

## THE STORY OF THE LAST ENCOUNTER OF BRITAIN WITH FRANCE

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**ABSTRACT.** *The story of the last Encounter of Britain with France.* This study is about a story which narrates an important event for British culture. Literary theory postulates that reading any story has several layers of interpretation. Reading this story is by no means an exception. Depending on the approach one can identify various elements which relate to legends, myths and folktales. This article presents a story of an episode which has an almost legendary place in British culture. The narrative speaks of a French interaction with the British. This took place in a place in Wales called Fishguard in 1797. Its legendary feature is given by the unexpected turn of events. In other words, an otherwise serious event is quasi-comical in nature. This story also contains a mythical element. It is said to have been an action of the local women. The local women are said to have dressed in their traditional attire. This display is said to have scared the French into submission. The entire story is being told by the locals as part of their inherited tradition. They have identified with the story to such an extent that they have even created a material culture around it and have put it on display.

**Keywords:** *story, legend, myth, France, Britain.*

**REZUMAT.** *Povestea ultimei întâlniri a Marii Britanii cu Franța.* Acest studiu prezintă narațiune unui eveniment important pentru cultura britanică. Teoria literară postulează că lectura oricărei narațiuni are mai multe nivele de interpretare. Lectura acestora nu este nicidecum o excepție. În funcție de abordare, se pot identifica diferite elemente care se referă la legende, mituri și povești populare. Acest articol prezintă povestea unui episod care are un loc aproape legendar în cultura britanică. Narațiunea aceasta vorbește despre o interacțiune dintre francezi și britanici. Acest lucru a avut loc într-un loc din Țara Galilor numit Fishguard în 1797. Trăsătura sa legendară este dată de o turnură neașteptată a evenimentelor. Cu alte cuvinte, un eveniment altminteri serios are o natură cvasi-comică. Această poveste conține și un element mitic. Este vorba despre o acțiune a femeilor din partea locului. Se spune că acestea s-au îmbrăcat în ținuta lor tradițională. Se spune că această apariție i-ar fi speriat pe francezi să

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se supună. Întreaga poveste este spusă de localnici ca parte a tradiției lor moștenite. Ei s-au identificat cu povestea într-o asemenea măsură încât au creat chiar o cultură materială în jurul ei și au expus-o.

**Cuvinte cheie:** *narațiune, mit, legendă, Franța, Marea Britanie.*

One was looking for a story that is tale-telling to British culture. As such one has stumbled across a story from the late eighteen century which is relevant for the cross-Channel relations of the time. It was called the last invasion of Britain.

But if one has already mentioned the narrative in the abstract, it has to be said that does not tell the whole story. Its purpose is to give a glimpse. The body of this article is meant to mention a bit more of its elements.

This is quite necessary, in fact. As the narrative is not an objective account of the events. It is rather full of subjectivity. It is peppered with myths, i.e. parts which were added later. It is remembered as mock-heroic and presented with a sense of humour.

### **1. The rivalry between England/Great Britain and France**

One was in search of a story representative of British culture. A much-debated aspect thereof is Anglo-French relations. The rivalry between the two sides of the Channel is old and goes back to the Norman invasion of England.<sup>2</sup> The problem of the time was that William Plantagenet referred to as the Bastard, who after defeating King Harold Godwinson at the battle of Hastings, acceded to the throne of England as William I and changed his nickname to the Conqueror, but, at the same time, kept his possessions in France. This led to an uncertain situation where the Kingdom of England was independent but was ruled over by a king who was also paying feudal homage to the King of France. The problem had only worsened as the Kings of England started to acquire more lands in France. At a certain point in time, the King of England controlled more than half of the Kingdom of France. That is when the bubble burst and a horrible series of confrontations generically called the 100 Years' War started and it ended up with King John losing all the Plantagenet possessions in France, except for the Channel Islands and the Pale of Calais.<sup>3</sup> However, this was not the end of the story. When King Henry VIII instituted his religious reformation,

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<sup>2</sup> Chibnall, M. [1986]. pp.11-13.

