

Usage of the Commons at Notre-Dame-des-Landes, Yesterday and Today¹

By François de Beaulieu²

Nothing is more misunderstood than the moors, the terrible decline of which the Bretons themselves have witnessed; many of them have in fact been pleased by this decline because they'd heard that moors were the very image of the poverty upon which they've wanted to turn their backs. And yet the moors are at the heart of an inventive, bountiful [*généreuse*] and particularly sustainable form of agriculture. Centered upon communal usage, these traditional practices have made a valuable contribution to current reflections upon on goods held in common. This is why it is fitting to reclaim the history of the [French] countryside and the people who invented new ways of living and working in it, in particular, at Notre-Dame-des-Landes.

The Commune of Notre-Dame-des Landes was only founded in 1871 after those constituted at Fay-de-Bretagne (two-thirds of the new Commune) and Héric (the other third) were broken up. The parish had existed since 1847 and boasted a significant population, which can be estimated to have been more than a thousand. In 1871, there were 1,785 inhabitants. All of the Communes located around Notre-Dame-des-Landes will be taken into account as we try to reconstitute the history of this area.

The constitution of the moors

As one knows, apart from the coastal areas, the large moors aren't spontaneous natural formations, but "secondary" ones created by post-Neolithic forest-clearings. Nevertheless, they were occasionally broken up by patches of shallow and acidic soil around small outcroppings of rocks. As for the forests, they weren't like current ones. They could be scrubby; fires and large mammals had created clearings within them; beavers had built dams, and trees grew and fell in the greatest disorder. Moreover, during periods of demographic decline, the forests were able to reconquer both the moors and the lands that had been cultivated.

It seems that during the entire Middle Ages and up until the 18th century, the moors only grew at the expense of the forests. The need for farmland wasn't the only motivation:

¹ "L'usage des communs à Notre-Dame-des-Landes d'hier à aujourd'hui," dated 15 May 2014. Published in French on 24 June 2014 by Naturalistes en lutte contre l'aéroport de Notre-Dame-des-Landes: <http://naturalistesenlutte.overblog.com/2014/06/l-usage-des-communs-a-notre-dame-des-landes-d-hier-a-aujourd-hui.html>. Translated by NOT BORED! 25 June 2015. All footnotes by the translator.

² Born in 1947, Beaulieu is best known in the English-speaking world for his associations with the Enragés in 1968 and the Situationist International between 1968 and 1970. A college professor, he became interested in the French moors in 1976 and has written 50 books devoted to the natural and cultural patrimony of Brittany. According to a note appended to it, this text "was only possible thanks to Yves Riou and Marie-Ange Lebreton, who assembled all of the local monographs on the subject, and to all the Naturalists-in-struggle who wanted to make contributions."

lots of wood was required to meet the many needs of micro-industrial and naval construction. In addition, the forest's cycles of natural regeneration, which had been founded on a balance between herbivores and their predators, had been profoundly disrupted: the forests were now home to parks in which the high nobility raised horses or went out hunting, especially for the hordes of pigs that only ate acorns. Of course, these developments weren't continuous but with the help of the lure of profits, the imperatives of the population to survive and various disturbances, the Breton forest was reduced to its simplest expression and was in a very bad state by the beginning of the 19th century (only five percent of the territory, while today it is 13 percent of it). Thus, the old forest of Héric was, in the words of P.-H Gashignard, "still largely composed, in the middle of the 18th century, of useless wastelands, frost and gas, moorlands and pastures."³

One can imagine that, after having cultivated an enclosed clearing in a forest, the humus would be exhausted after several years and the impoverished remnants would be left to become a moorland, the continuation of which was favored by extensive pastures and the gathering of bedding and fuel. Moreover, the heather plants secreted toxic substances that reinforced the stability of these areas, and natural elements and/or burdens [*prélèvements*] placed upon them by human beings and livestock added supplementary pressure. In Brittany, the evolution towards moorland and [then] its continuation was also favored by the region's sandstone or quartzite substrata and by the leaching of [nutrients from] exposed soils. Chemical modifications of the soil rendered it suitable to plants such as gorse and heather. In Notre-Dames-des-Landes and the surrounding areas, pedologists noted the presence of compacted pseudogley, which was saturated with water in the winter and dry in the summer. Thus one could find ciliated heather and dwarf gorse in the moderately-wet (mesophilic) moorlands.

