays. By 1926 an estimated 42,000 people inhabited the zone around Paris—and the zoniers would not be removed until the 1940s. Gradually the city would settle and build up this space, beginning in 1920 with the massive Cité Universitaire project, a complex on nearly a hundred acres where fourteen international pavilions would add a student neighborhood to the arrondissement. Stadia and price-controlled housing would soon cover the rest of the space, and the Boulevard Périphérique would cut it off definitively from the banlieues beyond in the early 1970s. A few farms that survived the interwar period sold milk and eggs in the neighborhood as the Fourteenth Arrondissement increasingly built up and crowded into the working-class Plaisance neighborhood around the railroad tracks. In 1919 most of the neighborhood—a long stretch of the Fourteenth Arrondissement along the railroad tracks—was officially designated one of the seventeen îlots insalubres of Paris for its unsanitary housing and high tuberculosis rate. By contrast, large, distinguished buildings lined the boulevard Montparnasse and the other grand avenues; small houses of one or two stories lined smaller lanes, survivors of an earlier time. But this was no country town: the Fourteenth Arrondissement was alive with entertainment and a significant intellectual and artistic life between the wars. Like Saint-Denis,
it furnished movie houses and shows, bars and cafés, but in addition the Fourteenth Arrondissement was home to painters, sculptors, and singers from France like Georges Brassens and foreigners like Alberto Giacometti. The modernist art critic, poet, and author from Quimper, Max Jacob, began his Paris life in nearby rented rooms, but by this time had decamped to Montmartre. Montparnasse intellectuals gathered in famous watering holes like La Coupole, as well as places that would feed the poor artist, like the modest Chez Rosalie behind the boulevard Montparnasse. Those in search of fun had their choice in the nearby cabarets like the Jockey, and prostitutes were easy to find.

Nothing if not heterogeneous, the Fourteenth Arrondissement carried the reputation of a Breton neighborhood. The wisest historians of Paris agree, however, that the city did not have an ethnic enclave in this period but rather was large and complex enough to house disparate groups side by side; indeed, Alain Faure demonstrates that the famous rue Lappe can be shown to have been remarkably Parisian, remarkably Auvergnat, or remarkably Italian. Nonetheless, the Breton population was increasingly important in the Fourteenth—growing from 9,455 in 1926 to 14,400 in 1936—an increase from 5.5 percent of the city’s population to 8.1 percent—and the neighborhood near the Montparnasse railroad station has been called “little Brittany” by Bretons and historians alike. Nonetheless, this area has a special meaning to Bretons between the wars.

Juliette Violain, from upper Brittany, testifies that “of course, it wasn’t completely Brittany, but it wasn’t really Paris either. Montparnasse oscillated between the two, ambiguous and ambivalent. . . . like all border zones.” Restaurants, shops, and cabarets in the neighborhood welcomed their Breton clientele. The well-known author Pierre-Jakez Hélias, whose book *Horse of Pride* explains Breton life at the time, explains: “One word we often heard was ‘Montparnasse,’ a district in Paris where the Bretons lived as a group, much as they had at home.” Childhood recollections from this period include the sight of Bretonnes in costume and coiffe coming to communion at Notre-Dame du Travail in the Plaisance. After arriving in Paris in 1924 and working as a cook, the Finistérienne Mélanie-Marie Tumet-Le Fur opened her crêperie near the boulevard
Montparnasse, in a neighborhood that increasingly had Breton hotels and cafés. Between the wars establishments with names like Au Rendez-Vous des Bretons, Hotel de Bretagne, and more specifically A la Ville de Douarnenez and A la Ville de Pont-Aven dotted the neighborhood. Monsieur and Madame Beuzen, also from the Finistère, opened the best-known Breton café and nightspot, Ti Jos, in 1937. Clients could speak Breton in such gathering spots, as well as at street dances throughout the neighborhood; the door of the Pharmacie Principale announced, “aman e komzerhrezhoneg” (Breton spoken here). This welcoming community plays an important role in narratives of arrival for its café conversations and advice—as it did for Monsieur B., who headed for Montparnasse because he heard there were Bretons there, and picked up job advice from a fellow client in a Breton café, advice that got him lifelong employment with the railroad in the banlieue. The Fourteenth Arrondissement, and Montparnasse in particular, offered a new beginning to Bretons, but it was not simply a space for transient newcomers, or for workers alone: it also included shop owners, pharmacists, and restaurateurs who would remain and in some cases prosper.98

The Fourteenth Arrondissement offered many kinds of work between the wars. The abbé Cadic was among those who wanted women to return to domestic service, although women sought and preferred other kinds of jobs after the war: “You want to go to the movies every night, go dancing, play the role of fine ladies . . . the wisest among you have found the road back to domestic work, do as they do. Leave the typewriters and shorthand. It’s better to amass some thousand franc bills as a domestic than to wander the streets of Paris looking for jobs that you will never find in commerce and in offices.”99 He was correct that Breton women would rarely find office jobs: even after the war newcomers from rural areas often began their careers in Paris as domestics, as waitresses, or in other service jobs, because they lacked the education and training that could prepare them for white-collar positions.100 But many Bretonnes preferred the autonomy of having their own free time after working hours and the feeling of being with members of their own class rather than stranded in a bourgeois household. Thus women without training entered the factory—women like Camille, a Bretonne who worked in the Say sugar refinery in the neighboring Thirteenth Arrondissement from 1922 to 1945. Grueling work damaged her fingers, but Camille found the long days bearable, beginning at 7 a.m. and concluding at 6 p.m., especially before 1936; after
that the pace of work was set to a relentless machine, and conversations with friends were lost in the process. Women were able to find non-service employment in the Fourteenth Arrondissement during the prosperous 1920s.

