

ICWA LETTERS

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Institute of Current World Affairs

The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

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Jean Benoît Nadeau is a Fellow of the Institute studying "the resistance of the French to the trend of economic and cultural globalization."

The Many Faces of France

PARIS, France

November, 1999

By Jean Benoît Nadeau

HONFLEUR - October 31st

Halloween is the most recent American import to France, and the French are still unsure about what to do with "Trick or Treat."

"How do you carve a pumpkin?" asked a friend at a supper she was throwing on H-Day minus 15. Pretty basic stuff, you would think, but not for French parents raised on *La Galette des Rois* (a cake the French eat on Twelfth Night). This ancient custom is quintessentially French: it's around the table and it's with people you know. A bean is slipped inside a *feuilleté* cake; the one who bites the bean breaks a tooth, is proclaimed King of the Table, is crowned with a Golden Paper Crown, and is spared Dishwashing. This is regal all right, but much cheaper on the whole and much less complicated than having to dress up one's children for pillaging the neighborhood, while kids you don't know ransom you for candies.

Halloween is the new word from the New World. This became plain as my wife Julie and I arrived in the Normandy town of Honfleur on Halloween day. Walking from the parking to the old port, we came across a congregation of a hundred witches, skeletons, ghosts and little devils — and no more variety than that. Parents still go by the book. Poor devils.

We were eating at a café facing the port when a dog walked into the place, sniffed his way to the kitchen, and trotted out, unperturbed. That fleabag, that vector of infection, was much more welcome than the handful of witches and skeletons that walked in soon after to bedevil the owner for "Trick or Treat."

You don't need to have lived for long in France to realize that cities and dwellings are not adapted to Halloween as we know it. How do you rampage from house to house when you have to dial a secret code at the door, lobby the concierge to let you in, run up and down seven flights of stairs to knock at closed doors in dark corridors to ask for candies? Federal Express had the same problem with direct delivery, and they retreated in disorder.

One way out of this conundrum is to ask merchants. Halloween being a pusher scheme from candy makers, French bakers have a vested interest in Halloween and are an obvious target. Besides, filling one's own bag with chocolate *éclairs* and *rochers* has its charms. Except that this year, Halloween was taking place on a Sunday. So the poor kids had to go to bars and cafés. And the owner of the particular one where Julie and I ate preferred dogs.

Had the city not been jam-packed with visitors, the shopkeeper might have been more responsive to Trick or Treat. But you see, there is a calendar problem: All-Hallow-Even (Halloween) necessarily happens on the eve of *la Toussaint* (All



*A He-Witch with factory-made broomstick.
Poor chap won't get his day's take of goodies.*

Saints' Day), a week-long school break in France during which quaint cities like Honfleur are besieged by visitors, mostly French and therefore not particularly generous. These came from the nearby town of Le Havre, right across the estuary of the Seine river, by driving across the beautiful aerial bridge to admire Honfleur's austere Norman look, its wooden church and its rows of tall, narrow houses covered with black tile. Being true cousins of William the Conqueror, Normans, even as tourists, tend to overrun a place. This doesn't make overwhelmed shopkeepers particularly available to those poor devils working hard to win their day's take of goodies.

But French kids rallied around soon after. Julie and I had just been served our *salade niçoise* when we heard a rumble of protest coming from down at the port. It was chanting children voices, that soon became clear.

"On-veut-des-bonbons! On-veut-des-bonbons! (We-want-Candies! We-want-Candies!)"

A police car, all lights flashing, was opening the way and the crowd

of passersby moved aside to make way.

"On-veut-des-bonbons! On-veut-des-bonbons!"

And there was our horde of witches, ghosts, skeletons and devils, with banners, followed by parents and monitors, marching and drumming for candies, and more candies, showing their fist at the terrorized shopkeepers and swinging broomsticks in the face of the defenseless tourists.

"On-veut-des-bonbons!"

We knew we were dealing with professional demonstrators-in-the-bud when we realized this *Jacquerie* of marching monsters was circling the port. What better place to lay siege? The port has little evolved since Samuel de Champlain sailed away to found New France, that fantastic miscarriage of French foreign policy. The port of Honfleur is no more than a big, sheltered pond with a gate wide enough to let yachts and small sailboats in, and therefore easy to hold.

"On-veut-des-bonbons!"

The voices and their echo could be clearly heard across the small port. All the tourists froze for a moment. Were these the ghosts of an ancient revolutionary past coming to haunt them? Will *La Galette des Rois* be overthrown?

"On-veut-des-bonbons!"

Fortunately for us, this haunting vision of marching



Demon stationed for Demonstration. All hands on deck!



"On-veut-des-bonbons! On-veut-des-bonbons!"

witches, skeletons, ghosts and devils faded away, chanting,

"On-veut-des-bonbons!"

