

Cyril DAVID, “Postal service in the Morbihan: from the opening up of rural areas to the modernization of the network from 1830 to the end of the 19th century” (“Le service postal en Morbihan : du désenclavement des campagnes à la modernisation du réseau de 1830 à la fin du XIX^e siècle”), master’s thesis in contemporary history directed by Isabelle Emeriau, Université de l’Ouest/Angers, 1998.

The goal of this study of postal service in the Morbihan (1830-1900) is to define the status and exact role of postal service in a more or less remote department of France in the 19th century with respect to the written word (Breton was essentially a spoken language), where the level of literacy was one of the weakest in the country; the department itself, a linguistic border separate from the rest of France, experienced environmental hardships (a terrain that was a mixture of wood-land and pasture land, sparse dwellings, poor roads far from the major arteries of communication) that played a significant role in determining its status. We end our study by presenting the major idées-forces derived from our study.

A real political strategy intended to open up the rural world from its isolation was implemented when the provisions of the Sapey law came into force on 1 April 1830. The national administration’s goal was clear: to bring the post office into every household, hamlet, and isolated farm in France. Even the most isolated areas should not longer be removed from the flow of correspondence. But we must recognize that this goal was far from being completely realized in the Morbihan countryside at the very end of the 19th century. The Morbihan was one of the last departments in France to receive daily service (1863). Moreover, the weakness of its postal infrastructures was obvious: with so few mailboxes and post offices for such a populated department, the overture of rural space in the Morbihan was inevitably fractional, with some areas remaining completely cut off from service. Throughout the century, the western part of the department was kept apart from improvements to the network and the creation of new postal buildings. To cite few figures: in 1881 there was one mailbox for every 2,137 Morbihan inhabitants; according to my calculation, the national average for the same year was one mailbox for every 922 inhabitants. In 1875 there were 5,500 post offices in France, or one office for every 6,533 inhabitants. But in 1876 the Morbihan had only one post office for every 9,932 inhabitants! Judging from these numbers, the Breton department was definitely the runt of the little among the departments of France. The sparse and widely dispersed local habitats did nothing to facilitate the postal authorities’ task; many small hamlets were only serviced after those who lived in towns. The zeal and good will of local officials was soon tempered, if not definitively erased in some cases, by the budgetary expenses required to set up postal structures. More often than not, the postal administration’s insufficient funds coupled with the poverty of the Morbihan communities were insurmountable handicaps. At the end of the 19th century, the postal authorities were definitely lagging behind in seeing to the real needs of rural areas in the Morbihan concerning mail service.

As for transportation, there were notable improvements that should be mentioned: at the end of the 19th century, the railroad had become the backbone of postal circulation; distances were shorter and routing delays had noticeably decreased. Thus in 1875 a letter sent from the capital took 3 ½ times less time to reach the department of the Morbihan than it did in 1833. The steam engine allowed for a relative opening up of the rural Morbihan. Although these improvements are noteworthy, they still did not constitute perfect service in rural areas; still major flaws were ongoing and complaints from local communities stressed delays. There were as many problems

with communication by mail as before. These dysfunctions took a toll on the economic life of the region. The variety of complaints drew the attention of the postal authorities to defects in the system and incited them to make improvements, with more rapid transport of correspondence as their main concern. But the modernization of the mail network remained largely insufficient to the demands of the local population especially in the Morbihan, up to the very end of the 19th century. Flaubert is particularly eloquent on this topic in his description of the arrival of the mail from Auray in his *Par les champs et par les grèves*.

Service to the local islands was also inadequate: of the four islands in the Atlantic that were part of the Morbihan (Belle-Isle, Groix, Houat, and Hoëdic), only Belle-Isle was voluntarily granted postal service by postal steamboat in 1863. Groix certainly had service by postal steamboat from 1877 onward, but this was only at the initiative of a private entrepreneur, a step the postal authorities were initially against. All other correspondence was still routed either by launch or sailboat, with the usual inevitable irregularities in service during the harshest months. Once again this situation is attributable to the economic and budgetary restrictions of which the postal administration was victim. Another likely hypothesis would be that postal authorities gave priority to those regions that had the largest mail traffic as a way of developing the network. This was far from the case for the Breton department.