Breton men in this part of town continued to work in transportation and laboring jobs. The 272 Bretons living in the Thirteenth Arrondissement who were members of the conservative Catholic La Bretagne society afford some insight into how men made a living in 1931. Only about sixty of them had a profession that required real training, aside from the thirty-six railroad employees. The greatest number labored as terrassiers, the others as miscellaneous workers and day laborers; employees of the Métro, trams, and narrow-gauge trains numbered seventeen, and thirty-six more Bretons worked for the national railroad. Nearly two-thirds of these men were from the Finistère, the most remote department of Brittany, whose arrivals in Paris were most recent, and only about 8 percent were from upper Brittany; nearly 20 percent were from the Morbihan and about 10 percent from the Côtes-d’Armor—so these workers doubtless do not represent the most skilled members of the Breton community.

Workers or not, it is instructive to analyze whom these men and women in Paris married during the prosperous 1920s, and the profile that they yield of Bretons in the city.

**Bretons Marry in the Fourteenth Arrondissement**

Although more Bretons married in Paris in 1925 than earlier, the marriage records reveal less, as they do in Saint-Denis. As elsewhere, the legacy of the Great War was clear from the practice of identifying decorated veterans, even in the most humble cases: When Georgette Charpentier, a daughter of cultivateurs and a chambermaid, married a Paris-born machine operator, a family member who was a valet de chambre and probably her brother or uncle stood up for her, and records noted that he had earned a Croix de Guerre.

The profile of Breton marriages changes discernibly. The Bretons who married in the Fourteenth Arrondissement in 1925, like those in Saint-Denis, did so at an earlier age than ever before. Breton women, whose mean age of first marriage had been nearly twenty-eight in 1890 and twenty-six in 1910, now married at twenty-five, with a median age of
twenty-three; for Breton grooms, who had married at thirty and then at twenty-eight, the mean age of first marriage was now twenty-six, with a median age of twenty-five. People could afford to marry younger than ever before. Young women like the shop worker Marie Dejouers demonstrate the new marriage pattern: from the village of Lambézellec just outside Brest, she married the Brestois machine operator Pierre Vantrou; at the time of their May marriage she was nineteen and he was twenty-four. Their widowed mothers did not attend, but a Breton sculptor and a workmate of Pierre from the neighborhood served as witnesses.∞≠∞

Some Bretons married young because according to marriage records they, like many in Saint-Denis and like native-born Parisians, lived with their parents. Family migration and support facilitated early marriage because family often underwrote the occupational training, lodging, and social life that could enhance one’s prospects. A couple from the town of Lorient in the Morbihan provides an illustration: Jean Kerlidou and Madeleine Goardet each lived with their parents in the Plaisance quarter of the Fourteenth Arrondissement a few blocks away from one another—he worked as an iron pipe fitter, and she as a bookbinder; their fathers were workers, their mothers housekeepers. When they married in January 1925 Madeleine was nineteen and Jean was twenty-two. A Breton couple from the northeast suburb of Le Lilas, plumber and dressmaker, witnessed the wedding.∞≠≤ Yet only a minority of marriage partners lived with their parents, and as of 1925 the majority of brides and grooms reported the same address as their partner at the time of their marriage—a notable trend for those who married fellow Bretons, as well as those who married outsiders.∞≠≥

The largest proportion of brides and grooms come from the Finistère, continuing the surge in migrations from that département. They were now over a third of the Bretons who married, while a smaller proportion came from the Côtes-d’Armor. Fewer came from the two départements of upper Brittany—together about the same proportion as from the Côtes-d’Armor. Likewise, somewhat fewer came from the Morbihan. In contrast to previous wedding partners, these are emphatically more urban—especially those from the Finistère. Entirely rural in 1890, many of the men who married in 1925 came from the towns of Brittany—Brest, Quimper, Lorient, Rennes, and Nantes. A few brides had come from the towns of Guingamp, Saint-Brieuc, and Nantes all along, but in 1925 Saint-Brieuc, Brest, Quimper, Lorient, Nantes, Rennes, and Vannes all gave birth to
more than one bride who married in the Fourteenth, and men were even more likely to be from urban areas. Most strikingly, Brest alone was the birthplace of eleven brides and fifteen grooms. Breton migration had not become urban, but it had come to include distinct urban migration streams: 30 percent of brides and grooms were from departmental and arrondissement capitals (see Appendix, table 2).

Marriages between Bretons had risen somewhat, from 26 percent to 30 percent in fifteen years. This is contrary to expectations, because it indicates that in the Fourteenth there was not a smooth increase in intermarriages—which classically represent assimilation, or at least integration. Evidence suggests that the Breton men available in the 1920s were more attractive marriage partners: their urban origins mean that they did not represent the peasant life that women sought to avoid. Second, the jobs available to Breton men in the 1920s offered better work than in the past, and so attracted brides who would like to share their life with a compatriot. Machine operators from the Finistère city of Brest provide concrete illustrations. André Jaffré and Armand Davalan, born a year apart in Brest, both found work as machine operators in Paris, where they lived close to each other in the Plaisance neighborhood of the Fourteenth. They married on the same day in April 1925, both to young women from Brittany. Marie-Louise Trebuil, a factory worker whose parents also lived in the Plaisance neighborhood, married Armand Davalan; two of his workmates witnessed the wedding. Cook Marie Cabillic, whose widowed father was a worker in the Morbihan, married André Jaffré; a delivery man relative—probably her brother—attended the wedding, along with a female friend who worked as a waitress. At the time of the weddings both couples lived together, and the grooms were twenty-three and twenty-five years old, the brides twenty-one and nineteen. The young Breton couple whose story is told above—the shop worker Marie and the machine operator Pierre—lived in the same building as André and Marie. These young men may well have worked in the railroad station, so near it shook apartment windows. Young couples like these gave the Plaisance neighborhood its Breton flavor, and Paris provided the work in these prosperous years.

Breton elites married in Paris as well, such as the Brestoise Augustine Henry, whose father was an inspector general in the Ministry of Public Instruction and wore the ribbon of the Chevalier de la Légion d’Honneur. At the age of eighteen she married a twenty-nine-year-old from Rennes.
who was a professor at the Faculty of Letters in Toulouse; his father was dean of the faculty of letters in Rennes. Another chevalier and professor signed as witnesses. Similarly, educated Bretons with a bright future came to Paris, like two pharmacy students, twenty-five and twenty-three—he was from the Finistère, with a customs inspector family witness. The student bride was from Pontivy in the Morbihan—her widowed father was a lycée bursar working in northern France. The educated urban elite of Brittany had greater access to Paris by the 1920s and married there while on Parisian or more nationwide trajectories.

