The Rise of Economic Societies in the Eighteenth Century

Patriotic Reform in Europe and North America

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ISBN: 9781137265258

DOI: 10.1057/9781137265258

Palgrave Macmillan

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The Society of Brittany and the Irish Economic Model: International Competition and the Politics of Provincial Development

John Shovlin

Economic societies flourished in France during the second half of the eighteenth century, propagating in three distinct waves between the late 1750s and the latter part of the 1790s.[1] The first such organisation established, and the model for the later associations, was the Society of Agriculture, Commerce and the Arts (*Société d'agriculture, du commerce et des arts*), established in Brittany in February 1757.[2] The society had nine sections (*bureaux*), one in each diocese of the province, including a central corresponding bureau in Rennes, the provincial capital. The number of associates ranged from six to eighteen per section, with the membership recruited from local merchants, clerics, and noble landowners.[3] The society's mission was to foster the development of farming, manufactures, and trade in Brittany by gathering and diffusing useful knowledge, by offering encouragement for practical schemes of economic improvement, and by advising the provincial Estates

[1] John Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2006), 83–92, 159–68, 208–11.

[2] On the history of the society, see Catherine Dumas, 'Aux sources de la Société d'Agriculture de Bretagne', *Bulletin et mémoires de la Société archéologique et historique d'Ille-et-Vilaine* 108 (2004), 97–118; Emile Justin, *Les sociétés royales d'agriculture au XVIIIe siècle (1757–1793)* (Saint-Lô: 1935), 36–41, 301–3; Louis de Villers, *Histoire de la Société d'agriculture de commerce & des arts établie par les Etats de Bretagne (1757)* (Saint-Brieuc: R. Prud'homme 1898).

[3] Originally each section was to have six members, but this number was subsequently expanded, with up to eighteen in Rennes and twelve in each of the other sections, along with a number of free associates resident outside the province. See Archives départementales d'Ille-et-Vilaine (hereafter Arch. dép. d'Ille-et-Vilaine), C 3913. Archival sources are not paginated unless otherwise indicated.

on economic policy. Like economic societies elsewhere in Europe, it claimed to serve the public and the nation and enveloped its activities and pronouncements in a mantle of patriotism.

The paradigm for the new organisation was the Dublin Society for Improving Husbandry, Manufactures and Other Useful Arts, which was viewed by the founders of the Breton association as an engine of Irish economic transformation.[4] Ireland occupied a privileged place in the thinking of the circle of political economic writers linked in the 1750s to the Intendant of Trade, Jacques-Claude Vincent de Gournay (1712–1759). Gournay was a prominent Breton merchant who had entered the royal administration of commerce in the 1740s. With the support of other figures in the administration, he used his position to encourage public discussion of political economic questions by patronising a group of young writers, many of whom would go on to become leading figures in French political economic debate.[5] These theorists saw Ireland as a telling example of how rapid economic development could follow from intelligent legislative intervention combined with the activation of civil society by voluntary associations. Gournay provided a key impetus for the establishment of the Society

[4] Arch. dép. d'Ille-et-Vilaine, C 2687, 182r ff. On the Dublin Society, see Henry F. Berry, *A History of the Royal Dublin Society* (London: Longman, Green and Co. 1915), 1–87; James Meenan and Desmond Clark (eds.), *The Royal Dublin Society 1731–1981* (Dublin, Gill and Macmillan 1981), 1–55.

[5] Gournay's protectors in the administration were Daniel Trudaine (1703–1769), Intendant of Finance; and Chrétien-Guillaume Lamoignon de Malesherbes (1721–1794), *premier président* of the Cour des Aides (the chief tax court in Paris) and Director of the Book Trade. The members of the network were Louis-Paul Abeille (1719–1807), Louis-Joseph Plumard de Dangeul (1722–1777), François Véron de Forbonnais (1722–1800), Georges-Marie Butel-Dumont (1723–1788), Simon Clicquot-Blervache (1723–1796), Jean-Gabriel Montaudouin de la Touche (1722–1781), Pierre-André O'Heguerty (1700–1763), and Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot (1727–1781), with, in a supporting role, abbé André Morellet (1727–1819), Jacques-Claude Herbert (1700–1758), abbé Gabriel-François Coyer (1707–1782), abbé Jean-Bernard Le Blanc (1707–1781), abbé Jean-Paul Gua de Malvès (1713–1785), and perhaps Jean-Baptiste de Secondat. See Loïc Charles, 'French "New Politics" and the Dissemination of Hume's *Political Discourses* on the Continent', in *David Hume's Political Economy*, eds. Margaret Schabas and Carl Wennerlind (London: Routledge 2008), 181–202; Simone Meyssonnier, *La balance et l'horloge: La genèse de la pensée libérale en France au XVIIIe siècle* (Montreuil: Editions de la Passion 1989); Antoin E. Murphy, 'Le développement des idées économiques en France (1750–1756)', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 33 (1986), 521–41; Arnault Skornicki, 'L'Etat, l'expert et le négociant: Le réseau de la "science économique" sous Louis XV', *Genèses* 65 (2006), 4–26.

