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Karine Salomé, *Les îles bretonnes: Une image en construction (1750-1914)*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2003. 466 pp. Notes, maps, figures, bibliography, index. 24€ (pb). ISBN 2-86847-824-7.

Review by Caroline Ford, University of California, Los Angeles.

Focusing on Brittany's coastal islands, Karine Salomé explores the genealogy of changing emotional responses toward a certain kind of landscape and its inhabitants from the mid-eighteenth century to the First World War. Inspired by the work of Alain Corbin,^[1] she reveals how a landscape that elicited fear and revulsion in the eighteenth century came to draw forth emotions of admiration and desire in the nineteenth century among the painters, poets, administrators, travelers, and engineers who visited it. Salomé is not only concerned with the writings and representations of those who were foreign to the islands, however. She also wishes to understand the influence of these external perceptions on the identities of the islanders themselves. The book is thus divided into three parts. The first examines the perceptions of French administrators and French and English travelers in the eighteenth century. The second focuses on the discovery of and growing fascination with the Breton islands in the nineteenth century, and the third attempts to understand the development of island identities as a whole.

Salomé suggests that early eighteenth-century observers viewed the islands in terms of the resources--defensive and material--that they could provide for the French crown. Belle-Île's location and its fortifications, which were designed by Sébastien Le Pestre de Vauban in the second half of the seventeenth century, played a particularly important role in France's wars with the British, for example. Observers noted the poverty, absence of trees, and the presence of wasteland, which were taken as signs of social disorder and lack of civilization. Indeed, negative images abounded in French administrative correspondence. This perception began to change toward the middle of the eighteenth century when island landscapes were appreciated for their wild beauty and when islanders came to be admired for their innocence, primitive nobility, and simple virtues. This was evident in the description of a utopia, *L'innocence du premier âge en France*, published in 1768 by Billardon de Sauvigny, which contained two fables, one of which was entitled *L'île d'Ouessant*. The fear and disgust that the islands first aroused thus increasingly gave way to curiosity in the nineteenth century, and this interest was further encouraged by the development of tourism after 1850, which coincided with the building of rail lines to the north and south of the Breton peninsula. Landscape painters and writers came to idealize the islands' savage and sublime nature, which culminated in a movement to protect landscapes for posterity by the early twentieth century. The island of Bréhat was one of the first to come under the law of 21 April 1906 governing the protection of natural sites and monuments.

The islands that Salomé considers are very heterogeneous in terms of their climate, topography, and economic base. They range from the tiny, temperate islands of Bréhat and Batz off the northern coast of Brittany, to the barren and windswept Atlantic islands of Ouessant, Molène, and Sein, to the southern islands of Houat, Hoëdic, Groix, and Belle-Île. By 1911, some had as few as 280 inhabitants and relied on fishing, while others, like Belle-Île, had a population of over 9,000, who were involved in diverse economic activities. These islands increasingly became a temporary home for summer residents. The celebrated actress Sarah Bernhardt, for example, first bought a fort and then the *manoir* of Penhoët on Belle-Île in 1909. Bréhat became a colony for painters, while Ouessant, perhaps because of its inclement climate, remained largely undeveloped. Salomé argues that despite this diversity one can discern a "homogenization of modes of perception, a unification of space considered to be beautiful in its totality"

(p. 215). Perhaps Salomé underestimates the degree to which Brittany's islands remained savage and uncivilized territory in the minds of many in metropolitan France.

Salomé relies on a rich store of documentation gathered in parish, departmental, national, municipal, and ecclesiastical archives as well as on literary texts, tourist guides, travelers' accounts, and iconographic materials. Although her command of primary and secondary sources is impressive, she does not fully account for why these islands were transformed from objects of fear into those of wonder in the period she considers. Moreover, one might ask whether island populations were viewed all that differently from those of Brittany's mainland.

The emergence of the fields of ethnology and anthropology as well as the development of theories of race changed the way in which islands were perceived by the end of the nineteenth century. Observers became as concerned with the problems of alcoholism, tuberculosis, and other disease—with understanding the effect of climate on a supposed Breton race—as they were with landscapes of the sublime. Moreover, as Salomé notes, in the late 1880s observers tended to concentrate their sights on island women, who seemed to crystallize the image of islanders in their exoticism, beauty (or ugliness), singularity, and familiarity (or strangeness). Salomé does not fully account for this shift in the attention that the islands and islanders received, but she does suggest that women increasingly came to be seen as the bearers of tradition, which included customs, local practices, religion, and dress.

While available sources are far less abundant, Salomé examines the effect of outside scrutiny on the island populations themselves and on the formation of local identities. She argues that islanders developed a strong professional identity as sailors and as men and women of the sea, and that they increasingly came to display an allegiance to the French state, while mistrusting outsiders at the same time. Salomé attempts to show the islanders' growing integration into a larger national culture through electoral statistics and other measures, but she does not fully capture the subtle negotiations that Breton islanders had with the French state. By any criteria island societies retained their distinctness in ways that eluded many outside observers. She also downplays their forms of resistance, particularly during the Third Republic's attempt to ban the Breton language in school and to secularize rural society, a battle which does not figure prominently in this book, in spite of its importance to the region. Nonetheless, Salomé has produced a rich and thought-provoking work, encouraging the reader to think about how perceptions of landscapes change over time, and about why islands, in particular, have represented images of estrangement and of paradise at one and the same time.

NOTES

[1] Alain Corbin, *Le territoire du vide: L'Occident et le désir du rivage* (Paris: Aubier, 1998) and *L'homme dans le paysage* (Paris: Editions Texuel, 2001).

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