<sup>3</sup> Prestwich, M. [2003]. pp.307-312

the Catholic King of France tried to help the English Catholics, which due to the unbending official stance, could only have been subversive in nature. After Queen Elizabeth I, styled Gloriana, died without issue, the first in the line of succession to the English throne was the King of Scotland James VI, who is known in the English royal row call as James I.<sup>4</sup> He had to deal with the Tudor legacy of the religious and sectarian divide. While he had some success, like the King James Bible, which is a landmark of literary English, he did have some undertakings which would come back later to haunt the establishment. These were the settlement of protestants in Ulster, also known as the Plantation, and the establishment of colonies on the eastern coast of North America. In the first, case, it would stir up constant unrest in a population already unhappy with its overlords. In the second case, though it would lead to all-out and prolonged war. He was succeeded to the thrones of England, Scotland and Ireland by his younger son, Charles, as Charles I. Unlike his father, Charles was never desperately confident with diplomacy. While, he was not a catholic, but was raised an Anglican, he did marry a catholic, a French royal princess no less. This was bound to cause trouble. His closeness to both the French and the Catholic Faith would prove his undoing. During his reign, England had plunged into a bloody civil war which ended up with him being beheaded and the country turned into a puritan Commonwealth of Oliver Cromwell. It was during this time that England helped the Protestants in France. The French kings harboured and supported the Stuart dynasty. After the death of Cromwell, the Stuarts were restored to the throne of England while they secretly hoped and tried to make England a Catholic country once more. That didn't come to be, because the glorious revolution had brought the Dutch Prince of Orange to the throne, as well as a new mercantile orientation. After his daughter, Queen Anne, failed to produce an heir, the King of Hanover, George I, was offered the throne, because he was the only close relative who was a protestant. It was during the time of his grandson, George III, that the American War of Independence occurred and the French helped out because they had been previously pushed out of Canada by the British. The huge expenditure of French resources in America was one of the causes of the French Revolution. As the French revolution grew increasingly bloody, the now British government was willing to help the royalists. This antagonised the two sides even more, and they were in a permanent state of war. The French Revolution turned into the French Directory which not only centralised the country but started to conquer their neighbours in order to make satellite states in its own image, the so-called "Sister republics", e.g. The Batavian Republic, Ligurian Republic, etc.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> McLynn, F. [1987]. pp. 84-89.

<sup>5</sup> Van Wie, P. D. [1999]. pp. 116-117

## **2. The road to invasion**

In 1797, despite more pressing domestic matters, poor supply of food in Paris, the members of the French Directory<sup>6</sup> decided to seek revenge for the British involvement in the French revolution when and where it overtly and generously propped up the supporters of the Ancien Régime, i.e. the Royalists. French general Lazare Hoche, a man whose name is inscribed on the Arc de Triomphe in Paris (Northern Pillar, Column 03) due to his revolutionary and Napoleonic exploits, was selected for the job. It has to be said that he did not draw up a plan to invade Great Britain. It was supposed a series of two diversionary landings in Britain, to enable a successful landing in Ireland in order to help "United Irishmen". One was supposed to take place in Newcastle and the other one in Bristol. The landings were expected to be successful and then without encountering any British armed resistance, or dealing with it swiftly, the two forces would eventually merge, thus cutting the country in two. Moreover, the Directory was hoping that the local populace would see the invaders as liberators and fraternize with them, thus undermining the British Establishment. Due to poor weather conditions both the feint in Newcastle as well as the main landing at Bantry Bay failed miserably. The only French expedition which would manage to get to British shores would be the invasion force meant for Bristol. As such, the events took place between 22 February 1797 to 24 February 1797 and historiographers have given it the catchy title The Battle of Fishguard. Today it is purported to be the last invasion of Britain, even though that was not its purpose, and, sadly, it was not the last attempt at a foreign military incursion into the Isle of Britain, as World War II would make it painfully clear.