Rest assured, ye mortals, of the Americanization of France: they are fast making it into their own. And maybe one day this Halloween turned *Hallowine* will bounce back across the ocean to haunt America.

* * *

VAUX-LE-VICOMTE — May 7th

We are never quite in the wild when we hike around Paris, and my hiking-club mates always make me laugh



Sorry. Bakery closed.

when they ask our guide, "Are we lost?" We never are. We can walk up to 35 kilometers a day on ancient trails along brick walls in open fields guarded by 17th-century farm houses, and visit an abandoned gothic church, the ruins of an ancient theater, or walk in the craters of a Gallo-Roman smelter. Days generally end at the café next to the train station. This kind of tamed environment is very exotic to any North American lover of the great outdoors, for whom the wild is never far. This impression was particularly strong on that day of May when we stopped for a snack in front of the castle of Vaux-Le-Vicomte, southeast of Paris. This blueprint of Versailles, built by Superintendent Nicolas Fouquet from 1657 to 1661, was so gorgeous that Louis XIV, somewhat jealous, jailed Fouquet to get the architect and the gardener for himself. Those were the days.

So I was remarking that this was pretty exotic when Pierrette looked at me.

"Exotic, again!" she said. "What do you mean by that?"

"When you go to Nicaragua, Pierrete, a mango tree full of mangos is pretty exotic, right? But so is France for me."

"But we cannot be exotic..."

"Yes you are, but not pejoratively. It's just all strange. In my country, there are no two-colored cherries and plums to pick as we walk. And forget about eating in front of a castle."

"You don't have castles like this?"

French people regularly ask this question when I exclaim at the beauty of a castle they barely notice. Few realize how new the New World is, nor how derelict the few bumpkins that peopled this gigantic transAtlantic desert were, and still are. One exception was French nobleman and writer François René de Chateaubriand



(1768-1848), a well-traveled man. He wrote that Canada was the Sahara except for the letters c, n and d.

“I wish I had a castle, Pierrette, but I don’t.”

* * *

MONTIGNAC — October 5

I did not tell Pierrette that the most exotic thing about France is the French themselves. They may have a particular brand of rudeness,¹ but in my opinion, their most outstanding characteristic is their willingness to engage in, and prolong, conversation. The French have an exceptional ability to converse on any subject, and this is by far their most endearing and sometimes tiresome quality. Inarticulate people are more the exception than the

rule. Before we left for France, my wife Julie and I were warned by many people that the French are hard to reach and exceedingly private, but so far we have had more trouble stopping conversations than starting them. One memorable instance took place in the town of Montignac, in central France.

My parents, my wife and I were walking in the streets overlooking Montignac’s private castle when my mother’s attention was caught by a strange tree in a private garden. It had fruit that looked like figs, but very hard figs. (In Quebec, the only domestic fruits are apples, pears and berries.) This particular garden also featured a banana tree and bamboo — all very out of place. So you can imagine my parents’ interest. For me, the point of interest was the two dozen CDs hanging in the tree to scare birds away. We were just leaving when my mother,

¹ There is no doubt that the French are rude, and certainly exhibit rudeness in a way different from American, British and Canadian visitors. But I think that the French are no more rude than most. Rather, there is a true problem of numbers that skews the perspective: the French are the most observed people in the world. France receives 70 million tourists per year, the highest number in the world, and a very high proportion for a country of 60 million. For the US, an equivalent proportion should be 300 million, compared to 45 million tourists in reality. The majority of tourists in France speak no French and have even less sense of local proprieties. This gives the French plenty of opportunity to be rude or appear so. One acquaintance of mine, a Canadian accountant who had lived in Paris for five years, once said to me: “I understood why the French are rude on the day I was asked for the eighth time in English where the Eiffel tower was.”

habitually discreet and always afraid to be a bother, noticed the owner of the house and asked him what these were.

"Figs," he said.

In no time, the four of us were chatting with the man — whose name we would not know before long — and his wife about banana trees, fig trees and bamboo. They gave us a plastic container of figs to take with us, and a jar of fig jam. The conversation went on wildly from traveling in Greece (where there are lots of figs) to Holland (where there are no figs). The Dutch buy real estate like crazy in Montignac, but nobody likes them because they are so cheap; people prefer the British, who hire people locally. Etc.

Conversation is probably the great secret art of the French, and speaking French is not the only rule.² For instance, it's not regarded as rude to interrupt people, but being boring is certainly a no-no. The pitfalls to French conversation are precisely the ones that are regarded as polite in North America. Questions like, "What do you do?" or, "What's your name?" are regarded as beside the point in the best circumstances, if not downright impertinent. But if you have a hangup about people's names and occupations, the secret is to keep the conversation running and to extract this information from context. Politics, culture, arts, *terroir*, anything can be food for talk. The secret is to be interesting. When the French regard their

interlocutor as interesting, and therefore worthy, they may offer their car, their chalet or invite the person inside to visit their place without even giving their name or asking for yours. It is a very different conception of privacy. Whenever the conversation gets suspended, which is normal between strangers, the secret is to remark on anything funny and don't worry about changing topics. The French love this. They call this *Passer du coq à l'âne* (going from rooster to donkey).