Because the small quantities of manure that were available could only be used upon small areas, forest-clearings also created moors. Whether they were monks or farmers, the clearers had to acquire a knowledge of the terrain and to identify and mark out the land that was the most favorable for agriculture and the land that wasn't. In a general way, the farms and villages were established on the richest areas, and the wooden framework [*la trame bocagère*] spread out from an initial core in which a garden and a field was "closed off for protection," with the moors occupying the territory's margins. But we mustn't represent the moors as they generally appear to us today – for example, those at the Monts d'Arrée. They weren't necessarily totally barren of trees, and [local] customs certainly created a very great heterogeneity. Nevertheless, the sight frightened visitors. Around 1664, Toussaint de Saint-Luc only saw "deserted moors" along the 18 leagues (about 37 miles) that stretched between Nantes and Rennes. A century and a half later,⁴ Edmond Richer, passing between Treillières and Blain, exclaimed, "You can't imagine a wilder appearance than the vast moors that extend before your eyes, [until they are] out of sight."

Traditional customs

Contrary to what many agronomists have said since the 18th century, farmers haven't distinguished "infertile moors" from "productive zones," because they've been convinced of the complementariness of what they call "cold land" and "hot land." In their eyes, a good farm is obligated to include moorland in proportion to arable land and pastures. "The best property that doesn't possess a certain stretch of it wouldn't find a farmer in the country,"

³ Cf. the Bibliography at the end of this essay.

⁴ This must be a mistake, for the French theologian Edmond Richer lived between 1559 and 1631.

wrote J.-C. Crussard in 1864, when he was the Director of the Farm School at Trécesson in Campénéac and the President of the Agricultural Association of Ploërmel.

The principle customs were pasturage and the cutting of vegetation (“reaping, bedding and grazing,” in the words of some deeds) so as to produce manure. (Manure was produced in the barns or alongside the paths and roads on which bedding and all usable vegetable debris had been spread). Slash-and-burn farming was practiced but, no doubt, more systematically in the north of Bretagne than in the south. After the scything, the clods of earth and roots were pulled up and baked in “furnaces.” The ashes were mixed into the soil, which could grow rye or black wheat for 3 to 5 years before the plot returned to moorland – often at first seeded with gorse. The dictionary of Blainese dialect put together by Louis Bizeul around 1850 indicates that slash-and-burn farming was utilized on small moors and accomplished with a tool called a “hoe” [*écobue*]. Both branches from the gorse plants and clods that had been pulled from the soil and dried out could be used as fuel. The statistics for the Lower Loire region (published in 1801) indicate that slash-and-burn farming was practiced in the Paimbœuf area and that sometimes one left “the fields rest for more than two years, and the broom and heather that had covered them were burned.” This practice, which we should call “stubble burning” [*brûlis*], was noted by Jean Bourgeon in Treillières: “the surface of the field is covered with wild plants gathered from the moors; a fire is set that lasts the rest of the night; the next day, seeds are planted in the ashes, which bring to the soil some potash and lye.” And yet the local customs and rules of the government of the Lower Loire (published in 1861) says virtually nothing about this uncommon [*originale*] and no doubt residual practice, but it does speak of *étrépage*.⁵ The old practice of slash-and-burn remains a part of the toponymy, as l'Écobut à Héric attests.

Moor grass, ferns and broom plants had many uses (bedding, protection, etc.). In fact, following Louis Bizeul as always, the clearing of a parcel of forest was called “a dig” [*un béchis*] and was done collectively with the aid of 30 to 40 neighbors who “sang work songs” and were “treated to a fatted calf and a barrel of cider.” Although apparently less ritualized than in Finistère, this operation was festive and free of charge.

Up until the 1960s, when and where there still remained open moorlands or pine forests (even if these were only upon the edges of slopes), people harvested vegetables with a hoe, principally in winter, to make bedding for livestock, and sometimes to spread them upon the paths and roads where maceration produced mud (called “*marnis*”), which was placed on the fields in the springtime.

Many testimonies emphasize the importance of the tool generally known as “hoe” [*étrèpe*] in the flattening of the bedding. In 1851, in his book, *Les derniers paysans*, Émile Souvestre (1806-1854) mentions – with respect to Gâvres, which is nearby Blain – “the hoe, the curved scythe that they use in the woods to cut the bedding for their stables.” Likewise, in his story “La femme blanche des marais,” published in 1878 in *les Contes de Bretagne*, Paul Féval (1816-1887) – who had lived in Glénac – wrote, “A man especially awoke his suspicions. He was a moor-digger [*un éterpeur de landes*] with a bad reputation who resided in the town of Saint-Vincent.” And Féval goes on to explain: “In the Morbihan, they call the wide and sharp hoe with which the farmers mow the moors *éterpe* or *étrèpe*.” Such hoes were mentioned in the after-death inventories made in the 18th century at Fay-de-Bretagnat. Nevertheless, the use of the term and the object itself went as far as the Welsh part of Brittany: one can find “*étrèpes*” in the inventories of 1681 and 1693 at Mendon (between Auray and Lorient) and “two *étrèpes* to cut down moors” in the inventory for 1674 at Surzur. Jean-Pierre Roullaud describes a “*étrèpe*” used at Guenrouët until the 1960s to cut up bedding and that looked like a scalene triangle (three unequal sides) that was joined at the

