# Pierre Loti the Anti-Colonialist: *Pêcheur d'Islande*

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**Abstract**: Said's *Orientalism* increased academic attention to Loti's work in the Anglophone world. Scholars turned to it for texts they could present as Orientalist or one of the other regional *-ists* developed from it. Some of their declarations have been too broad, however. In his best and, in France, best-known work, *Pêcheur d'Islande*, Loti took an anti-colonialist stand, using the regime's renewed interest in the Gauls as a way of condemning French colonialism abroad and at home.

**Keywords**: Pierre Loti – *Pêcheur d'Islande* – *Ramuntcho* – *Le Roman d'un spahi* – *Mon frère Yves* – Edward Said – *Orientalism* – the primitive – Flaubert – the Celts – the Gauls – Vercingétorix – contemporaneity of the past – *revanche* – France – racism – colonialism – anti-colonialism – Indochina

The publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978 and the approach to literary study that it fostered have considerably increased academic attention to the works of Pierre Loti in England and the United States. Anglophone scholars of French literature, building on what Said argued, now regularly publish studies of how various French authors represented and misrepresented the Third World as a function of their own fears, prejudices, and obsessions. Since Loti is perhaps the best-known nineteenth-century French author to have written on Asia, Africa, and the Pacific, it was inevitable that these scholars would turn to his work in their quest for texts that they could present as Orientalist or one of the other regional *-ists* developed from it.[1] One of them, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, for example, declared quite flatly on the basis of her reading of his *Le Roman d'un spahi*

[1]The book-length studies of this nature that include chapters on Loti's work include: Hargreaves, *The Colonial Experience*, developed from his dissertation, *The Colonial Experience (1870-1914) in the Works of Selected French Imaginative Writers (Pierre Loti, Ernest Psichari and Pierre Mille)*, University of Sussex 1978; Szyliowicz, *Pierre Loti and the Oriental Woman*, developed from her dissertation, *Pierre Loti's Attitudes Toward the Oriental Woman*, University of Denver 1984; Bongie, *Exotic Memories*, developed from his dissertation, *Rewriting colonialism: Allegories of the "New Imperialism," 1876-1914*, Stanford University 1988; Sharpley-Whiting, *Sexualized Savages*, developed from her dissertation, *Through the White Male Gaze: Black Venus*, Brown University 1994; Matsuda, *Empire of Love*, which does not seem to be a development of his dissertation. This article is a study of the anticolonial position Loti presents in *Pêcheur d'Islande*, not a refutation of colonialist approaches to some of his lesser works. Since the authors mentioned above have all abandoned Loti for other things, I think it is best to let sleeping dogs lie. I would not want to be confronted with some of my graduate student work either.

(1881) that "if ever there was a nineteenth-century novelist . . . who wholly exemplified the colonialist mentality of his era, it was Pierre Loti" (91).

This new academic attention has created a too-facile image of Loti as the stereotypical racist colonialist based on hasty and out-of-context readings of a few of his lesser texts. It has also skewed our view of his literary production. In France he remains first and foremost the author of two novels set in France, *Pêcheur d'Islande* (1886) and *Ramuntcho* (1897), which, because they do not appear to be of any use to those interested in colonialism, remain largely ignored by Anglophone scholars and the students they teach. This is unfortunate for many reasons, not least of which is that *Pêcheur d'Islande*, in addition to being a very fine work, is, among other things, a condemnation of the very colonialism whose mentality Loti is now accused of exemplifying.

Like Gauguin, who both emulated and envied him, Loti had a fascination with the primitive.[2] In one of his early works, a collection of pieces entitled *Fleurs d'ennui* (1882), he has the character Plumkett write him

> ce qu'il y a en vous de plus vivant et de plus constant sous toutes vos enveloppes [est] l'homme primitif. L'homme primitif, le sauvage préhistorique: mon cher Loti, c'est ce qu'il y a au fin fond de vous-même. Ce qui est très particulier chez vous, ce qui donne à vos livres cette étrangeté qui attrape les badauds, c'est le mépris que vous semblez faire des choses modernes; c'est l'indépendance aisée avec laquelle vous paraissez vous dégager de tout ce que trente siècles ont apporté à l'humanité, pour en revenir aux sentiments simples de l'homme primitif. (81)[3]

On 15 June, 1881, Loti wrote his friend, author Émile Pouvillon, that this Plumkett had determined that "il y a sur mon individu plusieurs couches différentes [. . .] et que le *moi* qui est tout au fond, le vrai celui-là, est un homme primitif, une espèce de sauvage préhistorique qui se montre de temps en temps et fait peur aux gens" (*Journal* II, 340).