## **3. The French forces**

The French Directory consisted of very determined statesmen who were very keen on achieving their agenda. However, on closer scrutiny, one will notice a few problems from the start. Most of the French army was fighting abroad, so they only had some reserve troops which were rejected by the commanders because they were not really fit for service. And, truth be told, they would part with them only half-heartedly. The French authorities had to improvise and found their recruits in some of the most unexpected places. The promised freedom to inmates and they hired foreigners such as Irish and even Spanish. This rather mixed group was given the title of "Seconde légion des Francs", the Second French Legion.

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<sup>6</sup> Lyons, M. [1975] pp.159-173

Provisions were also badly needed. Luckily for them, they did manage to capture a supply of British uniforms. But since they naturally wanted to differentiate their troops from the ones would be fighting, they tried to dye them black. The results were rather mixed with uniforms bearing hues ranging from brown to black. Nonetheless, due to their somewhat darker appearance, the troop was given the moniker “Legion noire”, the Black Legion.

#### **4. The way to Fishguard**

The French diversionary invasion plan was not particularly well connected to the realities of the terrain. The French sailed from Brest and were heading to Bristol according to plan. The problem was that navigation in the Bristol Channel is extremely difficult at the best of times. And it wouldn't be the best of times for the French. The dangers for navigation are many. There are the extremely powerful coastal currents which can smash anything flowing against the shore or, take them out to the high seas without any possibility of control. Then there are the tides which can leave the seabed exposed during the ebb and sweep everything in its path at flow. And then there are banks which lie invisible, making the estuary extremely shallow in these places being able to ground any ship no matter how big.

Today the ships entering this important waterway have plenty of help. First and foremost, all navigators require considerable river and sea training with extra rules in place just for the Bristol Channel. There are automated lighthouses which can be used as a reference in low visibility conditions. Navigators have at their radar devices, sonar and geopositioning satellite systems. They also have state of the art communication systems to enable communication with the ports in and around Bristol. Then there are the pilots provided to every ship which are familiar with the local conditions and can take action at a moment's notice.<sup>7</sup>

Back then, at the end of the Eighteenth Century, there was virtually none of that. The only development when it came to safety was a type of ship called a Pilot Cutter. It was indeed safer for navigation in the Bristol Channel due to a few innovations. The problem was that the French did not have the privilege of using one and had to make do with their rather conventional frigates. Once the invading armada reached the mouth of the estuary, the French commander quickly realised that the objective of reaching Bristol was untenable. But let's not forget that he was quite an adventurer. So, not to be deterred, he simply decided that they should land in a safe haven and start the

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<sup>7</sup> Steers, J.A. [1964]. p. 750

invasion there. Then they steered north instead of the original easterly direction, and kept going along the Welsh coastline of Pembrokeshire until they reached Carreg Wastad Head by Fishguard, where the local bay offered the ideal conditions for landing. They did so on the 22 February 1797.

### **5. An alternate history**

Alternate histories are interesting because they stir up the imagination of the public. The main reason for their success is that they are well-crafted scenarios. They are so well-crafted that they almost seem natural. Thus, they come with a high degree of plausibility. However, one must keep in mind that they never came to be. Consequently, alternate histories are entirely fictitious.

This is a perfect example thereof. In an account of the battle published almost a century after the events, i.e. in 1892 one is presented with a completely different story of the French invasion at Fishguard. According to this story, the French fleet, after avoiding the Bristol Channel went up the Pembrokeshire coast, but did not stop at Carreg Wastad but, instead entered the harbour of Fishguard directly. But, the port of Fishguard was guarded by an impressive fort which was manned and armed with guns. The French were said to have been fired upon by the British at which point they retreated to Carreg Wastad point which was unguarded and landed there.