Nonetheless, 49 percent of the marriages joined a Bretonne with a man born outside Brittany, and these marriages continued to outnumber by a healthy margin those that joined two Bretons. These grooms were quite successful as well. More Bretonnes married Parisian men than ever before—well over a third of those who married someone from outside Brittany. Typically, Louise Plessis from the Finistère married at twenty-two with a skilled worker—Georges Douet, a Parisian joiner whose widowed mother worked nearby as a laundress; the groom was twenty-eight. Plessis’s widowed mother remained in the Finistère, but another relative who worked in the same town as a domestic—probably her sister—came to Paris to stand up for her.

A few women from Upper Brittany married professionals, like the milliner Lucie La Barrière, from the chef-lieu of Fougères in the Ille-et-Vilaine, who at thirty-one married the Savoyard engineer Marc Landeau; his father was a responsible administrator in the department of Ponts et Chaussées in eastern France. Lucie’s sister, who had divorced the previous year, stepped into a different social niche when she married an automobile chauffeur the following week. Their widowed mother, a shopkeeper living on the Norman coast north of their birthplace, did not attend the weddings.

Seven Bretonnes married men born abroad in the 1920s—a very small proportion, but still an indication of changing circumstances when foreign immigration was substantial and there were many jobs to be had in the Paris basin. Léonie Le Roy, a daughter of cultivateurs from the Morbihan, followed a longstanding pattern by working as a domestic cook and delaying marriage, in her case to the age of thirty-eight. Yet her choice of husband came with the 1920s: Carlo Perrelli, a chauffeur from a small town near Venice who lived nearby. Marie’s distinguished employer, whom she had probably served for years, Chevalier de la Légion
d’Honneur and decorated veteran of the Great War, attended the wedding. Although marriage with an Italian may have been somewhat unusual for Breton women, most Italian immigrants were men, and likely to marry French women. These foreign grooms did not fit in one mold: they included a metal worker, hotel employees, a mason, and a chauffeur, from Switzerland, Martinique, Algeria, Belgium, and Italy.

Breton networks continued to stretch across the Paris basin in the mid-1920s, joining the men and women of the Fourteenth Arrondissement with the area between the former city limits and the suburbs, banlieues such as Malakoff and Montrouge to the south and Saint-Denis to the north. Marie Le Morellec, from just outside Saint-Malo, married a Breton from an inland village of the Côtes-d’Armor who lived in Saint-Denis. Arrondissement and city borders may have been drawn according to real barriers like grand boulevards, railroad lines, and the limits of the zone surrounding the city, but men and women did not hesitate to cross them.

Bretons who married in the Fourteenth in 1925 reflected a developing community in a prosperous age. They came from farther away than ever before—the tip of lower Brittany. Nonetheless, the Breton men were more skilled as a group than those who had come before: 40 percent were skilled laborers, with another 27 percent in white-collar and managerial work and an equal proportion in lower skilled work. Machine fitters, machine operators, skilled carpenters, and the like were more important than ever, and the horse groom had gone the way of the horse and buggy, although chauffeurs and carters remained. They worked in stores, offices, the tram, and the Métro. And over a quarter of the Breton brides had white-collar work in stores and offices, where two were typists and another two were telephone operators. Otherwise women’s work did not offer chances for so much advancement; over a third of the brides worked in lower-skilled jobs and nearly another third as skilled workers. Bretonnes were still those who took jobs as cooks and domestics, and proportionally fewer than before worked as nurses and dressmakers.

Generally speaking, a larger proportion of brides and grooms came from Brittany’s urban areas such as Brest. A greater number of grooms were from Paris itself, so intermarriage between Parisians and Bretons reached its peak with this group. Yet Bretons were also slightly more likely to intermarry than before the Great War, probably because they had more to offer one another. These younger and more skilled Bretons mar-
ried earlier. Other Bretons followed the longstanding pattern of late marriage after a prolonged stint as a domestic servant. A smaller group, protected by the presence of their families and in some cases education and social standing, married early and seem to have set off for a life of relative comfort. Those with less social standing were even more likely than ever to live with their partner before the wedding. And everyone could read and write. By their choice of partner, Bretons in this part of Paris both attended to their own community and joined the city; they may have lived on the southern edge of the town, but they were by no means marginal in their family formation or their work.

As these Bretons set up a life in the city, middle-class girls and their families were exposed to a very specific Breton character in the comic character of Bécassine.

**BÉCASSINE AND VICTORINE**

Between the wars Bécassine’s popularity reached a peak. The girls’ magazine *Semaine de Suzette* sold up to 200,000 copies, and department stores prominently displayed the annual albums (on occasion, with a salesgirl dressed as Bécassine). Bécassine products expanded to their greatest range as well: marketing began in earnest at the war’s end, first with the trademarked Bécassine doll in 1919, advertised as the unbreakable “little Breton heroine” of the comic strip. A host of related items flooded the stores: charming stationery for children, songs, chocolates, and piggy-banks. More dolls, plaster statues, jam pots, sugar bowls, children’s play utensils, yarn boxes, umbrella handles, patterns from which Bécassine costumes could be made, and Bécassine yarns went on sale in the 1920s and 1930s, echoed by homemade dolls. These derivative products gave Bécassine a presence in the middle-class home, primarily decorating the lives of her young fans.