This fascination with the primitive evidently started in his childhood – a time when the first remains of prehistoric man were being discovered across Europe, including in France.[4] In his novelized recollections of that period of his life, *Le roman d'un enfant* (1890), Loti recalls, speaking of books he was given as a child:

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[2] On Gauguin's envious fascination with Loti's career and works see Mathews. Gauguin's interest in the primitive was particularly developed starting in 1886 when he did his first painter sojourn in Brittany, in Pont-Aven just down the river Aven from Rosporden, where parts of Loti's 1883 novel *Mon frère Yves*, to which Gauguin alludes in his correspondence, takes place. Gauguin later went to French Polynesia in part to find an even more primitive culture, inspired in part by Loti's *Le mariage de Loti* (1880).

[3] Loti would have found this fascination with the primitive in one of his favorite writers, Flaubert, whose *Salammbô* (1862) he quotes in *Mon frère Yves* and elsewhere.

[4] On the history of the nineteenth-century discoveries of prehistoric men see for example Bruce and Montagu.

> Une fois, il y eut dans le nombre un grand livre à images, traitant du monde antédiluvien. Les fossiles avaient commencé de m'initier aux mystères des créations détruites. [...]
>
> Le monde antédiluvien, qui déjà hantait mon imagination, devint un de mes plus habituels sujets de rêve ; souvent, en y concentrant toute mon attention, j'essayais de me représenter quelque monstrueux paysage d'alors, toujours par les mêmes crépuscules sinistres, avec des lointains pleins de ténèbres ; [...]
>
> Bientôt aussi un nouveau décor de Peau-d'Âne s'ébaucha, qui représentait un site de la période du lias. (204)

In this case Loti was not fabricating his childhood: the "décor [...] qui représentait un site de la période du lias" was recently rediscovered along with other elements of his Peau-d'Âne theater (Othaniel 90). As an adult, Loti had particular respect for the "prehistoric" novels of Rosny aîné (Quella-Villéger, 394).

Loti's fascination with the primitive explains, in part, why he developed a particular interest in Brittany, which he first came to know in 1867 when he began his studies to be a naval officer in Brest. At least outside its cities, the region would still at that point have struck most non-Breton Frenchmen as more primitive than much of the rest of France. Loti went well beyond that, however. In his diary entry for 20 August, 1868, he wrote of an area near Lorient that:

> Nous avons rencontré dans notre excursion un endroit vraiment délicieux, un marais à hautes herbes auquel nous avons trouvé une vague ressemblance avec les fouillis marécageux de la période du Lias. La vue était bornée de tous côtés par des châtaigniers ou des chênes énormes ; et des pins maritimes imitaient assez bien les gigantesques calamites des forêts primitives ; la température était lourde ; le ciel brumeux et plombé rappelait l'épaisse atmosphère de l'ancien monde ; enfin un calme, un silence profond, quelque chose d'indéfinissable complétait l'illusion, et nous regardions avec admiration.
>
> Nous nous mouillions jusqu'aux genoux dans ce site antédiluvien. (*Journal* I: 46)

While in the navy Loti also got to know several Breton sailors well enough to visit them in their homes, allowing him an entrance into Breton culture that would not have interested, or been available to, most non-Breton Frenchmen of his era. One of these seamen, Pierre Le Cor, was from west of Paimpol in what was then the Côtes du Nord, married to a woman from Rosporden in the Morbihan, which Loti visited repeatedly over several decades and which figures as Toulven in his 1883 novel *Mon frère Yves*.

Another of these Breton sailors, Guillaume Floury, was from Ploubazlanec, a small fishing town north of Paimpol. Loti visited him as well, and from those visits came the idea for his next and finest novel, *Pêcheur d'Islande*, most of which is set in the region around Paimpol.