But this alternate story does not end there. It goes on to say that it was in fact all a huge misunderstanding. No one was expecting an invasion. The commander of the local fort thought that the fleet was British and was returning home. So, he ordered a few rounds to be fired as a greeting. The rounds fired were blanks. Not that he had any choice. After all, he only had only three cannonballs left in store so he couldn't afford to waste any of his precious ammunition. But, as the story goes, the French were completely oblivious to these facts. Had they known in what the intention of the fort commander was and the dire straits in which the local garrison was munitions-wise, they could have simply taken over the fort as well as the town and begin an invasion in earnest. But, being in the dark, the French lost this precious opportunity.

On closer inspection though, one will notice a few inconsistencies. While the actual land invasion would prove to be a complete disaster, the actual naval expedition was led and manned professionally. The French were supposed to land inconspicuously and not sail straight into a well-guarded fort and that is what they did.

### **6. On dry land**

Once the French infantry reached dry land, they were confronted with a real enemy. This enemy was not human in nature but something more efficient:

the wind. It was too cold, wet, and salty. They simply could not set up camp where they landed above Fishguard. So, the French Commander simply decided to go down towards Fishguard, but not in the town itself. Instead, they went for three farmhouses in the close vicinity of the town. Not wanting to lose their livelihoods, the local farmers whose properties were being trespassed tried to put on some resistance, but it was a game of numbers and the French won and the farmers had to run for their lives.

The French infantry had another incentive for this quick victory. They were going to loot the places. While they were doing just that and settling in, they discovered a prize that exceeded their wildest dreams. The locals had managed to collect salvaged port wine in remarkable quantities. Unable to believe their luck, the rowdy French troops quickly despoiled the places and got on with the job of consuming it. In this state they got the courage to conquer even more places to despoil and, of course, nothing was sacred.<sup>8</sup>

### **7. The mythical counterattack**

People are told that the argument that tipped the odds in favour of surrender was the fact the British managed to bring in reinforcements. William Tate stood with a severely depleted and unreliable force without much chance of success. It was right at this time that he was shown a most horrific sight to behold: rows of English redcoats above the hills of Fishguard. Realising his men were just about to be attacked from an elevated position, he sent two officers to sue for peace.

But what he couldn't have known was the fact that there was going to be no attack, for there were no reinforcements. What he was shown by a soldier in an equally distressed and disturbed state was nothing more than the most elaborated bluff the locals could pull. Apparently, the local women had kitted themselves in their traditional dress, which consisted, among other things, from a red shawl and a black Welsh hat, which very much resembles a top hat. In an inebriated state, any French soldier, unable to get too close, and expecting a British attack, could have easily mistaken them for the reinforcements. William Tate himself would have been disturbed enough by now to take the information at face value, seeing no reason to doubt it, even when he went to take a look at the supposed army.

### **8. A local heroine**

But the story in the previous paragraphs is most likely only a piece of lore. The fact of the matter is that there is no evidence of such a bold display.

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<sup>8</sup> J. E. Thomas [2007]. p.138.

The origins of this story can be traced back to the deeds of a local woman called Jemima Nicholas. While she came from a respected cobbler family, nobody expected what would happen next. She donned her clothes and arms, by which we mean a pitchfork, and led an attack of sorts on a group of invading soldiers. After the latter had busied themselves with looting and vandalising the local church of Saint Mary's where they managed to tear apart a precious bible and steal the chalice, they finally succumbed to drunkenness. As such, they were easy pickings for the local women led by Jemima. They were captured and held until being handed over to the proper authorities. The news of her extraordinary deed did not go unrecorded. Her reward was not just plenty of praise and remembrance, but also a nice pension for the rest of her life. Sadly her personality brought her in some trouble with the law when later in her life she got quagmired in a local riot. The details of what happened afterward are, however, unknown.

### **9. The French surrender**

On the 24 February 1797, the French commander accepted the unconditional surrender. The French delegates were expected at the British headquarters. They were welcomed inside and presented with the instrument of surrender which they duly signed. Then they were made prisoners along with the rest of the French invading force. Their ships were requisitioned and put into service by the Royal Navy.