The analysis of 19th century postal inquiries (1802, 1847, 1876-1877) allows us to measure the size of postal traffic in the department statistically. The results clearly indicate that the Morbihan, as well as all of Brittany, was not included in the list of areas that had heavy mail traffic (to cite but one example: in 1877 the Morbihan was tied with Finistère in 84th place in terms of postal receivership). This was the result of different factors bearing on epistolary practice: the importance of the Breton language, despite the State authorities' efforts to disenfranchise it, the persistence of oral methods of transmission, and the low level of literacy among rural inhabitants. All these factors combined to isolate the Morbihan from the major trends in letter-writing. Looking more closely at the linguistic example, we see that the Breton language was the most common means of expression in the heart of the rural world, even if French was understood by most of its inhabitants. An 1830 inquiry revealed a Breton-speaking population of approximately 70% in all of lower Brittany (Basse-Bretagne: Morbihan, Finistère, Côtes-du-Nord). Breton was primarily a spoken language that did not necessarily include a written component. There was another significant linguistic characteristic of the Morbihan: the Gallo dialect was spoken instead of Breton in the eastern part of the department. Thus the prevalence of vernacular speech was an obstacle to epistolary communication. The use of the postal service remained the prerogative of the educated, French-speaking classes, businessmen, merchants, and seafarers. The act of writing was a rare activity for the majority of the essentially rural population of the Morbihan.

Moreover, the literacy level in the Morbihan was less than average before the enactment of Jules Ferry's educational laws. This was certainly another determining factor in explaining the low intensity of epistolary practice and the relative weakness of postal traffic. For instance, a table created by the Ministry of Public Education in 1865 shows that three Breton departments, including the Morbihan, had an illiteracy rate of over 80%.

Furthermore, because of their living conditions (scattered dwellings) and work environment (edged farmland), country folk in the Morbihan led a life with little social contact and had only intermittent contact with others in their community. Their view of the world often ended at the border of their parish, which kept them relatively compartmentalized. One could truly say that they lived in isolation and that the very idea of postal correspondence was foreign to this segment of the population. But we must also recognize that progress in educational development also brought with it a certain awareness among the very rural classes of the value of this type of correspondence.

The establishment of postal service also represented an important political issue. The few examples we have seen all show the extent to which the postal administration and local authorities were closely linked. The Cabinet Noir (censorship office) was intensely active in the Morbihan between 1791 and 1800, and strove to repress the circulation of pamphlets, journals, and other counter-revolutionary almanacs that, according to the authorities, stoked the flames of rebellion and hatred of republican institutions. The creation of rural postal service in 1830 symbolized the penetration of the State's presence into the heart of the most removed rural settings in France; what is more, it also became a vehicle for integration and the local adoption of the French language through the development of postal traffic and the dissemination of writing throughout the region.

We conclude with a few remarks on the postal staff without whom the simple act of receiving a letter would not be possible. These employees personified the postal administration and more broadly represented the State's penetration into a non-French speaking region at the end of the 19th century. Rural mail deliverers and postmistresses were quickly assimilated in the Morbihan. They ensured that postal service ran smoothly and soon became an indispensable presence in the life of a small rural locality. More than in open-field areas, the mail carrier represented a crucial means of social contact with the "outside world", appreciated by the inhabitants of small hamlet for the postal and extra-postal services he provided. Some carriers had to be familiar with the Breton language in order to communicate with their customers. Hiring could therefore only be done on a local basis, at least in the most densely Breton areas. Local hiring enabled the postal service to take root in a somewhat closed-minded rural milieu where innovations were often met with resistance. This circumstance tended to disappear with the advent of the Third Republic because of the radical program of "Frenchification" fostered by Jacobin authorities. The employees in post offices were mainly natives of the departments of western France; besides Brittany, these included the Sarthe, Mayenne, Loire-Inférieure and Normandy.

We should emphasize one last characteristic of the Morbihan. Once the otherwise isolated rural demographics were opened to external services, the distances that had to be covered notably increased: the same mail carrier had to provide service to all the villages and hamlets that were sometimes quite far from town. It was not unusual for a mail carrier in the Morbihan to walk more than ten hours per day and cover distances up to 40-50 kilometers. Finally, their wage was totally inappropriate for their working conditions; this was true for mail carriers as well as women managers who had to work in cramped, damp, and antiquated settings. Their salaries kept them in relative poverty and on the verge of social degradation. To that one must add the demands of public service: customers came to expect daily mail delivery and would accept no compromise, but most of the time they were unaware of the daily sacrifices the postal employees had to make in order to ensure that the mail was delivered regularly.