of Brittany; two of its founding members – Jean-Gabriel Montaudouin de la Touche, and Louis-Paul Abeille (the first secretary of the society) – were part of his intellectual milieu.[6]

Gournay's initiative intersected with other forces to bring the society into being and to shape its activities. Brittany was one of the French provinces still partially governed by Estates in the eighteenth century. The Estates met every two years, and its Intermediary Commission (*Commission intermédiaire*) functioned between sessions to make the authority of the body an everyday reality in the administration of the province. Both the Intermediary Commission and the royal administration sought to foster economic improvement in Brittany in the 1750s, and envisioned the new society as a partner in these efforts. The provincial Estates exerted a major influence on the Breton Society, providing its funding, approving its membership and shaping its statutes and conduct. While the society adopted many of the forms and rhetoric of a voluntary association its close links to the Estates ultimately proved a critical influence on its development. However, the Breton Society should not be seen as a vehicle for a traditional politics of provincial resistance to the incursions of the administrative monarchy. It represented something quite different: a form of civic association that promised to mediate the tensions of Brittany's dependent relationship with Versailles.

The final determining influence on the establishment and trajectory of the society were the interests and sensibilities of the Breton notables who composed its membership. The new society depended on the energies of landed gentlemen, wealthy merchants and other local notables, some of whom were already engaged in projects of economic improvement before the society was founded. A key inspiration for these projects was the 'new agriculture' pioneered in the British Isles and, reflecting this engagement, the principal activities of the society took an agronomic form. Many of the other proposals for economic development emanating from the province before the foundation of the society might be seen as a kind of provincial Colbertism, embodying a demand that the monarchy become more engaged in developing Brittany's economic resources. While distinct in their assumptions from the Gournay circle, in practice these constituencies sought the same overall objective: the economic development of the province. The tensions among them could generally be accommodated within the structures of the society.

The circumstances of the Breton Society's establishment suggest the force of ideas about global economic competitiveness in France at mid

[6] On Gournay's role, see Arch. dép. d'Ille-et-Vilaine, C 2687, fol. 80r.

century, and the sophisticated way international rivalry with Britain was beginning to be understood, even on the peripheries of the kingdom. Its foundation also points to the modular quality of the Dublin Society – its perceived relevance and applicability in contexts beyond the British Isles. Some of the activities of the Society of Brittany, and the story of its ultimate decline, however, also point to its refractory quality as an instrument for the kind of political economic agenda proffered by Gournay and his circle. Local energies, once mobilised in the form of a voluntary association, could not always be depended upon to serve the purposes of grand economic strategy – the more so given the directing role the Estates assumed over the society from the start, and the commitments of leading members to other visions of economic development.

The Gournay circle, the Irish model, and the foundation of the society

The foundation of the Society of Agriculture, Commerce and the Arts was inspired by a vision of international economic competition disseminated by the writers of the Gournay circle.[7] Gournay and his collaborators stressed the importance of fostering domestic commerce and the agricultural economy that was its foundation, calling for the liberalisation of the grain trade in order to stimulate commercial agriculture. They also sought to develop manufacturing, and were hostile to monopolies and exclusive economic privileges. While arguing, in theory, that commerce ought to be the basis for peace and harmony among nations, they recognised that trade was a major strategic resource and a weapon in the international struggle for preeminence among states. A principal preoccupation of the group was explaining how England, a country with limited natural endowments, had become so powerful economically. Part of the answer, they argued, lay in its colonies, part in its advanced agriculture. But a central aspect of English success, they believed, was the way Ireland had been harnessed to England's purposes.

Ireland was widely viewed in the mid eighteenth century as a region recently transformed from a state of backwardness to a scene of prosperous industry. The linen manufacture was the leading sector of the new Irish

[7] In the 1750s, the writers linked to Gournay published about forty works of political economy, including translations of foreign works. See Christine Théré, 'Economic Publishing and Authors, 1566–1789', in *Studies in the History of French Political Economy: From Bodin to Walras*, ed. Gilbert Faccarello (London: Routledge 1998), 1–56.

economy, and it was the rapid expansion of this industry that caught the imagination of continental observers. (Irish exports of linen, which were less than half a million yards in 1698, grew to 40 million yards by the 1790s.[8]) Political economic writers universally attributed the establishment of the linen manufacture to the British government's efforts to stifle the Irish woollen industry while fostering a substitute that would complement British needs rather than compete with its own manufactures.[9]

