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Sharif Gemie, *Brittany 1750-1950: the Invisible Nation* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007). xvi + 308 pp. Map, notes, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-7083-2002-0.

Review by Julian Wright, Durham University.

A historian in search of a region and its identity: this is Sharif Gemie's opening statement about himself and this complex, multi-faceted book. The search takes us into the pre-Revolution in order to consider Breton society and politics at the end of the Old Regime, and pursues the history of Brittany as an area to be administered, subdued or exploited by the various regimes of the nineteenth century. As the search unfolds, it dwells increasingly on the idea that there was a Breton cultural and political movement, which Gemie introduces as minor actors in the story of Brittany under the Third Republic. Where these movements led to in the critical period of the 1940s occupies him to a great extent. But here the work ends, and the search is thus shown really to be little more than a device for the historian to hang his research on; if Gemie really wanted to tell us why Brittany's identity was so intangible, so elusive, he would need a fuller discussion of how the cultural and political Breton movements of the 1960s and afterwards reconfigured those aspects of their past that he has related; he would need a deeper analysis of the moral problem of Breton regionalism in the late twentieth century. The book is perhaps already rich and varied enough. Nevertheless, the purpose of this book is sometimes obscured by the complexity of the author's task.

Gemie begins by considering the relationship of Brittany and France in a general sense, and surveys demographic, economic and social developments that have changed that relationship in recent years. Brittany's conceptualization is more important to Gemie; he shows how this could locate it as a remote corner of France, a backwater, but also as a birthplace and a centre of much national energy. Gemie surveys the historiography on Breton identity through a number of different prisms, concluding that he is most drawn to Caroline Ford's "interactionist" interpretation that examines cultural and political transactions between the centre and the region.<sup>[1]</sup> Gemie himself claims to be offering a survey of Breton political culture as a corrective to some intellectual histories that dwell too much on the printed word and not enough on public manifestations of Breton political attitudes. It is worth noting, however, that this particular contribution is strongest in a few central chapters in the volume and that elsewhere the printed word, often that of non-Breton writers, predominates. Having outlined historiographical approaches, Gemie begins the main part of his book by outlining different types of nationalism. This takes us into yet more introductory material, and much space is taken up positioning Gemie's approach more broadly in terms of how he perceives nation-building, and further how he perceives the creation of the French nation. With these elements in place he then lays out his approach to Celtic identities as they are perceived in the modern era.

These lengthy introductory discussions are followed by a chapter on Brittany during the French Revolution—obviously of vital importance, although Gemie does not add anything particularly new to our understanding here. But once this very useful chapter is concluded we are thrust once more into the critical essay-mode that dominates so much of this book—and at this point, the undergrowth is particularly thick. To what extent, Gemie inquires, can the study of cultural definitions of Brittany be analysed through an adapted version of the analytical tool provided by Edward Said – "orientalism"?

Too much of this discussion is obvious; it will surprise no-one to discover that French writers of the nineteenth century sometimes liked to describe Brittany in rather exotic terms; and nor will many be startled to learn that there is a counter-argument here, in that other writers perceived Brittany to have a closer relationship with mainstream French culture. This section feels a little like a separate essay that has been pasted into the book in order to provide yet more discussion of how one might approach the concept of “Bretonism.” The problem is that it is only on page 106 that we finally enter the part of the volume where Gemie hopes to set up his own pendant to the analyses of Ford, by getting inside Breton political culture in the nineteenth century.

These central chapters draw on fresh archival material from the departments of Brittany in order to develop a nuanced analysis of the relationships between the State, the Church, local administrative officers and the local population in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Here, at last, Gemie offers us a detailed discussion of Breton political culture. We are led to a balanced conclusion about the relationship between Roman Catholicism and politics in Brittany; there was, long before the dramatic debates within Catholicism under Leo XIII, a clear sense in Brittany that Catholicism could at times promote a “liberal” political agenda; elsewhere, however its ties with legitimism were more solid. No clear picture can in fact be drawn, and Gemie’s insights here are particularly useful. The difficult emergence of a “blue” republicanism in Brittany is charted just as carefully and without slipping into facile generalizations. Gemie relates a marvellously Asterix-like tale of local peasants voting against the local nobleman, in spite of all the traditional tricks having been deployed to ensure that he would gain their support. The aristocracy was furious. The “plucky little Breton” of this story reflects the innate slipperiness of Gemie’s subject matter. Was Breton political culture becoming republicanized by the late nineteenth century? Perhaps; but Gemie is unable to develop the conclusion further because of the growing difficulty over what constituted solid republicanism in the interwar years.

As Gemie moves into his important discussion of the emergence of regionalist movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we are once more confronted with the problem that his survey of political culture (as distinct from his wider discussions about regional culture and historiography) has only been focussed on the mid-nineteenth century. When examining twentieth-century regionalism, Gemie fairly decides to concentrate his efforts on the militant *Breiz Atao*—an umbrella group that leant its particularly vibrant tone of ‘energetic’ regionalism to debates about Brittany’s place in the modern Republic. But Gemie does not pursue his investigation of how these and other regionalists operated at the local level in anything like enough detail. We are left rather confused: who among the regionalists was leaning to the right? Were there any proto-fascists among them? (Whatever that means—terms like this are not defined by Gemie). Who leant to the left, and what became of this interesting left-wing Breton regionalism? The whole section is too rapid to give us clear answers.