This episode shows a rather interesting circularity. The French invasion started with a landing in a place where it should not have taken place and ended with their surrender in a Pub. In any case, the local publican has preserved the table where the surrender was signed for posterity, as a sort of testimony for this most weird of moments in history.<sup>9</sup>

### **10. An unexpected and lasting consequence**

Much like today, the City of London was, at the time, a booming financial hub. There were various financial institutions like the Bank of England and, of course, the London Stock exchange. Anyone who was anyone was doing business in London. The monetary system of the Kingdom of Great Britain was working on the principle of convertibility. That is to say that the money could be redeemed at any time by their value in gold. Due to the many wars Great Britain waged, there was inflation to the point that there was more than twice

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<sup>9</sup> James, W. [2015] pp.95-96



the amount of money in circulation than the gold reserves in the banks. This was not really a problem as long as people did not want to trade in the money for gold. However, every time a sudden and unexpected event happens, the creditors tend to get fearful and pull their reserves from the banks. The French invasion of Fishguard and the ensuing battle was just such an event. In its aftermath, there was a scare of invasion and the creditors flocked to the banks to turn their money into gold. This was not just a peril for the banks which would obviously have had to close shop but it would have bankrupted the entire country. Usually, desperate times call for desperate measures, but what Parliament did next was nothing more than forward-looking and trendsetting. What they did was to make the pound inconvertible. To wit, nobody could go anymore to a bank and ask for the value in gold of the money they held. They introduced the fiat money, that is to say, money which was not tied to any source of material wealth, but, rather, their value stemmed from the law establishing them. In other words, the pounds went from being a proof of how much gold one had to an "I owe you" note. To be fair, this was neither the first attested time in history, nor the last time it happened, but, it helped The Kingdom of Great Britain and its successor state, The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, get over the Napoleonic wars and form an empire which would come to influence the affairs all over the world.<sup>10</sup> This episode shows just how much a story can influence society as a whole.

### **11. The tapestry of the battle**

After the battle of Hastings, a large representation thereof was made to commemorate the event. Historians are not entirely certain who commissioned it. It may have been William the Conqueror himself or someone in his immediate family, i.e. his wife or his brother. Since it was made in Bayeux, France and kept in the local Cathedral, it came to be known as the Bayeux Tapestry, although it has had several other names. Calling it a tapestry is a misnomer in a textile sense. A true tapestry is woven, but this particular example of cloth is embroidery.<sup>11</sup>

It was exactly this quirk that helped the Fishguard Arts Society to embark on a commemorative project of its own. They decided to pay homage to the event by making a tapestry depicting the Battle of Fishguard. While the underlying idea of the Fishguard tapestry seems to be remarkably similar to the one of the Bayeux Tapestry the style is not merely a pastiche of the later. It is much more than that. It is a work which combines local sewing traditions with a modern take on the events. So, the style is rather unique and fresh.

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<sup>10</sup> Foster, R. T. [2010] pp. 59-60

<sup>11</sup> Beech, G. [2005] pp.19-31

The Bayeux Tapestry is silent when it comes to its makers, while Fishguard tapestry is very explicit, naming all the people involved in the commissioning, design and manufacture. Like the Bayeux Tapestry, the one in Fishguard has panels. They both have titles, but, while the Bayeux tapestry is described by Latin titles, the Fishguard tapestry is bilingual, with the headings in Welsh, and the same information repeated in the footer in English. The Bayeux Tapestry is an excellent example of lay Romanesque, while the Fishguard tapestry is mock-heroic and romantic even. Last but not least, the feeling of the Bayeux Tapestry is that of miniatures from a religious book of the time, while the Fishguard tapestry is naive and brash.

### **Conclusions**

The entire endeavour was ill-conceived poorly planned and executed. The reasons for the invasion were and to rally up the underprivileged masses and destabilize British society thus forcing the British government to pull out of the war of the First Coalition. The folly of this plan is that the French Directory were assessing the situation according to their own recent revolutionary experiences. As such it did not take into account the historical developments in Britain itself, which had become relatively stable.