This comic character combined the old-fashioned vocation of servant with the life of the modern consumer. In the first postwar album Bécassine returns to domestic work as a cook after a series of comic tries at the more modern occupations of model, sports guide, and antique buyer—“A servant in the old style! A pearl!” exclaims her employer. She soon becomes the nanny for the marquise’s adopted daughter Lou-lotte; it was in her role as nanny and companion to Loulotte, who (unlike Bécassine) grew a year older every year, that Bécassine had adventures for
the next seventeen years, until the end of 1939. Bécassine acted as a loving
and patient caregiver to the orphaned Loulotte and by extension to her
young readers as well. Her activities reflected those of the well-heeled
bourgeois family: she used the telephone and gas stove, took a cruise,
drove automobiles, skied in the Alps, joined the scouts, and went to the
beach, all between 1927 and 1932. This series was kicked off by one of the
most celebrated albums, L’automobile de Bécassine, in which she wins a
fancy and powerful roadster, learns to drive, and takes a journey. This
celebration of the new technology, mobility, and tourism reflected a prosp-
erous, middle-class France.

Bécassine and her Breton roots represented a less prosperous and
knowledgeable France. She could be regularly bullied, fooled, and out-
witted; she made mistakes, suffered occasional confusion, and forgot
crucial items. Bécassine revealed her peasant roots by relating her cure for
the flu to her mistress, a cure that involved drinking a syrup concocted
from slugs—one boiled up for each year of the sick person’s life. Peas-
ants who came on the scene were by turn avaricious and amusing, mali-
ciously trying to cheat urban travelers on one hand and sharing their
wedding processions with geese and a pig, in the case of Bécassine’s
cousin Marie Quillouch. A lovable nanny was Bécassine, but a fool.

As children read Bécassine, or as it was read to them, adults were
snapping up a series of books by Roger Martin du Gard published be-
tween 1922 and 1940 under the collective title of Les Thibault. The author
of this family saga would win the Nobel Prize for literature in 1937 for the
portrait of an age, a “great sociological fresco” of the period between 1905
and 1914. It tells the story of lives divided by two worldviews, character-
ized at the prize ceremony as “that of the Catholic Church, and that of the
freethinking, unflinching, humanistic philosophy of feasting and master-
ing reality.” As the historian David Schalk writes, “the simplest use that
a historian can make of the novel is in obtaining background information
about the social and intellectual atmosphere of an epoch.” He also notes
that “a great novel is read and understood differently in each successive
generation,” and draws on Carl Becker’s observation that “each genera-
tion rewrites its own history, playing in new tricks on the dead.”

A minor character in this saga leaps out to the historian of Bretons in
Paris—one who is first introduced as “a little slut of a maid I had here, a
wretched brat of nineteen.” Hired from her seaside hometown, where
her mistress had been on vacation, and brought back to Paris, this charac-
ter fell in love with her mistress’s lover—a compulsive womanizer who would set her up in rooms from time to time, impregnate her, and forget about her. Victorine Le Gad would not retain her name in this novel but would be renamed Cricri and Rinette by lovers and employers. The madam who took her on after her baby died exclaimed, “‘Victorine’ I ask you! So I changed it to ‘Rinette.’ Not bad, eh? . . . Colin’s given her elocution lessons; she had a Breton accent you could cut with a knife; well, she’s kept just the right dash of it, a bit of a foreign twang—might be English—delicious anyhow.”

In a moment of bad conscience and temporary wealth, her former lover takes her out of a prostitute’s room and puts her on the train for Brittany, exhorting her “to leave her finery behind, cast off the harlot’s stock-in-trade, and begged her to go back, for good and all, to the simple ways, the purity of her former life,” because, as the madam had declared, “She only has one idea: to collect a little nest egg and go back to Brittany, where her home is. Damn silly, but there you are! All Bretonnes are like that. A cottage near the village pump, the usual white streamers, and plenty of processions—just Brittany, in a word!”

In Victorine Le Gad, Martin du Gard draws a character perfectly in keeping with a certain idea of Breton women: a bumpkin unsuited to Parisian life, naïve, sentimental, sexual, and on the slide from domestic service to prostitution. Other Bretons in Les Thibault fare no better. When one of the two heroes visits his professor at a later stage in the novel written in the 1930s, the door is opened by “a stupid-looking Breton maid”; catching his professor napping, he comments, “I certainly shouldn’t have been admitted, if the maid had known her job.” Martin du Gard renders those at home in Brittany as grotesque: the novel’s physician recalls vacationing at a Breton seaport when a bicephalous child was born. “Father and mother had begged the local doctor to put an end of the little monstrosity, and, when he refused to do so, the father, a notorious drunkard, had flung himself on the newborn child and attempted to strangle it. It had been necessary to secure him, lock him up. There was great excitement in the village and it was a burning topic at the dinner-tables of the summer visitors.”

Although these fine novels famously depict life in the Belle Époque, they also demonstrate that Bretons continued to be fair game between the wars for those wishing to depict naïveté, stupidity, and backwardness from the Parisian perspective.
THE BRETON COMMUNITY

The stereotypes of Breton troubles carried some truth. While other women were entering office jobs and desired shop employment or at least factory work, many Bretons were untrained, and so got their start as domestic servants or *terrassiers*. There was still great demand for each after the war, particularly during the good years of the 1920s. After all, Mélanie-Marie Tumet-Le Fur noted in an interview that she got her start as a domestic cook in 1924, and Jeanne Favennec first worked as a chambermaid in a clinic in the Fourteenth after she arrived in 1927, yet both women had long and successful lives in Paris. Likewise for Jean-Marie Poupon, who took every kind of job after his arrival in 1929, and for whom Paris work included laying rails with Portuguese and Poles.124

Other newcomers did not fare so well but slipped into alcoholism, became homeless, or earned their living in hotels “with no stars.” Germaine Campion, a twenty-four-year-old servant from the Côtes-d’Armor whom a doctor’s wife brought to Versailles in 1929 and then fired because she got drunk, spent alcoholic years doing odd jobs around the Halles, Pigalle, and Montparnasse before she recovered. Other young women worked in Montparnasse or on the rue Saint-Denis near the Halles, known for its prostitutes, turning their faces away as their compatriots passed and telling tales of good employment at home. As the Breton poet Glenmor later observed in his poem “Sodom,” “they are pretty our country girls / that Paris sees so early in the morning / they no longer cry / for their faraway Brittany / they have the laugh of a child / Paris makes them whores.”125 For men alcohol was the greater temptation. The grandfather of Guy Caro, a Breton physician who combats alcoholism, recalls that his grandfather, employed by a gasworks in the banlieue, saw Bretons drinking up to six liters of wine a day. Caro himself reasons that the combination of displacement, depression, and the ready availability of red wine close at hand—rather than cider—made a devastating combination.126

