

Our Breton Exiles

In the years immediately following the end of the Second World War, Ireland was host to a small but significant number of Breton refugees who found their way here, for the most part, through either Wales or England. Because of their alleged collaboration with the Germans or their anti French behaviour they had all been convicted in absentia and sentenced to long terms in prison or, in some cases, to death. Those that didn't warrant prison sentences were denied of their citizen rights, a subtle form of House Arrest.

Eventually the sentences were revoked and most of these refugees returned. Some did remain in Ireland becoming part of the fabric of Irish life, rearing their families here and are buried in Irish soil. In effect their existence didn't create many, if any, official waves but theirs was a harrowing story often living from hand to mouth having few or no rights, more or less condemned to survive on the edge of society before gaining a precarious employment and gradually making their mark in Irish commercial and social life.

A footnote in 20th century Irish history they may be, but theirs is nonetheless a riveting story of human perseverance, courage and inner strength. Perhaps for the first we get an in depth glimpse of their story in the new publication published by Oldchapel Press in Oughterard and entitled 'La Maison' in Connemara and the second volume of Yann Fouéré's autobiography.

Born in 1910, Fouéré had been involved in Breton activities since the 1930s during which he was the Founder President of 'Ar Brezhoneg er Skol' the Union for the teaching of Breton in schools, the Vice President of the 'Union Régionaliste Bretonne' as well as being the editor of several Breton newspapers. For these activities he found himself persona non grata in France at the end of the war and had to flee the country. The book follows his path through England, Wales and finally to Ireland where he lived in Dublin, Limerick (where he was teaching in Glenstal Abbey) and finally to Connemara where he developed a lobster and crayfish business exporting to the Continent. First published in French as La Maison De Connemara, this first edition in English has been translated by his daughter Rozenn Fouéré Barrett.

Although Rozenn has, I would imagine, fluent English, there

is a curious and attractive Breton flavour to the language of this book. Particularly evident is the general Breton credence that "nous sommes tous Celtes"; especially during Fouéré's Welsh séjourn where several Welsh nationalists allowed him refuge in their own homes and where he was given room to reflect on his own Breton identity before the threat of being deported to France forced him to flee to Ireland ending up in Connemara where he raised his family.

As he moves to Ireland, the book really gathers momentum and offers a valuable and unusual insight into Irish life during the years following World War Two. The small Breton community found refuge in Ireland then were basically nomads constantly on the move barely eking out a living and not without their own share of eccentrics. His various attempts to make a few shillings to support himself and his growing family would be comical if they weren't sometimes almost pathetic and his description of them adds to the wonderful Breton flavour of the book.

'La Maison' in Connemara fills an important gap in our knowledge of Post World War II Ireland, not least in the social realities of life in Connemara at that time. It also allows us an informative insight into the struggles and the commitment of Breton nationalists as their cultural identity risks extinction. It is a book well worth reading.

View Desi's video review of 'La Maison' in Connemara.

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