"Funny that you have so many CDs in that tree," I remarked.

"We don't know what to do with them. We get so many."

"Professionally?"

"No, from magazines mostly," said the man. "I'm a retiree."

"That leaves time to garden."

"And to build this house. I made it, you know."

"Oh! Renovating one was enough for me!"

"I was a teacher in a technical college, so I'm pretty handy."

"You were a teacher, really? You see, I'm a journalist and I would be curious to have a talk about trade schools..."

I began explaining what I was doing in France.

"Well, have you eaten?" asked the man.

"No, but we have to be in Fond de Gaume at 14:30 to see cave paintings."

"That gives you two hours. Why don't you come in for the *apéro* and we can talk this over."

They took the four of us into their house and sat us in the living room. And then the man showed us his bar. The French habitually have a wide variety of liqueurs and *eau-de-vie* (brandies) made of nuts,



Our Montignacien host in front of his fig tree. Find the CDs.

² For these observations, and I'm indebted to Polly Platt's book *French or Foe?* and to Sally Adamson Taylor's guide to customs and etiquette, *France*, in the "Culture Shock!" collection.

marc, roots, flowers — all linked to a particular terroir, which is even more prop for conversation. We settled for whiskey and pastis and had a wonderful talk for the next hour.³

It turned out that our host wanted to make up for the bad reputation of the French for lacking hospitality. We protested that he was providing us one more instance of the opposite. He was in fact the perfect casual host. Unlike most French, he was not particularly finicky about dressing — he wore sweat pants and slippers. His broad, open face made me think of an older version of a friend of mine, Hugo, an actor who relishes being your basic guy. And the man had conversation *à revendre* (to spare). He wanted to know the most noteworthy differences between France and America, and I summarized the content of some of my previous newsletters, like the odd French custom of being so distrustful in business dealings, for instance in apartment rental.

“A relative of ours will not rent to diplomats,” said our host.

“People have weird obsessions...”

“Not at all. It’s just that diplomats enjoy immunity and may not be sued in case of defaulting payments!”

This keen observer was a well of insight and I took many mental notes as we spoke. But we had to leave, eventually, and I still did not know his name. The polite way to ask is a circumvoluted question like, “What should I do to have the pleasure to speak to you again?” But this was too much for my father, an affable man who likes things straight, like most North American businessmen. He shook hands with our host first, and asked his name straight out. Our host looked puzzled for a few seconds, not because this was particularly impolite, but he simply did not see the point. So I went on with my version of the question. Then our man pulled a card. Mr. H.L. Brossard, *pour vous servir*.

* * *

MONACO — April 15

France may be exotic, but the French find me quaint. Many Quebeckers do all they can to hide their accent, but I am consciously going the other way — for reasons of anthropological research. So far, Quebec archaisms, improprieties and odd pronunciation are a sure-fire trigger for response. The French remark on my accent, sometimes right off the bat. The down side is that I have to put up with the occasional unconscious insulting remark to the effect that I am *mignon* (cute), a term generally used for Chihuahuas and miniature poodles. Naturally, it’s up to me to

bite or not, but the point is that the French throw the line first, and often open doors that would have been closed otherwise.

My Quebec accent has proved invaluable more than once, but it became priceless in Monaco, where I was covering the Conference of ministers of *la Francophonie* (read JBN-6). It had been four stressful days, and all my best interviews, notes and thought were compiled in a precious little notebook that never leaves me. Feeling pretty content with myself, I decided that there was nothing to do while the ministers *parléed* privately in the Conference hall. So I left my briefcase with the hotel concierge, and jumped into a taxi to visit the *Musée océanographique*, a must for someone who, as a child, read avidly Jacques-Yves Cousteau’s *Encyclopedia of the Sea*.

There is not much else to do in Monaco if you feel hesitant about gambling good ICWA funds. Other than the *Musée océanographique*, Monaco’s only point of interest is its status: the Principality of Monaco is not France, properly speaking, but a sovereign state run by a Prince under the protection of France. On the whole, it is no more than the French equivalent of a glorified Indian reservation. It measures 1.95 square kilometers, and is home to 6,600 Monegasque and 23,000 foreign residents in need of a tax haven. It just goes to show you how far you can get with a casino.

It was the taxi driver’s first day after a long break and he asked me about all the fuss at the hotel. Even by Monaco standards, security and limousine traffic were unusually high.

“You’re Canadian, right?” he asked while I explained.

“How did you know?”

“You have an accent, and you’re not African.”