In *Mon frère Yves* Loti has his narrator describe some of the old buildings around Toulven as primitive: "Ce chaume et ce granit brut [des chaumières] jettent encore dans les villages bretons une note de l'époque primitive" (154). Inside the home of Yves' wife's parents he sees "rien que des choses d'autrefois, pauvres et primitives" (306). The beautiful church in Toulven has "un porche d'une architecture très primitive" (160), and the young Toulvenaises who say hello to Pierre do so with "des expressions primitives" (170). When Pierre looks to the horizon he sees "ce même horizon que les Celtes devaient voir" (186). The local inhabitants still speak those Celts' language: he describes the Breton-speaking women of Toulven as "pronon[çant] des mots celtiques" (207). Those who gather for market day in St. Pol de Léon on the north Breton coast he also presents as descendants of and not very different from the Celts: "Cette foule en habits bretons . . . était encore pareille à celle des anciens jours; dans l'air, on n'entendait vibrer que les syllabes dures, le *ya* septentrional de la langue celtique" (70).

In *Pêcheur d'Islande*, Loti continues to present the Bretons and their culture as a modern survival of the ancient Celts. His narrator describes the thatched cottages in Ploubazlanec as having "de hauts toits en chaume pointus comme des huttes celtiques" (116) and the appearance of Gaud Mével's city bed in Yvonne Moan's cottage as "faisa[nt] l'effet d'une chose élégante et fraîche apportée dans une hutte de Celte" (205). When Gaud visits the little church at the entrance to Pors Even, the narrator says that the statue of the Virgin over its side entrance "ressemblait à Cybèle, déesse primitive de la terre" (120), one of the gods in the Celtic pantheon. In introducing the male characters of the story, a group of fishermen who spend seven months of the year in the north Atlantic angling for cod, Loti starts by describing them as "ces hommes primitifs" (58). When two of them, Yann Gaos and Sylvestre Moan, Yvonne's grandson, pilot their ship through a terrible storm, the narrator remarks that "ils étaient devenus étranges, et en eux reparaissait tout un fond de sauvagerie primitive" (112). Unlike in *Mon frère Yves* and very much unlike in *Le roman d'un spahi*, Loti here gives the adjective *primitif* a strongly positive connotation of manly force and energy, however, similar to that accorded it by Leconte de Lisle in his *Poèmes barbares* and Flaubert in *Salammbô* (both 1862). Later, when Yann learns of Sylvestre's death during the latter's military service in Indochina, his mind fills with "les rêves indicibles et les croyances primitives" (187).

Indeed, as these passages and others in *Mon frère Yves* and *Pêcheur d'Islande* demonstrate, by the 1880s Loti had developed what T. S. Eliot, speaking of Loti's contemporary Rudyard Kipling and Sussex in England, referred to as "a sense of the antiquity of [Brittany], of the number of generations and peoples who have laboured the soil and in turn been buried beneath it, and of the contemporaneity of the past" (32).

One can find this in Loti's work as early as the first of his pieces set in France, the first of the four parts of *Fleurs d'ennui*. There for the first time we meet Yves Kermadec, later to be the title character in *Mon frère Yves*, when Loti recounts a hallucinatory dream to his friend Plumkett. Yves and Loti are visiting St. Pol de Léon, Yves' birthplace. As they leave, the city, itself ancient, disappears:

> Autour de nous il n'y avait déjà plus aucune trace de la vieille cité de Saint-Pol, ni de la maison où Yves est né. Nous étions au milieu de la lande sombre et déserte, parmi les genêts et les bruyères: la terre reprenait sa physionomie des époques primitives, avant de s'anéantir, et l'obscurité dernière s'épaississait autour de nous.
>
> Alors Yves me dit, avec l'intonation d'une frayeur d'enfant: « Frère, regardez-moi, est-ce qu'il ne vous semble pas que je suis devenu plus grand que de coutume? » . . . Et je répondis: « Non, » –pour ne pas lui faire peur; mais je voyais bien qu'il était plus grand que nature, et maintenant il était vêtu comme un Celte, avec des peaux de loup jetées sur ses épaules. (20-21)[5]

This remarkable passage, the predecessor to those that we have just examined in his next two books, *Mon frère Yves* and *Pêcheur d'Islande*, shows that from early in his career as an author Loti saw at least certain liminal regions of his homeland as containing "the contemporaneity of the past," just as one of his great admirers, Proust, would do several decades later with his presentation of Françoise, Théodore, and the church in Combray.[6]

Sylvestre's death in *Pêcheur d'Islande* is the pivot point around which Loti constructed the novel in several senses, since it changes the lives of the other three main characters. With it he made strikingly clear "the contemporaneity of the past" in at least some modern Bretons: he designed the battle scene that led to it to recall the last battle between the Romans and the Celts in Julius Caesar's *Gallic War Commentaries* (8.48), the Roman officer Volusenus' skirmish with the Celtic king Commius and his men. The Latin text recounts how

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[5] Already in 1878, for his friend Sarah Bernhardt, Loti had worked up an impressive drawing of Pierre Le Cor, the real-life model for Yves Kermadec, posed before a (highly phallic) menhir as the Druid warrior Hu-Gadarn. See Loti, *Pierre Loti dessinateur* 228.