⁵ A ecological-restoration technique.

meeting of the smallest two ones. Nearby, on the way to Moisdon-la-Rivière, Isabelle Paillusson discovered the “*vouge*,” a kind of sharpened hoe, longer (30 cm) than it was tall (15 cm), with the handle centered and standing perpendicular. The word “*vouge*” usually refers to a sickle on a long handle.

L'Écomusée Rural du Pays Nantais, which is located in Vigneux-de-Bretagne, has transmitted to us a really beautiful group of photographs of *étrèpes* that have been preserved in that region's eco-museum, and we can see that they correspond to the assembled descriptions, thus confirming the great diversity of the forms and the ingenuity of the blacksmiths.

Attacks on the moors

Under the *Ancien régime*, the territory of what is now Notre-Dame-des-Landes and its surroundings increasingly appeared to be essential for the lords of Rohan (the Blain marquisate), the royal domain (the lordship of Gâvre), and diverse aristocrats and commoners. Ever since the 16th century (1549), these property owners used acts of confiscation to authorise the clearing of wooded areas and moorlands as a form of annual rent. Performed upon small areas and in a piecemeal fashion, such operations could end up in the abandonment of the plot and [thus] generally did not pose any problems. The contracts that only concerned the right to mow “privately” prohibited enclosures and thus the clearing of land. There were also cases of collective confiscation by which it was possible to guarantee communal enjoyment [of the land], such as the instance (1774) in which the Duke of Rohan allowed 60 laborers to make collective use of the moors at the Grands Mortiers à Héric, which would remain “wasteland in perpetuity.” In fact, the question was posed in a much more contentious way in the 18th century, when, through successive waves associated with the obliging decisions of the King or the Parliament of Brittany, more ambitious operations were undertaken and challenged the communal usage of the moors. Many legal proceedings – seeking to impose the transfer of certain confiscations that were “too irritating to the inhabitants of the neighboring villages” (and, additionally, to suppress the pastures, given that the enclosures prevented access to water and/or roads) – were begun and sometimes won. Communal procedures challenged old confiscations made 40 years previously in the name of acts passed 100 years earlier (for example, the case circa 1778 concerning the moorland around Rolandière and Villeneuve). When the problem became too difficult, the farmers assembled and brought down the new embankments, as in Héric in 1773.

Even if the argument was quickly swept away by the triumphant rationalism and hard laws of the market, the right to pasturage on the “useless and empty lands” was virtually sacred and, as late as the 18th century, one could find in the area around Nantes pious aristocrats who asked their confessors about the possible sinfulness [*la faute*] of forest-clearing and the confiscations to which it led when they combined to deprive poor people of their access to the pastures. In fact, *Très ancienne coutume de Bretagne* (drafted between 1312 and 1325) stipulated that the [transfer of] things that “cannot bring profit to those to whom they belong” but could profit others without causing any harm to their owners must not be prevented “because it would be a sin.” A group of confessors drew up an inventory of their questions on this subject and submitted them to the Bar of the Parliament of Brittany, which responded that the lord must above all else conduct a “sorting out” [*triage*] that would allow him to reserve for himself, once and for all, a third of the commons and to use it as he pleased.

It was in this context that, in 1752, the Abbot named Renaud, the parish priest of Treillières, took up the defense of his parishioners by re-copying the acts that had established

their rights and that, in 1786, his nephew participated in the destruction of embarkments and the trial that followed it. In this case, as in others, the trial dragged on long enough for us to be able to find the complaints in the Notebooks of Grievances. The records for Treillières indicate that “the lord had closed off an enormous number of moors and commons, which is contrary to our possessions and material comfort.” At Héric, it was requested that the “wastelands and moors” that had been confiscated by the King should be returned to the vassals, that is to say, to the local farmers. At Fay-de-Bretagne, the complaints remained very moderate because they were limited to the idea that the “land remains shared between us and the lord,” and yet the complainants stated that rent would no longer be paid for land that had been confiscated.

A great uncertainty came to mark the revolutionary period when it came to the future of the moors: the Revolution hesitated between the defense of the poor people who wanted to keep communal customs intact and the idea of progress associated with individualized private property.