“And you, are you Monegasque?”

“Yes, I am.”

He was quite pleased and so was I. In four days, he was my first original native Monegasque. He explained that the French do most of the work in Monaco, but rarely reside there. The city is too expensive to live in for the French, because they cannot benefit from the personal income-tax exemption until they’ve lived there for five years.

The *Musée océanographique* is much like the city: a fantastic collection of oddities and monsters, but not much more. Returning from the Museum, I arrived at the hotel and went to retrieve my briefcase from the concierge. We

³ Trade schools will be addressed in another newsletter .

chatted for a while and the concierge, who turned out to be Monegasque too, asked me the ritual question.

“*Vous êtes canadien, n’est-ce pas?*”

“Yes, how did you know?”

“Returning from the *Musée océanographique*?”

“How did you know!”

“Would you happen to have lost this?”

And then he handed me my notebook, which had slipped inadvertently from my pocket in the first taxi. The taxi driver, who did not know my name but knew my accent and the hotel I came from, had taken it back to the hotel’s concierge, thus saving four days of interviews from oblivion.

Bravo, Monegasque taxi driver.

Bravo, Quebec accent.

* * *

ST-PÉ-DE-BIGORRE — May 12

All societies have a laughing stock. Canadians deride Newfoundlanders, dubbed Newfies; Americans chuckle at Vermonters; and the French have a hoot over the Belgians. Jokes are virtually the same between cultures, (Joe Blow: “Does this road go to Brattleboro/St-John’s/Orléans?” Vermonter/Newfie/Belgian: “Nope. Just sits right there.”). I personally hold no grudge against Belgians. Some of my best friends are Belgian. It’s not their fault.

Forever in my mind, the Atlantic Pyrenees *commune* of St-Pé-de-Bigorre will occupy a special place, because this was where I became Belgian — unwillingly. This is not a little miracle at all; the Virgin Mary in nearby Lourdes did not lift her hand. In fact, it was so predictable that I forewarned my friend Jacques Chabert, as we drove to a spelunking convention in southern France.

“Belgian, you! Jean Benoît! Listen to yourself! You are absolutely unmistakably Canadian.”

“Yet, I have experienced this kind of confusion once or twice in Marseille, and so have my parents.”

“Hearing you, we can smell the Maple Syrup

and the odor of the moose in rut.”

“Some people don’t know what meese⁴ are.”

“This is not possible.”

“Mark my word.”

We did not have long to wait.

The Transfiguration happened on the very first evening in St-Pé, while Chabert was talking to the chef in the kitchen of the 17th-century *collège* that was the base for our gathering. As soon as I got into the conversation, the cook looked at me with bewilderment and asked, like only the French do:

“You Belgian?”

In all, it happened a good dozen times during the five days we were in St-Pé and in all sorts of places: during a slide show, at the bar, in a cavern, in the showers. I don’t remember all occurrences. The question came from the locals, but also from more worldly people coming from Bordeaux or Marseille, with all sort of educational background.⁵ People in Southern France can tell a Basque from a Corsican (easy) or a *Toulousain* from a *Bordelais*, but anything north of the Loire is obviously foreign. Belgian.

* * *

FRESNES — April 7

I should not laugh too much at the Belgians because one of them opened the way to my first family experience in France. Myriam Fisch, a friend from college years, is Belgian by her father, American by her mother, Zairian by birth and Canadian by education. An architect and a speech therapist, she is married to a Frenchman, Éric Marsault, whose parents I met at Myriam and Éric’s place in Sherbrooke, Quebec. We had a very good time and the Marsaults invited Julie and me to visit them: “We’ll show you what real France is.” We finally got to their place on Easter Monday as our friends were visiting.⁶

Marie-Madeleine and Jean-Marie Marsault live in Fresnes, a commune of 800 located between Tours and Orléans, the Loire valley. Internationally, the area is better known for the Châteaux de la Loire, but Frenchmen know it’s in the middle of la Sologne, a territory riddled with ponds and lakes that make it one of the best hunting and fishing grounds in France. For over a decade,

⁴ Canadian mooses are meese, like Canada geese.

⁵ During the years that I learned English, and until recently, I could not tell an Irish accent from an Australian, and the nuance between Texan and Georgian was impossible to catch. But this was a second language for me.

⁶ I’d better be polite about the Belgians, since another Belgian French, Anne-Monique, married to a Frenchman, invited me to spend the 1999 Yuletide with her in-laws.

Jean-Marie Marsault was mayor of Fresnes, which he knows by heart. He worked on the family farm and later earned a living as an insurance salesman, while Marie-Madeleine ran a typesetting business. Through hard work, the Marsaults managed to put their children through college and university. Number one child Patricia is a professor of Spanish. Number two Martine is a pharmacist's assistant. Number three Éric is a Ph.D. *cum laude* in Chemistry from McGill University. Number four Pascal is an award-winning organist who teaches in Japan. "When I was young, I could not afford studying, so I stopped at twelve to work on the farm, but I swore to myself that my children would do better," says Jean-Marie, who retired after a stroke.