[6] Loti would continue to do this. In the last of his novels set in France, *Ramuntcho*, which takes place in the French part of the Basque country, he once again deals with the links of present-day inhabitants to their primitive ancestors, this time quite literally evoking "the number of generations and peoples who have laboured the soil and been buried beneath it," though by then he gives this very negative connotations, as if in opposition to the nationalism then being developed by Barrès. On this see Berrong, "Pierre Loti's Response." In *Ramuntcho*, however, unlike in the Breton texts just quoted, Loti does not present his Basque characters as simultaneous manifestations of both themselves and their forebearers.

> [l]eaving the rest [of his men] behind, Commius turned his horse and recklessly charged towards Volusenus. All his cavalry followed, turning our small force and chasing after it. Commius . . . pointed his spear and thrust it with all his might through Volusenus' thigh. Now that the Roman commander had been wounded, our men did not hesitate–they stood their ground, then turned their horses and routed the enemy. (219)[7]

Loti repeated all of these details when reconstructing this scene in *Pêcheur d'Islande*. Sylvestre has been sent to Indochina during the French colonial wars there. One day while, with five other sailors drafted into land combat, he is out on reconnaissance in a rice paddy, he is caught in an ambush as Commius had been taken off guard by the Romans (8.23).

> À une minute d'indécision suprême, les matelots, éraflés par les balles [fired at them by the Indochinese soldiers], avaient presque commencé ce mouvement de recul qui eût été leur mort à tous; mais Sylvestre avait continué d'avancer [like Commius]; ayant pris son fusil par le canon, il tenait tête à tout un groupe, fauchant de droite et de gauche, à grands coups de crosse qui assommaient [like Commius' reckless charge]. Et Sylvestre courait après [the Indochinese soldiers who started to flee when he attacked them. He ended up with] un coup de lance à la cuisse [like Volusenus]; mais ne sentant rien que l'ivresse de se battre [like Commius], cette ivresse non raisonnée qui vient du sang victorieux, celle qui donne aux simples le courage superbe, celle qui faisait les héros antiques. Et, grâce à lui, la partie avait changé de tournure: cette panique, cet affolement, ce je ne sais quoi, qui décide aveuglément de tout, dans ces petites batailles non dirigées, était passé du côté des Chinois; c'étaient eux qui avaient commencé à reculer [like the Celts at the end of the skirmish].
>
> ... C'était fini maintenant, ils fuyaient. (161-162)

[7] The Latin text, which is probably how Loti would have read the *Commentaries*, is "conversoque equo se a ceteris incautius permittit in praefectum. Faciunt hoc idem omnes eius equites paucosque nostros convertunt atque insequuntur. Commius [. . .] lanceaque infesta magnis viribus medium femur traicit Voluseni. Praefecto vulnerato non dubitant nostri resistere et conversis equis hostem pellere." There were many French translations that he could have consulted.

Book VIII, from which this passage comes, was not written by Caesar himself but by Aulus Hirtius, an aide. It was, however, regularly published and read with the first seven books, as it was perceived as being a reliable account of the final pacification of Gaul and so an important historical document.

The line comparing Sylvestre to "les héros antiques" nails the invocation of the *Commentaries*, but the parallel is not a simple one. If, on the one hand, the French soldiers start to retreat when suddenly attacked like the Romans, they are inspired to advance by a fearless and rather reckless comrade, as Commius inspired his Celtic warriors to do. Sylvestre gets wounded in the thigh by a lance, once again very specifically recalling Volusenus.[8] The young Breton soldier is meant to recall a "héros antique," but which one is not clear.

Part of this ambiguity can be explained by the fact that Loti, who had himself studied painting, would have been familiar with the way nineteenth-century French painters, when composing a canvas on Classical models, often inverted elements in the original in order to disguise their tracks or demonstrate their ingenuity.[9] Manet's use of Raphael's *Judgment of Paris* in *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* is a particularly famous example of this. Since Loti studied painting in Paris in the 1860s, it is not surprising that he should have employed such a painterly strategy when using the *Commentaries*.