The dismemberment of the moors

The Commune of Fay-de-Bretagne, which occupied a total of 9,000 hectares in 1840, included 3,800 hectares of moorland and underbrush; in almost all of the surrounding Communes, between 30 and 40 percent of the territory was communal moorland. But at the same time, the parish priest at Treillières noted that 500 hectares in his parish had been cleared over the course of four years. The Commune itself possessed 1,000 hectares of moorland, the main part of which it had held on to, and had limited itself to renting several small plots and charging [rent from] those who had established their farmsteads and cleared some of the terrain. As Jean Bourgeon wrote, “the sprawl [*mitage*] of the moorlands changed at the whim of the municipal debt.” But it was only a sprawl because, at the beginning of the 19th century, agriculture still lacked weapons. The Empire and its wars having disappeared, the situation changed and some villages brought out the old acts that had established their rights, made claims on surrounding areas, and invoked progress. There were legal proceedings, prevarications, and regularizations of the encroachments by the many poor people who’d constructed roadside shacks and gardens. The needs of the Commune grew and each person could have his or her share or crumb from within the framework of the subdivisions, which were quietly made. As a result, the communal moorlands were dismembered between 1837 and 1850. At Héric, the subdivision of the moorlands at the Grands Mortiers was effected in 1838. Despite the costs of the tedious investigations, in which each person provided his or her testimony about what his or her grandfather had owned and the placemarkers on the property (trees, ponds, paths, etc.), the land was distributed so that each person seemed to have his or her share and, in many cases, the new land records could be established with the creation of the communal land registry.

As expected by many landowners in the rest of Brittany, the laws passed after 1850 to facilitate subdivision and “development” concerned only a small amount of space (there were merely 23 shareable hectares of moorland from Parignac to Fay-de-Bretagne in 1869). In fact, the Loire-Atlantique region benefited from three incentives: a class of rich property-owners who were turning away from commerce with America and towards investing in land [in France]; successful examples in the area that stretched from Grand-Jouan to Nozay (the agronomist Jules Rieffel and the Abbey of Melleraye); and the discovery of the fertilizing powers of the “black beast,” a byproduct of the sugar-refining industry that solved the problem of manure when waiting for the arrival of nitrates from Chile. But the movement was begun and, thanks to the impetus of many property-owners, new villages were even

created (Solférino, the name of a battle won in 1859, appeared in Blain and had its twin in the moorlands of Gascogne).

Thus the highly geometrical designs of agricultural parcelling can be explained by a process of subdivision that was conducted on large areas over the course of a relatively short period of time. Hedges were planted to mark out the property lines as well as to prevent livestock from roaming into the fields. Here we must note a practice recorded by Per Bihan at Fay-de-Bretagne: “the sprouts or re-grown branches of the young hedges are protected from the appetite of the livestock by the spraying of animal excrement, with the help of small sticks from the broom plant.” Also practiced was *plessage*, a very old technique that creates and maintains enclosures by understanding and using the vegetable dynamics of the living hedges to render them more impenetrable. But because the farmers were always in need of bedding, the moors weren’t totally destroyed. As late as the middle of the 20th century, they continued to plant gorse in order to feed their horses. Michel Tarin,⁶ who was born in 1938 and was a farmer at Chavagnes in the Commune of Treillières, says that his father used to go all the way to Châteaubriant (50 kilometres away) to buy gorse seeds.

The clearing of the moors gave birth to an unusual situation: a wooded countryside in a humid zone, set up by the ancestors of the farmers whom the madness of our époque wants to chase away. This countryside is characterized by the presence of small meadows that haven’t been modified or drained; unimproved embankments and old planted hedges; wild streams and a dense network of diversified ponds. The embankments were part of the “conservatories” [*conservatoires*] of the old landscape to the extent that they were constructed by digging the ditches that surround them. Nevertheless, they were relatively dry, and contained more heather-ashes than ciliated heather, which typified the original large moorlands. We can see that the history of this region is complex, but we can also see that the new pages in it will never erase the preceding ones (except if they are all torn out in favor of a botched page from the history of aviation).⁷