This is me next to a signpost while hiking around Paris. Three of the four towns named bear the name of cheese: Brie, Coulommiers, and Chaumes. Guess what's exotic from the picture?

Conversations are lively at the Marsaults and most of what was said will find its way into one newsletter or another, if it has not already. But the art of the table at the Marsaults turned out to be the real focus of our stay, providing subtext for my newsletter (JBN-4) on *le terroir* and the special relationship of the French to food.

Particularly memorable was the opening of the first six-course meal, a barrage of *asperges vinaigrette*. Marie-Madeleine had got a load of white asparagus from a nearby farm, and the vegetable was piled on the table like a cord of wood. "Now, you'll have to learn the proper customs!" announced the father as he took up his fork. And then every family member, all at once, slipped their fork under one side of their plate to prop it up in order to create a small pool for the vinaigrette — or the cream sauce. Then seven of us methodically made our way through the huge bowl of *asperges vinaigrette* - eating with our fingers, naturally.

On the last morning, Jean-Marie took me to his garage, where he builds things and stores huge quantities of wine, which he bottles himself. I had always thought that my friend Éric made his own vinegar because he is a true-blue chemist. Not at all: he takes after his father. "Only good wines make good vinegars," is the motto at the Marsaults.

But the best item in the garage was the cheese dryer. Nowadays, Jean-Marie is very much of a slave to his arteries, but there is one thing his arteries have to put up with: his daily brick of goat cheese. This taste he passed on to his son Éric, who exclaimed one day that Montreal

was probably the only place he knew where cheese prices were cut when the cheese was ripe (because it was approaching its due date). His father showed me there are no due dates for cheese in France. Jean-Marie is not much of a cook, but he likes cheese so much that he became a skilled *affineur* and matures his cheese himself. Whenever he goes near Blois, he comes back with enough bricks of goat cheese to hold for a month. The wet bricks, pressed 24 hours before, are covered with black ashes. He then lines them up in a special drying rack of his fabrication (a wood box with shelves made of wire netting). The cheese dries for a month, and is then transferred for aging into two saucers, of the kind used for clay flower pots. "With a bottle of St-Émilion, my friends, this is France."

* * *

REMIREMONT — August 5

I usually am bad at planning holidays in advance and, as every lodging in France is booked solid long before August vacations, I had almost resigned myself to spending my summer in Paris — when I got a phone call. Valérie Lehmann, 40, a Montreal friend I had helped when she migrated to Quebec some eight years ago, was in France for the holidays and was inviting me to spend a couple of days with her family in their home town of Remiremont.

"But you'd better say R'mir'mont like everyone else," she warned.

So there I was on the train going east to that little

town of Les Vosges, the chain of mountains that used to form the border with Germany until Louis XIV annexed Alsace and Lorraine in the late 17th century. The area remained a main bone of contention between the French and Germans, who re-annexed it from 1870 to 1918, and again from 1940 to 1944. To this day, eastbound trains are notoriously uncomfortable because the French, until recently, did not want to renovate the line. The reasoning was simple: why make it easier for the *Boche* (Huns)? You never know.

“The French often say that in France, *“le passé passe mal”* — a pun meaning that the past is never quite passed to become past. As I hiked on ridges a few days later, I came across a dozen stone landmarks with a D for Deutschland (Germany) on one side, and an F for Frankreich (France) on the other side. And one evening I met a saw-mill operator who had just broken his blade on 75-year-old shrapnel and barbed wire lodged in a cut-up tree.

Les Vosges make a natural frontier and a perfect hiking ground: this small chain of relatively high mountains, 4,400 feet high, is cut with deep valleys and covered with vegetation all the way to the top. From every ridge, you can observe *chamois* (antelope) or spot at least a dozen inns and refuges. Because the summit ridges are rather flat and make a perfect grazing ground, farmers use them for summer pasturage.

Valérie, unfortunately, had twisted her knee just before I arrived. The good side of this was that this would allow me to spend more time with her family. The

Lehmans are an exceptional family in all regards. The mother, Claire, ran a seamstress shop until the birth of her third child, Éric. The father, Claude, himself Jewish, escaped deportation during the war by hiding in the city of Nice, where he got acquainted with Parisian intellectuals. For nearly 50 years, he ran a shoe store selling exclusive designer shoes and befriending Yves Saint-Laurent while reading and building the best private collection of books in town.

The Lehmans live in a loft apartment on the arcaded main street, but we hardly spent any time in *R'mir'mont*. The very first thing we did as I arrived was to attend a *fête champêtre* (a country ball) in the little village of Travexin, 20 kilometers away. The landscape had much the makings of Vermont's Green Mountains, except for a few details. Houses were Swiss-style; the stone church was 15th-century; and people ate sauerkraut, got drunk on Riesling and danced to an Alsatian band.