Nonetheless, in the prosperous years after the Great War concerns faded with helping poor and vulnerable Bretons. The abbé Cadic, weakened by constant work and tuberculosis, had to leave Paris.127 When he passed away in 1929 the Breton Parish did not survive him, and no equivalent organization was to take its place until after the Second World War. The task was left to the likes of curé Edmond Loutil of Saint-François-de-
Sales in the Seventeenth Arrondissement, journalist for the Catholic daily *La Croix* and prolific novelist under the name of Pierre L’Ermite. Loutil produced fiction with the intent of keeping the faithful on the road to virtue: a series of novels throughout the Belle Époque and interwar period such as *The Woman with Open Eyes* (1927). Here Loutil relates the story of a young Breton girl, Rolande, dazzled by Paris, who wisely took it as a sign that Paris was not the place for her when her dear aunt’s purse and furs were stolen while the two of them were at the communion bar in the Sacré Coeur basilica. Rolande was quickly persuaded to leave by a priest and his old mother; she deserted her worthless Paris beau for a good boy back home and took the night train out of the city. One can assume that Loutil’s *The Woman with Closed Eyes*, published the year before, had a less happy conclusion.∞≤∫

Pious Bretons were less active as helpers than as worshipers, like those who joined the annual pilgrimage to Sacré Coeur in Montmartre; over a thousand of these were Finistériens in national costume in 1923. Two years later a special train brought over five hundred costumed peasants to a series of services in three churches, ending in the company of the Maréchal Foch at the Arc de Triomphe at the tomb of the unknown soldier.∞≤Ω The standard-bearer for a more secular Breton care and solidarity, Dr. René Le Fur’s weekly *Le breton de Paris*, ceased publication in May 1923.

I do not suggest that the Breton community became less numerous or coherent. On the contrary, it grew to an estimated 200,000 in greater Paris by the mid-1930s.∞≥≠ Interwar Bretons in Paris included more self-conscious, educated, skilled, and powerful Bretons than ever before, and a smaller proportion of the unskilled rurals who had come to clean the kitchens and build the Métros of Paris, those who had been characterized as the “pariahs of Paris” in 1898.∞≥∞ The black-and-white Breton national flag—which would have a bright future—was designed about 1923. The Breton press in Paris was energized that same year when Louis Beaufrère began to publish the weekly *La Bretagne à Paris*, modeled on the paper of Le Fur and equally interested in promoting Breton identity and solidarity. Called “the official organ of the federation of Breton societies in the Seine,” the paper gave free publicity and news of Breton societies—and these increased in number as associative life grew. The federation included all sorts of groups: those organized around département of birth, literary interests (*La Pomme*), athletics (*Le Club Sportif des Bretons des
Paris), student life (L'Association des Étudiants Bretons de Paris), and professional life (L'Amicale des Médecins de Bretagne). Most of these were only active within the city limits, but the sports club drew from greater Paris and grew quickly after it was founded in 1925, adding teams for football, tennis, basketball, cycling, and various forms of wrestling. The growth of the sports club indicates that a certain number of Bretons were not too exhausted by work to be able to play. Or to dance—for street dances throughout the city and in the banlieue included *Bals bretons* on the national holiday of 14 July and throughout the warm-weather months, where Bretons met and mixed.∞≥≤

Bretons founded thirteen other groups in the banlieue, like Les Bretons d'Aulnay-sous-Bois. The Amicale des Bretons de Saint-Denis stood apart for its power and explicit leftist politics. It organized the Pardon of Saint-Denis beginning in 1936—a gathering and manifestation based on the Breton tradition of the religious Pardon, but completely secular. Thousands of Bretons attended: an estimated twenty thousand in 1938 and thirty thousand in 1939. Other organizations stood outside the federation: the creative group of artisans called the seven brothers, “Seiz-Breur,” and creative groups such as the Clairière Parisienne, for “druids, bards, and *ovates*.”∞≥≥ These groups belie the Breton stereotype of individualism and inability to organize.

Two years after the founding of the newspaper *La Bretagne à Paris*, the annual election began of a young woman to be the Duchesse des Bretons de Paris, sponsored by the federation of Sociétés Bretonnes de Paris. This was the doing of the newspaper editor, Beaufrère.∞≥∂ Hearkening back to the Duchess Anne of Brittany, whose marriage to two French kings joined the province with the nation of France, the postulants wore impeccable Breton garb. Delegates from each society voted in a two-round election, and the final round was held at a dinner dance on the left bank, at which the duchess—she who had a clear majority—was crowned. The elected young woman led the procession to the celebration of Saint-Yves each year on 19 May, and then on to Mass, riding a white horse and dressed in sixteenth-century robes.∞≥∑

Nonetheless, neither Breton organizations nor celebrations suited every Breton in greater Paris. Many who attended the festivities surrounding the annual Saint-Yves celebration in May or the warm-weather street dances abstained from Breton associations. None of the interviewees of Françoise Cribier belonged to regional associations. Neither
Yvonne Yven (chapter 2) nor François and Marie Michel (chapters 3 and 4) associated themselves with Breton organizations. Organized Breton identity was a part of the world of Bretons in Paris, yet only a part.