Several of the British works translated by members of Gournay's circle emphasised that England had turned Ireland into a kind of *machine de guerre* in its economic and political struggle with France. By preventing the export of Irish woollens and establishing a linen industry in Ireland, John Cary observed, the English 'would in time alter the Ballance of our Trade with France, when we shall send thither more Woolen, and receive thence less Linnen'.[10] Georges-Marie Butel-Dumont's translation of, and extensive commentary on, Cary's work underlined the success of this project, pointing to the substantial economic benefits England derived from its Irish pawn. The reengineering of the Irish economy had permitted England to break out of dependence on foreign imports of linen, especially imports from France.[11] Another of Gournay's associates, François Véron de Forbonnais used an annotated translation of Charles King's *British Merchant* to make a similar argument. Forbonnais insisted that French readers must understand the ways in which Ireland (and Scotland) contributed to a favourable English balance of trade. The decline of markets in England for French linens was directly linked to the establishment of a linen industry in Ireland, Forbonnais observed.[12]

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[8] L. M. Cullen, *An Economic History of Ireland Since 1660* (London: B. T. Batsford 1987), 53. Also, generally, W. H. Crawford, 'The Rise of the Linen Industry', in *The Formation of the Irish Economy*, ed. L. M. Cullen (Cork: Mercier Press 1969).

[9] See Istvan Hont, 'Free Trade and the Economic Limits to National Politics: Neo-Machiavellian Political Economy Reconsidered', in *The Economic Limits to Modern Politics*, ed. John Dunn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990), 41–120.

[10] John Cary, *An Essay on the State of England in Relation to Its Trade, Its Poor, and Its Taxes, for Carrying on the Present War Against France* (Bristol: W. Bonny 1695), 109–10.

[11] Georges-Marie Butel-Dumont, *Essai sur l'état du commerce d'Angleterre*, 2 vols. (London and Paris: Nyon 1755), vol. 1, xxii–xxiii, 75. Also, *Journal œconomique, ou Mémoires, notes et avis sur les arts, l'agriculture, le commerce et tout ce qui peut y avoir rapport* (November 1755), 185–6.

[12] François Véron de Forbonnais, *Le négotiant anglois, ou Traduction libre du livre intitulé: The British Merchant, contenant divers mémoires sur le commerce de l'Angleterre avec la France, le Portugal & l'Espagne*, 2 vols. (Dresden and Paris: Estienne 1753), vol. 1, xxxiii; vol. 2, 72–3n, 81–2n.

10.1057/9781137265258 - The Rise of Economic Societies in the Eighteenth Century, Edited by Koen Stapelbroek and Jani Marjanen

Nowhere had the bite of Irish competition been felt more keenly than in Brittany, the centre of the linen industry in France. In the 1680s, half of the total value of Brittany's linen production had been exported to England, most in the form of the cheap *crées* fabrics produced for popular wear. Over the course of the eighteenth century this market collapsed in the face of high duties and Irish competition. (By contrast, the other major branch of Breton linen production – the higher quality *toiles de Bretagne*, which had its main markets in Spanish America – continued to prosper at least into the 1770s.)[13]

Most commentators on the Irish developmental model stressed that the decisive factors in Irish success were intelligent legislative intervention combined with the successful activation of civil society.[14] From 1696, Irish linen cloth could enter the British market duty free, a major advantage for Irish producers.[15] The Irish Parliament in Dublin was also credited with offering financial encouragements to linen manufacturers, and with importing seeds to improve the quality of Irish flax and hemp.[16] A key ingredient of Irish success had been the Dublin Society. Little advantage had been taken of the premiums offered by the Parliament for flax cultivation, according to Butel-Dumont, until the foundation of the society in Dublin, 'the object of which was the improvement of cultivation of land'.[17] Louis-Joseph Plumard de Dangeul described the Dublin Society as 'one of those first societies which took as their object the advancement and the study of trade, manufactures, and agriculture', and 'whose success was the most striking'. He highlighted the premiums for improvement offered each year by the society, and went on to enumerate fifteen

[13] Jean Martin, *Toiles de Bretagne: La manufacture de Quintin, Uzel et Loudéac, 1670–1830* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes 1998), 188ff; Jean Tanguy, *Quand la toile va: L'industrie toilière bretonne du 16e au 18e siècle* (Rennes: Editions Apogée 1994), 101–3.

[14] Forbonnais and Josiah Tucker also stressed that lower wages in Ireland compensated for the high wages paid to English workers. Josiah Tucker, *A Brief Essay on the Advantages and Disadvantages which Respectively Attend France and Great Britain, with Regard to Trade*, 2nd edn. (London: T. Trye 1750), 73n. François Véron de Forbonnais, *Questions sur le commerce des François au Levant* (Marseille: Carapatria 1755), 20–1. Also, Butel-Dumont, *Essai sur l'état du commerce d'Angleterre*, vol. 1, 51.