“Funny,” I remarked to Valérie. “The musicians wear Bavarian hats.”

“Shh! Don't say that to my dad.”

I later learned that Bavarians wear *Alsatian* hats, as everyone knows in the area. Appearances can be deceptive.

Travexin's *fête champêtre* was just the beginning of four days of hiking and feasting that make up the backbone of *Vosgiennes* family reunions. From one inn to the next, I probably ingurgitated two or three Munster cheeses washed down with countless glasses of wine — what Valérie's brother Éric called *un petit canon*. During those wild four days, I became close to Éric, who is my look-alike, according to Valérie. Éric is the best guide: he is passionate about his region, which he knows by heart. For a writer, he is also a dream come true because he knows 27 different ways to say one thing. Conversations with him seem like a very long brainstorm. From him, I learned that Parisians are locally dubbed *les Doryphores* (Colorado Beetles), a potato parasite — also a codename for Germans during the Occupation.

One supper at Valérie's older sister's, Régine, was particularly memorable. She lives



Valérie Lehmann with father Claude at Travexin's fête champêtre.
A very good introduction to local customs.

at the end of a very long trail barely accessible by car, in a little two-story stone house that used to be the shed of a bigger property on the steep flanks of the deep valley over Saulxures. The table was set on the grass and we ate at dusk while listening to a fox yapping for her cubs. We ran out of cheese, and Philippe Curien, a friend of the family, and I drove to the home of a nearby farmer, M. Lambert, to get some of his produce. We visited his stone barn, built in 1800 — a third of its ground floor is a stable for 20 animals, another third is the cheese dairy, and the remaining third is the house where he lives with his

per year, the Lips spend most Saturdays and Sundays underground, or getting there. For their summer vacations, they went spelunking in China. As I spoke with them, their youngest son Stéphane came in carrying some rope gear and speaking recognizable jargon. This was how I realized that spelunkers can reproduce.

By the time conversation had moved from spelunking to life in general, we were drinking *Picon*. *Picon-bière* could be best described as a beer *kir*. *Kir* is a blackcurrant liqueur mixed with wine, whereas *Picon-bière* is a mixture of beer with a liqueur made of orange peels. Strong stuff, *ja!*

“Typically Alsatian,” exclaimed Lips.

“Is that what your accent is?”

“Yes, most Alsatians speak with a Germanic accent.”

Note the word, Germanic. Never say to Frenchmen with a German accent that they have a German accent. Say Germanic, or Alemannic, *à la rigueur*. Alsace became a part of France in 1681, but the fact that it is Germanic need not be a matter of concern. Most areas of France were not French until very recently and have preserved much of their regional character — albeit blurring under the effect of television and increased mobility. In fact, when Alsace reverted to Germany in 1871 as a result of defeat in the

Franco-Prussian war, ten percent of all Alsatians took refuge in France and later colonized Algeria. Alsace is now indisputedly French, but Alsatians still have a strong sense of their difference, as Bernard Lips explained to me:

“When referring to France as a whole, Alsatians often speak of ‘the Interior.’ In conversation, they will say, ‘*Vous autres, les Français* (You, the French)’, but will not accept being told that they are not French.”

“Much of the recent history of France has been about leveling regional and cultural differences,” I said. “But I am still surprised at the extent of differences. Still, immigrants integrate very quickly, I notice.”

“I don’t know how immigrants do it, and even what drives them,” said Josiane. “Hearing them, you would never think that their mother tongue is not French.”

Josiane had a funny look, very odd, like someone hearing a voice. And then she said.

“Now that I think about it, my father was Swiss, and



The Lips Family: Bernard, Stéphane and Josiane. Merry spelunkers rarely say no to a shot of Picon-bière.

bearded wife. Until nightfall, Mr. Lambert told us of the snow, of modern techniques, of his son-in-law’s modernizing, of more snow, of the boars that destroy his fields and of the *battue* (hunt) organized to get rid of them.

“Did he not tell you they never got a single boar?” asked Régine when we got back. “The hunters had the wrong ammunition!” And probably too much of the right *petit canon*.

* * *

VILLEURBANNE — September 16

Villeurbanne is a suburb of Lyon that, like most of French suburbia, owes much to Soviet esthetics except for the buildings’ lively pink and yellow paint. I was there to interview Bernard Lips, an engineer and a director of the *Fédération française de spéléologie*. But Soviet esthetics stopped at their doormat. The Lips live in a long, modern and comfortable apartment with all modern amenities. He and his wife Josiane are amongst the most gung-ho spelunkers I have ever met. Except for a few weekends

my mother Italian. I guess I don't have to look far to find an example."