While there certainly was discontent in the Kingdom of Great Britain, it tended to be about personal advancement in an increasingly mercantile society. Almost everyone by now expected political change to be slow and predictable, so as not to damage business or, indeed the running of daily lives. Moreover, while there was some desire for political reform it was largely expected to be top-down and not vice-versa. This meant a general repudiation of violent action against the establishment. The establishment is a loose term referring to the way society is being run and involves very complex, mostly economical and political, relations between the various strata. The French Directory advocated a strict separation of powers as well as a submission of the economy to itself and its own purposes, which at the time was war. In Britain the opposite was true: any war was meant to protect the business interests of the ruling elite. The population accepted it because this wealth would trickle down to them and because, through enterprise, one could indeed climb this social ladder. In other words, the average British were incentivised to play by the rules.

It is true that the situation in Ireland was markedly different. But the fact of the matter is that the French understood it even less. There were parts of Ireland which were settled with Scottish and English Protestants, which were staunchly loyal to the Crown. Most of the arable lands were in the hands

of a couple of dozen families which were either English or thoroughly anglicised, while most of the local populace was being pushed westwards, where the lands were rocky and poorly suited for agriculture. The locals were indeed completely disenfranchised, but lacked the tradition of unity, save for their shared Roman Catholic faith, as their Gaelic language was being pushed to extinction. The truth was that the Irish were beginning to starve and the only solution was to emigrate. Some migrated to the isle of Britain, while many more to North America, especially to the United States, where they could actually make a living instead of just trying to survive in an increasingly inhospitable Ireland. The masses which the French expected to rise up against the British overlords simply could not rally under the given circumstances.

Then there was the actual planning. The idea of diversionary attacks may have seemed brilliant but the places chosen for landing in on the isle of Britain were indeed very poor choices. The French were well-advised to steer well clear of the ports in the South like Portsmouth, Bournemouth, Plymouth, etc., as well as the Thames estuary, i.e. London. These places were well-defended by a number of impressive coastal fortifications. The fortifications relied on a network of lookout posts and an efficient communication system to spot incoming enemy vessels and raise the alarm. The French were also aware that there were no such complicated military installations in place on other places on the British coastline. They may also have been aware that the seas were treacherous due to storms breaking out at a moment's notice. But the desire to go ahead with the plan proved stronger and the French went ahead with it, despite any red flags, just assuming that nothing would go wrong.

The French invasion forces were also a problem. France was engaged in wars with everyone who was anyone in Europe, and even beyond. While France did have the largest population of any country in Western Europe at the time, it did put a strain on its human as well as its material resources. Basically, France could ill afford such an invasion. But, since there was political will for it to happen, it had to happen. Obviously, they could not spare any experienced sailors nor any experienced infantry. All they had were a few hundred men who were unfit for service, but the French had correctly calculated that these wouldn't be enough. To go through with their plans they had to find a lot more men. They reckoned that since their jails and prisons were full of reprobates which were just a burden on their society, maybe they could put them to good use. So, the French promised amnesty to inmates willing to fight the British. The simple logic was that rather than staying inside and risk being beheaded, it was worth taking a risk in Great Britain.

While France could only spare a few soldiers, it could spare even less experienced commanders. The result was that the commanders chosen for the

invasion also had maverick streaks. They were little more than unexceptional men who desired to escape the routine of their daily lives rather than professional military men of some stature. They were thus unable to assess the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and risks, and manage their tasks accordingly. The result of such poor decision-making was a chain of errors which nullified the chances of success from the start.

Reading about the events one cannot but be astonished about the farcical nature of the French invasion of 1797. However, these events have brought about serious consequences. The response of the population was that of rallying against a common enemy. The spirit of social cohesion was thus strengthened. But it was much more than that because this solidarity would come to shape the hearts and minds of the British. At the same time, out of necessity, there was a quick but fundamental rethinking of the British financial system in order to withstand and even thrive through military campaigns. So, the French invasion, far from weakening the British society helped transform it, if only ever so slightly, into the superpower which it would be in throughout the nineteenth century.

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