For members of the Breton nationalist movement, this identity was fundamental and political. Centered in Brittany, the Breton movement was affirmed and politicized between the wars. This movement’s long-standing and complex history dates from the founding during the Belle Époque of the Union Régionaliste Bretonne, led by the Marquis de l’Estourbeillon, a legislative deputy who played an important role as president of the Société La Bretagne described in chapter 3. The URB represented the conservative, aristocratic, and clerical interests that emphasized Breton language and literature. After the Great War the second Emsav, or uprising, began with the founding of the Groupe Régionaliste Breton in 1918. The Breton nationalism of the 1930s was rooted in several organizations with some publications, the most important of which was Breiz Atao! (Brittany forever), and drew primarily from the extreme right. This regionalism would reflect the important ideologies of the times, including socialism, but also fascism and racism for a Breton nationalism that looked to Ireland—and then Germany—for inspiration.∂

Breton nationalism became visible in the Paris of the late 1930s, at a time when the French state would come to explicitly support regionalism. Violent action brought national attention, first in 1932 when members of a secret society blew up the statue of Duchess Anne kneeling before the King of France in front of the Rennes City Hall. This statue had long been a sore point with Breton loyalists; Le breton de Paris and René Le Fur had campaigned for a replacement in 1912 because it symbolized the joining of Brittany with France in a way that demeaned Brittany. The statue finally met its end in August 1932, when President Édouard Herriot was in Brittany to celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of the union of Brittany with France. When Herriot returned in November for a similar celebration, the railroad lines were sabotaged on the Franco-Breton border. These actions held importance for many nationalists but remained irrelevant for most Bretons; and for the educated like the famous Breton writer Pierre-Jakez Hélias, then a student in Rennes, it was an old, irrelevant story.∂ Some Breton nationalists, writers, and organizers would take up residence—at least part time—in Paris. Herry Caouissin, who plays an important role in this history, arrived in 1932.∂
By 1935 Bécassine had been published for thirty years, and perhaps the creative energies of the author, Maurice Langereau, were running low as he approached the age of seventy. The stories published after this date, such as *Bécassine en roulette*, lack the energy and sparkle of earlier ones. Moreover, the last three albums of 1937, 1938, and 1939 came up shorter than the others by some fifteen pages. In any case, with the late 1930s the realities of Bécassine’s era were passing. The economic depression and the democratizing measures of the Front Populaire government of 1936–37 spelled the twilight of the class-bound society in which the Marquise de Grand’Air and her friends ruled, while ignorant country folks could be ridiculed at will.

Yet on the street Bécassine still had meaning: Bretons continued to be ridiculed with the name Bécassine, and its male variant Bécassin. This was a thorn in the side of young women especially, subjected to comments like “Look, Mama, it’s Bécassine!” from the mouths of children who saw Breton dress in the streets of Paris. Especially painful because domestic work became perceived as increasingly humiliating after the Great War, Bécassine was most offensive when she left the anodyne printed page of children’s stories.139 The colonial exhibition of 1931 was to feature a children’s area with nursemaids dressed as Bécassine, until *La Bretagne à Paris* and the Breton newspaper *Ouest-Éclair* sounded the alarm in imperial terms: “We can’t give such a negative image of Bretons to the children of Indochina and Algeria!” Finally the exhibition organizer and imperial warrior Maréchal Lyautey intervened to prevent the appearance of Bécassine nurses, assuring that there would be no “Bécassine coloniale.”140

Changes in attitudes toward French regionalism and folkways in the interwar period underlay objections to Bécassine. Among the Breton activists who moved between Brittany and Paris were writers who participated in the regionalist literary movement analyzed by Anne-Marie Thiesse in *Écrire la France*.141 One of these was the artist Herry Caouissin, who produced a striking postcard cartoon of a Breton peasant literally kicking Bécassine out of Brittany, sending her and her illustrator Pinchon scurrying back to Paris.142 Caouissin, along with the author Léone Calvez, wrote a virulent, emotional anti-Bécassine play at the end of 1936—initially performed by students at Notre Dame de Lambader in front of the president of the Bleun-Brug, the Catholic Breton nationalist associa-
tion. Performances were in the Breton language, and a French-language publication appeared in 1937. Bécassine vue par les bretons (Bretons’ view of Bécassine) features a vivid color illustration of a distinguished Breton woman standing on the small of Bécassine’s back, effectively breaking it—similar but much more virulent then a cartoon in the Breton paper Briez Atao titled “The True Brittany Crushes Bécassine.” The remarkably dramatic rhetoric and plot of the play deserve a brief summary.

Bécassine vue par les bretons begins when the grandmother of a noble young woman named Mona mourns her departure for Paris. The grandmother had already lost her husband to the sea and three of her four sons to the Great War when her remaining son and grandson drowned. Of her six orphaned grandchildren the eldest, Mona, has agreed at the age of fifteen to work for a bourgeois Breton family in Paris, having arranged through her priest to keep her younger siblings at school. Mona departs in her beautiful local costume, having rejected her employer’s request to discard it. In Paris, Mona serves as the maid for a spoiled adolescent of her own age, Nicole. As Nicole gathers with her equally spoiled friends, one offers Nicole a Bécassine doll and all begin to make fun of Bécassine as a typical Breton; when Mona enters the room, one friend declares that she looks ridiculous in her medieval outfit, and another that she is nothing but a savage from a backward region. In her outrage Mona ridicules Bécassine and recounts the ignorance with which the hurtful insult is used in the streets. She articulates a stirring defense of Brittany, recalling that without Arthur de Richemont and his Bretons, Joan of Arc could never have saved France, and that the Breton sacrifice in the Great War had been recognized by Joffre, who claimed that “Napoleon had his guard, I have my Bretons!” Without the Bretons, Mona continued, Paris would have been taken by the Germans. She finishes with indignation: “And you have the courage to treat like Bécassine the mothers, the wives, the sisters and the daughters of these heroes to whom you owe your national independence.” The girls are effectively shamed. The denouement: Mona, having received a discarded lottery ticket as a gift from Nicole, wins the national lottery; when the family soon goes bankrupt, Mona intervenes to save them and declares her intention to return home to Brittany.