We must save the last moorlands

According to certain, oft-cited estimates, the Loire-Atlantique area had around 300,000 hectares of moorland at the beginning of the 19th century. But if we consult the meticulous *Statistique du département de la Loire-Inférieure*, published by Jean-Baptiste Huet de Coëtlizan (1769-1823) in 1801, we only find 133,632 hectares or 20 percent of the total area (marshes and meadows were counted separately and the total of the “uncultivated” land was 161,127 hectares). Incidentally, this estimate agrees with the figure from 1844 of 100,000 hectares, presented as the “first reliable figure” by René Bourrigaud. The current local governmental inventory of natural places claims 1.4 percent (a total of 9,782 hectares) is “moorland and underbrush,” but it must be understood that there are, in fact, only 5 patches of [true] moorland (three are on the coastline), which is a slightly significant number, but they don’t contain much more than 200 hectares in total, with the largest and best-conserved located on the plateau that extends from the Landonnais to Grand Auverné. The Corine Land Cover database says there are 624 hectares of “moorlands and brushwood.” The botanist Aurélia Lachaud, who has traveled extensively in the area, summarizes the situation well when she says, “the large-scale moors are now quasi-nonexistent, except for the slopes of the Don (Grand-Auverné and Moisdon). On the coastline, the most beautiful moorlands used to be at Préfaïlles, but today the majority of them are merely thickets of gorse. The remainder of

⁶ Cf. his open letter (French only) dated 22 September 2013 concerning the airport that is to be built at Notre-Dame-des-Landes: <http://zad.nadir.org/spip.php?article1903>.

⁷ An international airport is to be built on these lands.

the large areas are underneath pine trees and in a more or less relict state. There are also small pockets that shrink each year due to a lack of appropriate management.”

This means that every parcel of moorland in Loire-Atlantique is precious and that the [total of] 2 hectares that remain in several small areas within Notre-Dame-des-Landes are the last aspects of the landscape that dominated for two centuries. There’s no doubt about their patrimonial character. If the moorlands are to be protected, it is for properly human and cultural reasons, because it is in its diversity that nature plays an essential role in our perceptible [*sensible*] experience of the world and in the rootedness that allows us to take the measure of it.

The commons at the heart of the debate

For centuries, it was the custom for the moorlands to be used collectively. Conflicts exploded each time individuals, in one way or other, wanted to contravene the uses and customs that assured the general equilibrium and, in particular, to topple that equilibrium over into private appropriation. It took more than two centuries to impose privatization of the communal moorlands.

The philosophy of this subdividing [of the Commons] was well summarized by Nicolas-Yves Borie, the first prefect of d’Ille-et-Vilaine, who wrote in 1801 that “community causes destruction.” That’s pretty much the thesis of the biologist Garrett Hardin (1915-2003) in his essay “The Tragedy of the Commons,”⁸ published in 1968 in *Science*. Hardin’s idea was that “the Commons” – which, for him, was not only pastures and meadows, but also public parks, natural preserves and Social Security – are the causes of a mutual super-exploitation that aims at maximizing the individual’s profits. In the eyes of this American ecologist, only the regime of private property can conserve the sustainability [*durabilité*] of natural resources. The polemic begun by this text, which brought fuel to the neo-liberal fire that was being started, is at the heart of a debate that is still relevant today. For several years now, it has in fact contributed to reflections concerning the Commons (even “the Common”), which, by analogy, includes the field of the Internet. Many authors have based their reflections on the enclosures in Great Britain, which have marked economic, social and political thinking since the 18th century. Even a recent work such as *Commun*, an essay on revolution in the 21st century written by the philosopher Pierre Dardot and the sociologist Christian Laval, cites no examples from France.

We hope that it will be understood that, in the history of Brittany’s moorlands and in the history being written today at the ZAD⁹ at Notre-Dame-des-Landes, there is material that helps us better understand the functioning of social models other than those that give prominence to an all-powerful State or a totally liberated market. This is what Grégory Quenet recently suggested in *Qu’est-ce que l’histoire environnementale?* when he affirmed, “collective management offers many historical examples of sustainable [*soutenable*] management that is more efficient than private property.” A lawsuit brought in 1698 by the users of the communal moorlands that extended from Lanveur to Languidic against a monopolist perfectly illustrated the fact that the usage of the commons is essentially based upon an unwritten law and founded upon a working-class way of life [*savoir-vivre*] that is the best guardian of the sustainability of the communal patrimony. The “poor people of the parish” aren’t rapacious egomaniacs who scrape the meagre moorlands at their disposal down to the bare rock. Quite the contrary: they defend the moorlands against those who want to rip

⁸ English in original.

⁹ The *Zone À Défendre* (Zone to be Defended), in this case, against the construction of a new international airport. Cf. <https://zad.nadir.org/?lang=en>.

out clods for the sake of reaping and pasturage only. They are in fact guardians of the system that is threatened by an individual who precisely founded his irreversible plunder on the right of the owner to the land. Above all else, “the Commons” is the will to live together, to have a future and to periodically reinforce the links between people, for example, within the framework of the festivals that accompany and celebrate collective labor. This age-old experience must nourish the reflections of those who will continue to live within the ZAD.

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