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## New Books from Brittany

Reviewed by Lois Kuter



### **Daniel Giraudon. *Traditions populaires de Bretagne: Du coq à l'âne – Quand les animaux parlaient ...***

Yoran Embanner. 2013. 395 pages. ISBN 978-2-916579-51-1.

Daniel Giraudon is a professor at the Université de Bretagne Occidentale and researcher at the Centre de Recherche Bretonne et Celtique (CRBC) in Brest. He has studied oral traditions of Brittany for over 40 years, collecting stories, sayings and phrases in Gallo of eastern Brittany where his family has roots, as well as Breton in the Trégor region (especially) in north central Brittany. Fluent in both these languages, he has gleaned an immense amount of lore from masters throughout

Brittany and has written a series of books on the relation of Bretons to their natural world.

This book is the re-edition from a 2000 publication with some additions and relocation of the section on insects to *Le Folklore des insectes et autres petites bestioles* (see review in *Bro Nevez* 121, February 2012). Featured in *Du coq à l'âne* are animals of the Breton countryside. A little over the first third of the book is devoted to birds: larks, woodcocks, crows, coo coos, owls, jays, thrushes, swallows, blackbirds, peacocks (not native to Brittany!), finches, woodpeckers, magpies, pigeons, wrens and robins. The second third of the book focuses on farm animals: horses, cows, goats, dogs, cats, pigs, chickens and roosters. And the last third presents wild animals: toads, frogs, salamanders, snakes, rabbits, wolves (no longer found in Brittany), foxes, moles, mice and rats.

The book is loaded with legends, Gallo and Breton sayings about animals, riddles, rhymes for children, proverbs, song and poetry. There are lots of expressions comparing peoples' behavior to animals such as "c'hweshet 'vel un toñseg" – proud like a toad, which will puff up defensively when approached. There are also many ways that animals give omens of death or marriage as in the expression: "Pa groaz ar big war an hentchoù, prestik e tremen an Ankou" (when the magpie crosses paths, death will soon pass). In many cases animals can give a sign of upcoming weather such as the songs of coo coos and frogs in the spring. Sometimes the prediction can be iffy as recognized in the expression: "N'eo ket ur wenilienn a ra an hañv, nag ur barr awel ar goañv" (A swallow doesn't make it summer any more than a wind gust makes it winter). Some of the sayings and expressions are "earthy" with references to rear ends and excrement and urine (to put it more formally).

There's a wealth of information about how Bretons in the past (and sometimes in the present still) take precautions to insure the welfare of their animals through special Pardons where the animals are blessed or practices to insure fertility. There are also precautions humans must take to avoid meeting fantastic animals late at night such as angry bulls or huge ferocious black dogs. And there are tales of people being transformed into animals when they die as punishment for bad deeds during their lifetime.

When it comes to wild animals there are clear expressions of loves and hates and fears. Toads, salamanders and snakes sometimes met cruel fates for their association with the devil before being recognized for the helpful ecological role they can play in a garden. In this as well as in the two books noted below the author does not spare us stories of what seem today cruel practices regarding animals – sometimes a children's game or pastime such as collecting as many bird eggs as possible. But, the close relationship Bretons have had with birds and animals they encountered in rural life is certainly clear in the wealth of language devoted to these creatures and the attention paid to them as domestic animals on whom one depended or as wild animals that were an important part of the environment. As the saying

goes: “Ne z’eus ken nemed ar vadiziant etre an dud hag ar chatal (only baptism separates people from animals).

As is the case in all three books by Giraudon presented here you will find hundreds of photos of the animals presented as well as people who shared their wealth of knowledge and lore with the author. There are also old postcards and drawings, as well as newer photos, to set the scene. And each book also has a useful bibliography to further explore. For those interested in Celtic traditions more broadly there are quite a few examples of lore and expressions from Scotland and Ireland included for comparison.



**Daniel Giraudon & Yann Riou. *Traditions populaires de Bretagne: Cocquillages et crustacés – dictons, légendes et croyances du bord de mer.*** Yoran Embanner. 2013. 271 pages. ISBN 978-2-916579-49-8.