The contrived plot and virulent rhetoric of Bécassine vue par les Bretons express the outrage of Bretons at the nasty insult that the figure of Bécassine had come to mean to them. Certain Bretons were alert to insults
in the public realm, and Henry Wulschleger’s film *Tout va très bien, Madame la Marquise*, released in late 1936, lit the flames of ire in January 1937. The front-page editorial of *La Bretagne à Paris* called the film an odious and inept attempt to smear Brittany and its people—the film included a Breton hotelier serving spoiled fish and a snot-nosed, louse-covered child. Deputies to the chamber, along with some forty students, demonstrated in front of the theater where the film was shown. The film was withdrawn at the end of its first round but could reappear on other screens. Albert Le Rail, a deputy representing the département of the Finistère, sent a letter to the prefect of police signed by most Breton deputies; in response the police agreed to have the injurious words cut from the film. Meanwhile, Breton theater owners refused the film outright, and the mayor of Le Havre proposed a national boycott.\(^\text{146}\) When the film was shown in the Breton neighborhood of the Fourteenth Arondissement, students and club members hooted and whistled so loudly that the film could not be heard; the police were called—“good boys who were not too severe, because there were certainly a good number of Bretons among them,” according to Beaufrère—and the show continued amid shouts and whistles until the audience sang, at the end, “Bro goz ma zadou” (“Vieux pays de mes pères”), the Breton national anthem. After demonstrations at the theater, Beaufrère reported that in its newly cut version, only 1,400 of the original 2,500 meters of film remained.\(^\text{147}\)

In this year of 1937 the French state honored the blossoming of French regionalism, first by opening the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires in the Trocadéro Palace on 1 May, indicating a respect for the usages, costumes, and lives in the former provinces.\(^\text{148}\) The Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industries Modernes was to commence on the same day—an exposition perhaps most widely known for the heroic structures of the Soviet and German pavilions facing off alongside the Seine, and for the exhibit of Picasso’s *Guernica*. Nonetheless, unlike other world’s fairs that emphasized the new and modern, this exposition “also celebrated rural life, regionalism, and folklore.”\(^\text{149}\) A rural center, a model village, and twenty-seven regional pavilions lined up along the Seine alongside national exhibits from throughout the world.

The Breton pavilion opened with fanfare and joyous celebration on 30 July, an inauguration that brought all Breton organizations in Paris to the scene. The pavilion held pride of place along the Quai d’Orsay, its interior and exterior the result of competitions and struggles among
Breton architects, artisans, and intellectuals. Signaled by pointed use of
the Breton language with the sign Ty Briez (Breton House, Maison de la
Bretagne), the building had a modern look that also echoed Breton archi-
tecture. A Celtic column ten meters high dedicated to the history and
virtues of Brittany decorated the front, and a fresco was at the entrance.
The most remarkable and memorable part of the pavilion was the largest
ceramic sphere ever created, a globe of the earth illustrating the glory—
and the routes—of Breton navigators. Ti Briez combined exhibits of tra-
ditional pottery, dance, and costume with more modern artisanal cre-
ations featuring work of the Breton Seiz Breur.∞∑≠

Despite this honoring by the state and the international community of
Breton culture in the form of artisanal, folkloric, and architectural accom-
plishments, the Breton Bécassine remained the butt of jokes. Late 1938
brought news of a film about Bécassine starring the pretty young starlet
Paulette Dubost. In an article about a new offense to Bécassine, Beaufrère
of the Bretagne à Paris warned that if the filmmakers went ahead with the
project there would be a movement against it, like that against Tout va
très bien two years earlier.∞∑∞ Nonetheless, Bécassine was filmed in two
Breton locations and a studio in Paris, although even in the eyes of Bé-
cassine’s greatest defenders the film violated the cartoon character’s inno-
cent spirit. The film showed Bécassine taking a piglet to bed with her and
feeding potatoes to the pigs while giving peelings to little Breton children
—this last echoing the taunting couplet “les pommes de terre pour les
cochons, les épluchures pour les Bretons” (“potatoes for pigs, peelings
for Bretons”).∞∑≤ Meetings were organized to protest the filming in Brit-
tany, and representatives of Breton organizations throughout France,
from Lyon to Le Havre, wrote indignant letters to deputies and to La
Bretagne à Paris.∞∑≥ Herry Caouissin, his brother, and a couple of friends
plotted to kidnap Dubost during filming in Brittany—after tying her to a
tree they were to notify the press and then take her to dinner in the
evening—but their plot was foiled by the departure of the film crew. The
filming went on, and when Bécassine was released, the main character
danced across the advertising poster, a pig dancing right behind her.∞∑∂

The film could not be shown in Brittany; in Paris additional reper-
cussions ensued. On 18 June three Bretons living in the capital—an elec-
trician from Rennes and two students from the Finistère, all in their
twenties—entered the Musée Grevin, the popular wax museum of Paris,
and smashed the wax likeness of Bécassine, in their words “an idiotic-
looking wax statue.” Press comments reflected a variety of opinions: *Le breton socialiste* called it “a joke in dubious taste,” while *L’Ordre* labeled this an “imbecilic gesture.” The popular illustrated daily *Excelsior* noted that the three were members of the nationalist organization Breiz Atao and suggested that the newspaper of the same name had doubtless egged them on, but “in any case, Brittany is rising—she hates Bécassine.” When the police asked if the three were part of a separatist movement, one replied, “It was in no way a separatist act. We read in the *Bretagne à Paris* that an odious cinematographic production was going to ridicule our Brittany once more. In breaking the wax statue in the Musée Grevin it was, in our thinking the Bécassine in the new film . . . that we wanted to get at and that we, the young people, will no longer tolerate what they put on the screen, or even a simple effigy of the awkward and foolish Breton we know. Our mothers, our sisters, and our fiancées do not deserve to be made fun of like this; and as for our grandmothers—those stoic and upright grandmothers, many of whom lost their sons in the Great War—we demand on their behalf respect for their *coiffes* and traditional costumes.” This was of course reported in the *Bretagne à Paris*. In July, Breton senators and deputies sent a delegation to the president of the Conseil d’Etat demanding that the *Bécassine* film be censored. Others wrote to the minister of national education, Jean Zay, and the minister of selected justice, Paul Marchandeau, reminding them that this film was an insult to the Bretons, who were one-sixth of the victims of the Great War. In Brest “this abhorrent caricature of Breton women” was burned in effigy on 2 July. The *Excelsior* was correct: Bretons now hated Bécassine. They directed their hatred to the usage of the term “Bécassine” as an insult, a derogatory nickname for Bretons and especially Breton women. In addition, disrespect for Bretons carried the more male, and political, insult to those who were more keenly aware of their role in French history and especially to Breton sacrifice in the Great War. Breton anger took its toll on Bécassine products, which became intolerable to Bretons. Not only the film but also the magazine *Semaine de Suzette* and Bécassine albums disappeared from Breton shops, as did Bécassine yarn.