Part of this ambiguity, however, was also most likely the result of Loti's use of the ambivalence with which late nineteenth-century France regarded Julius Caesar's conquest of Gaul. On the one hand, since the Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century liberal French historians had been realigning the traditional view of the origin of their nation. As André Simon has remarked, beginning in the nineteenth century "les partisans du Tiers État exaltent les Gaulois" in opposition to the theoreticians of nobility, who "prétendent fonder les privilèges de celle-ci sur la conquête franque" (27). Especially after the Prussian invasion of Paris in 1814-1815 and even more so after the disaster of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, liberal historians associated these Franks with the Prussians/Germans, depicted them as hostile invaders rather than noble founding fathers, and proclaimed the Celts to be the true forefathers of the common Frenchman (Simon 28; see also Pomian). Nineteenth-century historian Amédée Thierry, on the first page of his influential and often republished *Histoire des Gaulois*, declared that the Gauls were "une race de laquelle descendent les dix-neuf vingtièmes d'entre nous Français" and "une famille qui est la nôtre" (I.1). As Pomian writes in his very fine article on this change in French historiography: "Désormais, on n'est français qu'à condition d'avoir pour ancêtres les Gaulois" (71).

That should have made Julius Caesar, the conqueror of the Celts, an early enemy of the French, but for most historians it did not. While they admired the bravery of Vercingétorix and the Celts who were willing to sacrifice themselves to preserve their

[8] This thigh wound was evidently created very intentionally by Loti to evoke the *Commentaries* in this scene, since the description of the Indochinese soldiers mentions their guns but makes no mention of spears. In the next chapter of the novel, when Sylvestre lies dying in a hospital bed, there is no further mention of this wound, which seems to have been forgotten. Instead, the text talks about his chest wound, which Loti uses to create a parallel between Sylvestre and the crucified Christ.

[9] On Loti's study of painting and drawing see the Introduction to *Pierre Loti dessinateur* 4-38.

independence, most French historians could not bring themselves to abandon the idea that Caesar, by bringing Gaul within the fold of the Roman Empire, had blessed it with the advantages of Roman civilization and the respite from Germanic invasion that allowed these advantages to be enjoyed. In the chapters devoted to the nineteenth century in his study of how the French have viewed Vercingétorix and the Roman conquest of Gaul, Simon shows how this conflict between a love of independence and an admiration for the benefits of advanced civilization shaped the nineteenth century's presentations of Caesar's then much-studied invasion (see also Pomian 85-91).

So there would have been this reason as well to have the courageous Breton Sylvestre, who grew up in his grandmother's "hutte de Celte" and whom Loti presents as resembling a "héros antique," recall both the "antique" Celt Commius and the Roman Volusenus. It is worth noting that Loti's publisher, Juliette Adam, who came up with the title for *Pêcheur d'Islande* and serialized the novel in her *La nouvelle revue* before it appeared in book form, had written seven years before its publication: "Travaillons à la résurrection du vieil esprit de la Gaule et de celui de Rome" (Simon 64).

The fact that Loti evokes the *Gallic Wars* while describing the French conquest of Indochina is not fortuitous. It is not just a matter of developing Sylvestre's character one last time, or situating the Bretons once again as modern incarnations of the Celts and their virtues.[10] As Christian Amalvi among others has noted, "la colonialisation positive de la Gaule," the civilization-admiring interpretation of Caesar's conquest mentioned above, was "souvent mise en parallèle avec celle de l'Afrique et l'Asie à l'époque contemporaine par les Français" (354).[11] If Roman-culture-loving scholars justified the Roman conquest of Gaul by citing all the elements of Roman civilization that it introduced, their political contemporaries justified French colonial activity with similar arguments. That is why it is significant that Loti introduces a reference to Caesar's conquest of Gaul while describing France's conquest of Indochina, and even more significant that he blurs the distinction between the conquering Romans and the conquered Celts in doing so.