* * *

LANNION — November 3

When the French talk about *Bretons*, they think of die-hard reactionaries in black dress with laced headdress, who refused highways and nuclear power, and threw stones at tourists. And indeed, *Bretagne* (Brittany) is a hard land of broken coast, where a hard people long lived in little dark granite villages with exuberantly sculptured road shrines. Yet Brittany now enjoys highways, nuclear power and millions of tourists in summertime. Which doesn't prevent independentists from exploding the odd bomb in tax-collection offices.

Lannion, a *commune* of 20,000 in the heart of Breton-speaking country, is all you wouldn't expect if you believe in prejudices and read the paper everyday. Lannion has an ancient history but no particular strategic value and hardly any point of interest, except for the odd megalithic monument in the vicinity, like standing stones and stone tables. It comes as somewhat of a surprise that the city numbers 50 high-tech companies, France Telecom's research center, and two high-tech universities. As we arrived, Julie and I noticed an unusual number of smart stores and fashionable bars, with a *clientèle* of kids and young professionals in snazzy clothes.



Pierre Lavanant, engineer and president of Lannion's Breton Cultural Center.
"More modern than acknowledged."



The French word for a picture is "*cliché*." This is a cliché of Brittany.

ten percent of the population, have a command of Breton — compared with 75 percent in 1900.

Julie and I met Pierre Lavanant during a *Breton* singing lesson he had organized in an elementary school. It was the first session, and a dozen people tried to sing in tune with folk singer Iffig Kastell. For linguists, Breton, although a Celtic language, bears more resemblance to Cornish or Welsh than to Irish. For the lay person it sounds somewhat Viking or Gothic, although French "*Celts*" (for lack of a better word) speak with a definite French accent. "But then my parents did not teach me Breton, and I heard it from my grandmother," says Lavanant.

After the singing session, he took us to his place to chat with his wife and an old friend, a researcher for France Telecom and a city councilor in Lannion. As we discussed this revival of tradition, they often repeated: "We are modern people, you know." The prod for this is that *les Bretons* have long suffered from their reputation for being behind their time.

Brittany was never part of France, properly speaking, until Anne de Bretagne (*Ann ar Breizh*, in Breton) united her kingdom to France in 1532 in exchange for the promise that Brittany would be run by its own Parliament. At the time, Brittany was prosperous because its merchants had mastered the high-tech tool of the time, the sailing ship, and actively traded with Holland and Britain across the channel. But Brittany's prosperity suffered from Paris-centered policies. Louis XIV's embargo on trade with England in the late 17th century, and Napoleon's naval blockade a century later were devas-

tating for the local economy. In the wake of the Revolution, *les Bretons* did not help their own cause with an uprising that went into history books as anti-Republican and Royalist, although it was basically anti-centralization in purpose. In fact, France would be a federation today if most regions had had their way then. In the 19th century, *Breton* merchants and sea traders found that French industrialists could buy cheaper coal in Wales than in France. This went against the official policy of autarky. The French government forbade the trade, thus slowing down the process of industrialization and depriving Brittany of its most obvious source of wealth. And Bretagne went down in the history books as a poor region deprived of any natural resources.



Airbus's freak carrier plane is called the Beluga. Like Europe, you can find a million reasons that it won't fly, but it does.

In the early 1900's, Brittany was so poor and backward that Breton families realized that speaking only Breton was guarantee of poverty, and the language disappeared almost overnight.⁷ "Now you understand why the *Bretons* welcome Europe and why Bretagne, alongside with Alsace, voted massively for Europe during the referendum on the Maastricht treaty in 1992," says Lavanant. "It's our only leverage against the hegemony of Paris, both in terms of culture and economy."

* * *

TOULOUSE — May 9

"Too bad," I said to my friend Jacques Chabert as we drove through the outskirts of Toulouse in southern France, on our way to a spelunking convention.

"What's the problem?"

"I wish we could stop in Toulouse, but then I wish we could also have stopped in Limoges, and Cahors, and Agen, and Orléans. This is a frustrating country. At least in Canada, there's nothing for hundreds of kilometers."

Visiting Toulouse takes time — not only because I have an old-time friend, Sophie, living there. But Toulouse, being the home of the Airbus consortium, is a very important city for understanding France and Europe. In fact, it has a long history of independence. Eight

centuries ago, the region was home of the Albigensians and the Cathars, two of the strongest heresies of Christianity — in effect Protestantism before Luther. A national crusade eradicated the heretics and Toulouse later became Protestant. At the time of King Louie, it was one of the last French areas, with Bretagne, to be administered by its own local Parliament rather than by an Intendant. To this day, the Occitan tongue still has currency. It is therefore somewhat fitting that the region became an aviation center, despite Paris, and later home for the Airbus project, Europe's biggest industrial success.

"I wonder if I will see the *Bélouga*," I sighed.