The author, Maurice Langereau, was shocked by this anger at his beloved character: “Bécassine provokes laughter by the blunders that her naïveté gets her into, by the adventures and misadventures that result. But while they are laughing, children murmur ‘that good Bécassine!’ And
they pronounce these words with a tone of profound affection. Goodness is in fact the basis of Bécassine. Constantly she neglects her own pleasure and her own interests. Langereau was doubtless sincere, but he did not understand the way Bécassine had been used on the street or what her legendary stupidity had come to mean to Bretons. And it is undeniably true that Bécassine had proven to be a profitable venture for Langereau and Pinchon: the twenty-four albums based on the stories in *Semaine de Suzette* had sold 1,864,000 copies, and an alphabet book had sold 370,000. This brought Langereau 35,316,000 francs—in addition to 250,000 francs for allowing Bécassine’s name to be used in the film in 1939. In any case the French state was unwilling to prosecute the three young men who had vandalized the wax museum Bécassine in June 1939, because more important matters were at hand. The Second World War put an end to Bécassine; the German occupation forbade owning or reading Bécassine albums. Further, 1939 marked the close of the era of marginality for Bretons in Paris.

The interwar period saw a sea change in the public image and discourse about Bretons in Paris. On one hand real slights remained, directed to minor characters in the finest fiction of the time, such as *Les Thibault*, and to Bécassine in the film. Although this film was hardly in the same league as Jean Renoir’s *Rules of the Game*, released the same year, as an insult it had the power to arouse Breton ire for sullying this character. Yet on the other hand, a strong contingent of literary and skilled Bretons took it upon themselves to reply to such insults with literary and public action: an anti-Bécassine play and the destruction of the wax museum statue. An equally skilled group of Bretons produced a provincial display at the World’s Fair in Paris in 1937 that was not a folkloric caricature, as it had been in 1900, but rather a demonstration of Breton modernity and skilled craftsmanship.

The church remained vital. Events such as Pardons in Paris and pilgrimages to the Sacré Coeur basilica gathered Bretons by the hundreds. Writers like Monseigneur Edmond Loutil continued to publish literature on the evils of the city. Nonetheless, there were also signs of a fading influence. In the 1920s the Paroisse Bretonne lost its life force when François Cadic left the city. The Pardon of Saint-Denis was a secular affair that matched the declining influence of the church in Saint-Denis.
Likewise, the Breton community lost the leadership of René Le Fur and the thoughtful traditions of his publication, but it also gained sources of support. The first was a new weekly newspaper with a young editor, the second a strong associational life with the proliferation of clubs of all kinds. Finally, some Parisian Bretons were influenced by, and important to, the burgeoning nationalist movement, the Emsav. The voices of the Breton experience sound more clearly for this period, and they allow us to hear more acutely the range of experience, from loneliness and isolation to a close-knit familial and working life.

The nuptials of Bretons in Paris during the prosperous 1920s record how the changes in this community had accrued since the 1870s and draw a powerful portrait of changing lives in the varied urban environments of the Paris basin. In both Saint-Denis and the Fourteenth Arrondissement, Bretons joined the broader social trend of earlier marriage, no longer following the prewar pattern of early marriage to a fellow rural in Saint-Denis or late marriage following years of service as in the Fourteenth Arrondissement. Rather, more secure and lucrative work prompted earlier marriages in the 1920s. Moreover, the Bretons of Saint-Denis became more fully integrated with other men and women in the Paris basin as they became more likely to intermarry, while men and women in the Fourteenth Arrondissement also chose mates from across a wide spectrum, including fellow Bretons. Within the melting pot of greater Paris there did remain a community of Bretons who chose to marry with one another.

And for the most part, they would stay on in the Paris basin. Like François and Marie Michel, and the Métro worker Jean-Marie B. and his wife, Bretons often settled outside the city limits, where they could have a garden and a little house. In any case, memories of a difficult life in Brittany, the death of family members there, the relocation of siblings and cousins to the city, and the attractions of the Paris basin kept Bretons in Paris or the banlieue. These patterns in work and residence would continue in the postwar decades.

By the late summer of 1939 a trilogy of forces worked to end the days when Bretons could be considered pariahs. An expanding labor force and the booming Parisian economy of the 1920s allowed Bretons access to jobs that demanded more skills and in some cases offered employment security. In other words, many people from Brittany were able to enter the labor force that we consider modern, as skilled and sometimes unionized workers, state employees, and white-collar workers.
In addition, the Breton community included politicized men who were willing to bring to Paris their Breton identity, awareness, sense of historical wrongdoing, and anger at insults like the famous cartoon character Bécassine—students, intellectuals, and skilled workers like the three young men who broke apart the statue of Bécassine in the wax museum. These members of the community had the time, energy, and willingness to be disruptive on behalf of Breton power and identity.

Finally, the political inclusion that had Bretons smarting from the forced learning of the French language in earlier years came to be a benefit in the 1930s. Municipal jobs such as work for the Métro system became reserved for French nationals. With the Great Depression, hundreds of thousands of foreign workers—welcomed and even recruited in the boom years of the 1920s—were victims of what Janine Ponty calls “conjunctural xenophobia.” They were encouraged or forced to leave the country by processes that varied by immigrants’ national origin and location in France. The tracking of foreigners, perfected by the Paris police in the interwar period, served to expel unwanted newcomers and colonials. These departures reduced France’s principal foreign-born groups by over a half million between 1931 and 1936 alone and left the labor force more exclusively to French workers. With the deepening of the Depression and worsening xenophobia that came with the influx of refugees from fascism in Italy, Spain, Germany, and points east, attention would turn to non-national outsiders: most especially, foreign-born Jews would become the target of exclusion and persecution. This exclusion of others created the context for greater inclusion of the derided pariahs of yore.