He blurs this distinction on the other side as well. The Indochinese who ambush Sylvestre and his comrades live under "des toitures cornues" (160), not unlike the "hauts toits en chaume pointus comme des huttes celtiques" (116) beneath which Sylvestre had been raised by Yvonne back in Brittany. This, too, like Sylvestre's spear

[10] Thierry catalogued what he saw as these virtues at the beginning of his *Histoire des Gaulois*: "les traits saillants de la famille gauloise, ceux qui la différencient le plus, à mon avis, des autres familles humaines, peuvent se résumer ainsi : une bravoure personnelle que rien n'égale chez les peuples anciens ; un esprit franc, impétueux, ouvert à toutes les impressions, éminemment intelligent ; mais à côté de cela, une mobilité extrême, point de constance, une répugnance marquée aux idées de discipline et d'ordre, si puissantes chez les races germaniques, beaucoup d'ostentation, enfin une désunion perpétuelle, fruit de l'excessive vanité" because "le moi individuel est trop dévelopé" (I.4).

[11] Similarly, in her study of the use of Vercingétorix and the Gauls in secondary school textbooks during the period when Loti wrote, Alice Gérard found that "la conquête romaine est appelée à légitimer, à son tour, les conquêtes coloniales de la France" (362).

wound, cannot have been a randomly-included parallel detail, since the evocation of the *Commentaries* necessarily parallels the invaded Indochinese with the invaded Celts. "Leurs figures plates [étaient] contractées par la malice" but also by "la peur" (161), giving them a humanity not generally accorded belligerent Asians then or for years to come by Western writers. When, after Sylvestre's courage inspires the other French troops to stand their ground and charge and these Indochinese soldiers flee, they do so "comme des léopards" (162), a sleek and beautiful animal. In mounting an ambush against the French troops these Indochinese resemble Volusenus' invading Romans, thereby giving Sylvestre a chance to shine like his heroic Celtic forebearer Commius, but in defending their homeland against foreign attack the Indochinese resemble the positively presented Celts as well. *Pace* Sharpley-Whiting, therefore, *Pêcheur d'Islande* does not "wholly exemplify the colonialist mentality of its era."

Nor did Loti. In *Prime jeunesse* (1919), published after he had retired from the navy and could write without being subject to military review, Loti condemned the French invasion of Indochina publicly in no uncertain terms as "l'absurde et folle expédition du Tonkin [qui] venait d'être décrétée par l'un des plus néfastes de nos gouvernements; on envoyait là-bas, pour un but stérile, des milliers d'enfants de France qui ne devaient jamais revenir" (303). These young Frenchmen he depicted as "ces chers morts, sacrifiés par la folie criminelle des politiciens colonisateurs" (304), which explains why, already in 1886, Loti had constructed Sylvestre's agony and death to resemble Christ's, down to the thirty pieces of money that the government turns over to his grandmother and that make very clear that the young Breton sailor has been betrayed and crucified by that government. Even while he was still an officer and his publications subject to censure by the naval high command, Loti found a way with *Pêcheur d'Islande* to use republican France's glorification of the Celts to call into question its current colonial policy, at least in Indochina.

The war in Indochina is not the only French invasion and domination that Loti describes unfavorably in this novel, however. There is also that of Brittany, of which not coincidentally another Moan, Sylvestre's grandmother Yvonne, is depicted as the once again highly sympathetic victim.

After hundreds of years during the Middle Ages when Brittany, either as a kingdom or a duchy, fought to prevent annexation by the French or the English, it was finally absorbed into France when, in need of help, the duchess Anne de Bretagne married first Charles VIII and then his successor Louis XII. The latter's successor, François I, who married Anne's daughter and successor, failed to honor the terms of the wedding contract that was designed to preserve Brittany's independence, and the duchy was absorbed into France.[12] The ever more centralized French government subsequently treated that outlying region with a mixture of disdain and neglect until the second half of the nineteenth century, when the nation's newly-developed railway

[12] On the details of the wedding contract/treaty see, for example, Poisson, Le Mat 239-240.

system both linked Brittany far more firmly to Paris and the rest of urbanizing, industrial France and, as a result, brought its differences more clearly to the attention of the central government. The rector of the school system headquartered in Rennes wrote in 1880 to his superior that "La Bretagne . . . n'a pas été volontairement réunie à la France, . . . n'a jamais accepté de bon coeur son annexion, . . . proteste encore. . . Francisez la Bretagne aussi promptement que possible. . . Intégrez la Bretagne occidentale au reste de la France" (Griffon 53-54).[13] Paris undertook a major step to do just that two years later when Jules Ferry established compulsory elementary education for all citizens of France, education that had to be given and received in French.