Daniel Giraudon pairs here with Yann Riou, a math professor at ISEN in Brest who has also collected oral traditions, especially that of the sea and maritime life in the Leon area of northwestern Brittany. As is the case with all the books in this series on popular traditions of Brittany, a wealth of lore in both Gallo and Breton are gathered from all parts of Brittany.

This book on shellfish and crustaceans begins with a story of how the ocean became salty. This is a Breton version of a tale also found in Scandinavia and Scotland where a sea captain steals a magical grinding mill to take on board his ship to crush salt he needs to preserve the fish he catches. The mill produces salt on command, but the captain does not know the words to make it stop. The ship fills with salt and sinks to the bottom of the sea and this is how the sea first became salty.

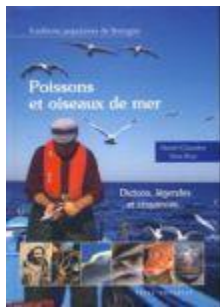
Before launching into a presentation of the particular creatures of the sea (ar mor) presented in this book, the authors also discuss lore related to tides, the color, sounds, and character of the sea including waves and the danger to sailors.

In describing shellfish and crustaceans, this book includes lots of folk sayings and expressions that describe their unique characters, but focuses more on traditions related to the collection of sea life by fishermen – professionals as well as amateurs who venture out at low tide to glean. While in earlier days this was important in gathering food for one’s household, today the practice of searching for crabs, clams or other creatures exposed when the tide goes out is still very much practiced by Bretons for the enjoyment of learning about their environment as well as the pleasure of eating fresh seafood. You learn about how each creature is hunted and captured as well as something about how it is prepared and served as a meal.

In the shellfish category you are presented to and learn the many names associated with hermit crabs, barnacles, snails, cockle shells, scallops, razor fish, oysters, mussels and clams. When it comes to the crustaceans you learn about different types of crabs (ar c’hrank, in Breton) and how they are collected and eaten, and you will also learn about different types of lobsters, shrimps, and prawns (langoustine). In presenting the techniques of fishing for these, a section is included on how fishing baskets have been made. While perhaps not always eaten, other creatures to be found on the coast are also presented: sea anemones, starfish, sea urchins, jelly fish, cuttlefish and squid.

For those who are not familiar with a seaside environment – like me – you may find yourself searching for English equivalents to name the creatures well illustrated in photos. Whether you love to eat mussels, sea urchins or oysters or not, this book will certainly give one respect for the wealth and importance of shellfish and crustaceans to be found in the coastal waters surrounding Brittany.

**Daniel Giraudon & Yann Riou. *Traditions populaires de Bretagne: Poisons et oiseaux de mer – Dictons, légendes et croyances.*** Yoran Embanner. 2013. 271 pages. ISBN 978-2-916579-50-4.



Taking us a little further out to sea, this book focuses on fish and provides a wealth of information on the history of how Bretons fished and the current state of the art. People and their tools are pictured in old photos and drawings and you also find photos of the fishermen and women who shared their knowledge with the authors. The bulk of the book is devoted to fish, including sea bass, conger eels, fresh water eels, goby, sand-eels, Pollack, lote, mackerel, mullet, plaice, rays, red mullets and gurnards, whiting, dog-fish, and dory.

Expressions and sayings related to these fish are included but a focus is on how and when fishing is done and how fish are eaten, with some stories about fishing exploits and adventures. Also included is an introduction to the custom of "Poisson d'avril" or "Pesk Ebrel" in Breton. This is our own April Fools Day when outlandish things are said and we are sometimes made to look like a fool. You will also enjoy stories about the relationship of Saints Goustan, Neot and Corentin to fish, and you will be introduced to the art of digging up worms and bait for fishing.

While fish take up three-fourths of this book, some 80 pages are devoted to sea birds and their relationship to fishermen as competitors for fish and sometimes as game to be eaten, or simply as companions out at sea who can help one locate a good fishing spot or warn of weather changes. Birds included are cormorants, curlews, gannet, seagulls, oyster-catchers, puffins and petrels.

I have to admit that I am much more of an inland person who prefers a dip in a small stream than a frightful pounding by a wave on a beach, but this did not prevent me from appreciating these two books which present vividly the strong relationship Bretons have had and continue to have with the sea and its creatures.