"What's that?" asked Chabert.

The *Bélouga* is a carrier plane that looks just like its name: a Beluga whale. It features a mushroomed upper deck big enough to transport wings, cabins, stabilizers, and cockpits between the Airbus plants in Hamburg, Toulouse and Chester.

Just as I was saying this, I saw the *Bélouga* in the air on our right. It had taken off a minute before and was ascending. I knew of its extraordinary appearance, but seeing it, it struck me that the contraption is the best summary of what Airbus, and even Europe, is all about: an odd-looking, even improbable, working, high-flyer.

Europe is a flying whale. □

⁷ This very fast process of aculturation resembles the one that assimilated Franco-Americans in New England or all French speakers in other parts of Canada, as well as North American Indians.

INSTITUTE FELLOWS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

Adam Smith Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is studying and writing about the republics of Central Asia, and their importance as actors within and without the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. Degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Shelly Renae Browning. A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia and the indigenous peoples of Vanuatu to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology. [SOUTH ASIA]

Chenoa Egawa. An enrolled member of the Lummi Indian Nation, Chenoa is spending two years living among mesoAmerican Indians, studying successful and not-so-successful cooperative organizations designed to help the Indians market their manufactures, agricultural products and crafts without relying on middlemen. A former trade specialist for the American Indian Trade and Development Council of the Pacific Northwest, Chenoa's B.A. is in International Business and Spanish from the University of Washington in Seattle. [THE AMERICAS]

Paige Evans. A playwright and former Literary Manager of the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York City, Paige is looking at Cuba through the lens of its performing arts. With a History/Literature B.A. from Harvard, she has served as counselor at the Buckhorn Children's Center in Buckhorn, Kentucky (1983-84), as Arts Editor of the International Courier in Rome, Italy (1985-86), and as an adjunct professor teaching a course in Contemporary American Playwrights at New York University. She joined the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1990. [THE AMERICAS]

Whitney Mason. A freelance print and television journalist, Whit began his career by founding a newspaper called The Siberian Review in Novosibirsk in 1991, then worked as an editor of the Vladivostok News and wrote for *Asiaweek* magazine in Hong Kong. In 1995 he switched to radio- and video-journalism, working in Bosnia and Korea for CBS. As an ICWA Fellow, he is studying and writing about Turkey's role as nexus between East and West, and between traditional and secular Islam. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Marc Michaelson. A program manager for Save the Children in The Gambia, Marc has moved across Africa to the Horn, there to assess nation-building in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and (conditions permitting) availing and unavailing humanitarian efforts in northern Somalia and southern Sudan. With a B.A. in political science from Tufts, a year of non-degree study at the London School of Economics and a Master's in International Peace Studies from Notre Dame, he describes his postgraduate years as "seven years' experience in international development programming and peace research." [sub-SAHARA]

Jean Benoît Nadeau. A French-Canadian journalist and playwright, Jean Benoît studied drama at the National Theater School in Montreal, then received a B.A. from McGill University in Political Science and History. The holder of several Canadian magazine and investigative-journalism awards, he is spending his ICWA-fellowship years in France studying "the resistance of the French to the trend of economic and cultural globalization." [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Susan Sterner. A staff photographer for the Associated Press in Los Angeles, Susan received her B.A. in International Studies and Cultural Anthropology at Emory University and a Master's in Latin American Studies at Vanderbilt. AP gave her a wide-ranging beat, with assignments in Haiti, Mexico and along the U.S.-Mexican border; in 1998 she was a co-nominee for a Pulitzer Prize for a series on child labor. Her fellowship topic: the lives and status of Brazilian women. [THE AMERICAS]

Tyrone Turner. A photojournalist (Black Star) whose work has appeared in many U.S. newspapers and magazines, Tyrone holds a Master's degree in Government and Latin American politics from Georgetown University and has produced international photo-essays on such topics as Rwandan genocide and mining in Indonesia (the latter nominated for a Pulitzer). As an ICWA Fellow he is writing and photographing Brazilian youth and their lives in rural and urban settings. [THE AMERICAS]

Daniel B. Wright. A sinologist with a Master's Degree in International Relations from the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University, Dan's fellowship immerses him in southwest China's Guizhou Province, where he, his journalist-wife Shou Guowei, and their two children (Margaret and Jon) will base themselves for two years in the city of Duyun. Previously a specialist on Asian and Chinese affairs for the Washington consulting firm of Andreae, Vick & Associates, Dan also studied Chinese literature at Beijing University and holds a Master of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary of Pasadena, California. [EAST ASIA]

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Phone: (603) 643-5548 E-Mail: ICWA@valley.net
Fax: (603) 643-9599 Web Site: www.icwa.org

Executive Director: Peter Bird Martin
Program Administrator: Gary L. Hansen
Publications Manager: Ellen Kozak

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