Loti had a chance to see in person the effect that the imposition of French language and culture had on Brittany during his various visits there, and he developed one of the most moving and memorable scenes in *Pêcheur d'Islande* to convey it to his readers. Sylvestre is killed in Indochina in March 1884, two years after the passage of the law that began the state-sponsored suppression of the Breton language. Three months later his grandmother is called to Paimpol to learn the terrible news. When she gets to the Bureau de l'Inscription maritime an officious government clerk drives home the disdainful attitude of the French government toward the Bretons, a disdain that ironically recalls that of Sylvestre and the other French soldiers toward the Indochinese, "ce . . . dédain, [cette] vieille rancune moqueuse" (160) depicted just a few chapters before.

> Il lisait maintenant d'une voix doctorale: "Moan, Jean-Marie-Sylvestre, inscrit à Paimpol, folio 213, numéro matricule 2091, décédé à bord du *Bien-Hoa* le 14 . . .
>
> – Quoi? . . . Qu'est-ce qui lui est arrivé, mon bon monsieur?. . .
>
> – Décédé! . . . Il est décédé, reprit-il.
>
> Mon dieu, il n'était sans doute pas méchant, ce commis; s'il disait cela de cette manière brutale, c'était plutôt manque de jugement, inintelligence de petit être incomplet. Et, voyant qu'elle ne comprenait pas ce beau mot, il s'exprima en breton:
>
> – *Marw éo! . . .*
>
> – *Marw éo! . . .* (Il est mort. . .)
>
> Elle répéta après lui, avec son chevrotement de vieillesse, comme un pauvre écho fêlé redirait une phrase indifférente . . .
>
> Ce petit monsieur . . . lui faisait horreur: est-ce que c'était comme ça qu'on annonçait à une grand'mère la mort de son petit-fils! . . .

[13] Griffon does a good job of presenting the extent to which Brittany was still Breton-speaking in 1882 and the effect compulsory public education had on the use of Breton.

> On lui remit un mandat pour aller toucher, comme héritière, les trente francs qui lui revenaient de la vente du sac de Sylvestre. (178-179)[14]

In the moment of her greatest sorrow Loti shows the very positively portrayed Yvonne treated disdainfully for her use of her "primitive" local language. Even within its own borders the French bureaucracy of the 1880s functions in a reprehensibly colonialist fashion.

As a career naval officer Loti had far more opportunity than most Frenchmen to observe the sometimes-bloody truth behind the colonialist propaganda of his day. His three articles for *Le Figaro* on a massacre of Indochinese villagers by French troops gone wild, though they almost cost him his commission, were one way to bring this truth to those at home who did not have the access to a free press that countries like France take for granted today.[15] Literature provided him with a way of depicting the irony of that colonialism in the context of the growing glorification of Vercingétorix and the Celts that had begun under Napoléon III but really took off during the Third Republic as part of the mentality of *revanche* that preoccupied many Frenchmen for the next four decades.[16] It also allowed him to depict the similarities between the French government's colonialist treatment of supposedly uncivilized "primitives" abroad and some of its own citizens at home and condemn them both.

Certain of Loti's lesser texts will continue to be pilloried as politically unacceptable after hasty and themselves propaganda-shaped readings in graduate seminars and facile papers on colonialism. That is the nature of part of the profession these days, though it has always struck me as a waste of time. What is innovative or informative about showing that an author from a previous era shared the common prejudices of his era, especially when it only involves repeating what Edward Said demonstrated quite extensively more than three decades ago? Even Loti's early texts are not so monolithic as Said, in parts of two sentences, as his acolytes, in whole chapters that should have been better researched, have maintained. Careful scholars and astute readers willing to invest the time that more sophisticated analytical reading requires will, however, find their efforts well repaid when they consider some of Loti's best works. They were the product not of hasty, prejudice-ridden whitewashing, but rather the nuanced work of a man who spent his life living in and reflecting on the issues that he treats.

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[14] The thirty francs recall the thirty pieces of silver that Judas received for betraying Christ. They are part of the imagery Loti developed to link Sylvestre's death to Christ's crucifixion in order to suggest that he, too, had been betrayed, though in this case by Jules Ferry's colonial policy.

[15] On those three articles and the trouble they caused Loti see Quella-Villéger, Chapter 4, "De l'anticolonialisme au scandale."

[16] On the use of Vercingétorix in developing the desire for revenge against Germany after their seizure of Alsace and Lorraine at the end of the Franco-Prussian War see Simon, Chapters II-IV.

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