A tentative criticism of the problem of this part of the book might be that Gemie has simply not been able to read enough in the recent political studies of the Third Republic; this is a field that is expanding rapidly. A wider consideration of political developments in the Third Republic would allow his discussion of the politics of Breton regionalism to become far more nuanced. Doubtless space was a consideration here, as well. Nevertheless, small but vocal groups such as the Union Régionaliste Bretonne are passed over rather quickly, and Gemie does slip into generalization. He indicates in one of the many tables that proliferate throughout this book (not all of them particularly useful) that 17 percent of this particular movement were members of the aristocracy (taking figures from a monograph published thirty years ago). But he goes on nevertheless to refer to the movement as “aristocratic”—by contrast with later groups. This is precisely the point where a more sustained investigation of the URB and other regionalist groups, uncovering their personalities and their writings in more detail, would have helped Gemie’s picture to emerge from the rather opaque description that is offered here. Too many of the regionalists of the interwar years ‘surprisingly’ espoused ideas or causes that did not quite fit. But there is not enough space for us to pursue these complex personalities. The inevitable demonstration of how all this ‘played out’ under the occupation suffers as a result.

Gemie's dilemma is that he has in fact attempted to write with two different historiographical approaches in mind, and these do not always balance. The first embraces his quest for the texts and discourses that tell us how Brittany has been conceptualized and re-conceptualized. Pursued in considerable detail in the early sections on nineteenth-century writing about Brittany, this approach needed greater development in the later sections on regionalism. Le Goffic, the marquis de l'Estourbeillon, and other poets and activists of the regionalist universe surely could have been dealt with in greater detail. This would naturally have dove-tailed with the discussions of how Brittany is "thought of" by Bretons and by outsiders alike. The second strand to Gemie's contribution is his discussion of political culture, pursued with a good eye for archival sources. Because his close reading of the wider context of French political culture in the later Third Republic is not as strong as his understanding of earlier nineteenth-century practices and debates, the final sections of the volume seem somehow muddier.

It is by no means impossible to weave two such divergent strands together; but constraints of space and perhaps time have led to a tantalizing book, in which wonderful examples and insights are offered in one sphere only to be unbalanced by a patchy discussion in another. A longer book, in which all matters relating to discourses of *brettonitude*, including those emanating from the regionalists themselves, were considered together in a first section; and a much fuller examination of political practices and debates in Brittany were pursued in a second, would have been more satisfying. More satisfying, too, would have been to have bullet-point lists and tables woven into the natural flow of the prose; these look ugly, and contributed to a feeling of haste induced by some slightly slipshod editing.

Histories of identities lead us to concentrate our sharpest analytical insights on the texts that transmit the values of the culture that shapes and forms the authors of these texts, leading us to conclusions about the way in which the creation of a given identity helped or hindered the emergence of a dominant discourse at national level. One part of Gemie's story about Brittany is the story of how intellectuals, politicians, local historians, notables and priests told themselves stories about Brittany, and to what purpose, given the shifting power relationships between the region and the centre. With much critical discussion of outsiders' views of Brittany and a multi-layered analysis of the problem of Breton identity in historiographical perspective, Gemie's approach here is subtle and intelligent. This is perhaps the story with which he is most at home, and would, if developed in more exhaustive detail, have made an excellent monograph in itself.

The second story Gemie wishes to tell is about political and social developments within the region; and this is the tempting and elusive part of his work. The study of identity formation draws us ineluctably away from 'experience' and the detailed discussion of those fascinating characters, localities and events that first drew us to the topic (there is no doubting, by the way, Gemie's personal fascination for Brittany, and it is right and proper that this has been allowed to permeate his text). There were several points at which I longed to hear more Breton voices; and the book comes to life when Gemie gets inside the writings of *Breizh Atao* or the accounts of the *pardon* in the nineteenth century.

The dichotomy between these two histories might have become more tractable had we been offered a pursuance of the two themes up to the present day, because it is in the last fifty years, as Gemie hints in his opening pages, that the very intangibility of Breton identity becomes most apparent: the relationship between "chewy", detailed socio-political history and the discourse of Bretonism has itself collapsed in recent periods when the very idea of regional identity was politically and morally dubious.

Gemie passionately believes that it is important for identity history that the historian should examine in closer detail the practices of political actors at the "grass roots." But this claim raises a question about the limitations of identity history. At its best, as in some of Gemie's chapters here, we learn to examine an idea about a region (or other social category), through a multi-faceted intellectual approach that

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teaches us much about the way in which modern thinkers conceptualize their own social norms and cultural values. But connecting this academic discourse to that of the historian who has a worthwhile fascination with political practice on the endlessly various “local” scale remains a difficult proposition. While Gemie has striven to write an accessible, appealing book—and his prose is certainly directed in an accessible way—the overall balance of his work is not clear. His subject matter is ultimately the biggest problem: he has attempted to write a book about something which he has stated is indefinable. This surely is enough to give any historian a headache. It is to his credit that the book contains much that is useful, tangible and well-written, both in the sections on debates about the concept of Brittany, and in the discussion of the growth of Breton political life in the nineteenth century.

#### NOTES

[1] Caroline Ford, *Creating the Nation in Provincial France: Religion and Political Identity in Brittany* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

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