[15] Butel-Dumont, *Essai sur l'état du commerce d'Angleterre*, vol. 1, 78.

[16] Joshua Gee, *Considérations sur le commerce et la navigation de la Grande-Bretagne*, trans. Jean-Baptiste de Secondat (Amsterdam: F. Changuion 1750), 97–8; *Journal œconomique* (November 1754), 184–5. The Irish Parliament was increasingly generous in its grants from the 1740s onwards. See Cullen, *Economic History of Ireland*, 96

[17] Butel-Dumont, *Essai sur l'état du commerce d'Angleterre*, vol. 1, 77.

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prizes specifically, praising the generosity of Dr Samuel Madden whose personal financial contribution funded many of the awards.[18] Dangeul was here developing a theme adumbrated by others, including Montesquieu and Josiah Tucker, who saw in Ireland a successful instance of the use of prizes to excite the emulation of farmers and manufacturers to carry their crafts to the highest perfection.[19] By the 1750s, Ireland was also frequently mentioned in French sources as a site of agricultural innovation.[20]

The success of the Dublin Society in transforming Ireland was cited in the report establishing the Society of Agriculture, Commerce and the Arts drafted by the Commerce Committee of the provincial Estates. It was under the auspices of such a society that 'Ireland, which had been one of the world's poorest countries, became prosperous. . . . This Society caused instructions and recompenses to be distributed, and Ireland took on a new face.'[21] The initial proposal for establishing the society had come from Jean-Gabriel Montaudouin de la Touche, a wealthy Nantes merchant, in a memorandum he sent to the Estates in 1756. The Commerce Committee endorsed the proposal, noting that it had Gournay's enthusiastic backing (half of the members of the committee subsequently became members of the society).[22] Knowledge of the Dublin Society may already have been widespread in Brittany. There was a substantial and prominent Irish merchant community in Nantes.[23] One Irish resident, a Mr Gallwey, had undertaken land

[18] Louis-Joseph Plumard de Dangeul, *Remarques sur les avantages et les désavantages de la France et de la Grande Bretagne, par rapport au commerce, & aux autres sources de la puissance des Etats, traduction de l'anglois du chevalier John Nickolls*, 2nd edn. (Leiden: 1754), 170–4.

[19] According to Montesquieu, 'This practice succeeded in our own day in Ireland; it established there one of the most considerable linen [toiles] manufactures in Europe'. Charles de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des loix*, Book 14, chapter 9. See also Tucker, *A Brief Essay*, 103; Anon., *Observations critiques et politiques, sur le commerce maritime; dans lesquelles on discute quelques points relatifs à l'industrie & au commerce des colonies françoises* (Amsterdam and Paris: Jombert 1755), 17–18.

[20] *Journal œconomique* (May 1752), 38; (May 1753), 173; (August 1753), 164ff.

[21] Arch. dép. d'Ille-et-Vilaine, C 2687, 166v–167v.

[22] Arch. dép. d'Ille-et-Vilaine, C 2687, 36r.

[23] L. M. Cullen, 'The Irish Merchant Communities of Bordeaux, La Rochelle and Cognac in the Eighteenth Century', in *Négoce et industrie en France et en Irlande aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles*, eds. Louis M. Cullen and Paul Butel (Paris: Editions CNRS 1980). In 1750, Montaudouin's first cousin married the daughter of an Irish merchant established in Nantes. See Archives municipales de Nantes, GG 252.

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improvement projects in the Nantes area 'following the methods of his Country'.[24] Another Irish agricultural improver named Naigle was subsequently consulted by the Nantes bureau of the society.[25]

One of the early initiatives of the Breton Society was to sponsor a translation of the Dublin Society's *Weekly Observations*.[26] Published in a single volume in Dublin in 1739, the *Weekly Observations* had appeared serially as short articles in the *Dublin Newsletter* in 1737 and 1738.[27] The first eight letters described the political economic problems the Dublin Society sought to address, and the rest were short memoranda on practical matters including linen manufacture, drainage, land reclamation, cider-making and brewing. The translation of the *Weekly Observations* was undertaken by Mathurin Thébault, a teacher of mathematics, who became a member of the Breton Society in 1759. (In his annotations, Thébault also cited works written or translated by members of the Gournay circle.[28]) The Breton society followed the translation and publication of the *Weekly Observations* with its own *Corps d'observations* the following year.

The Dublin model as diffused by the Gournay group was not, however, the only inspiration for the Breton Society. Indeed, had the initiative of Montaudouin and Gournay not intersected with the agendas of local improvers it is unlikely that the society would have received the support of the Estates, or successfully mobilised the energies of the Breton gentlemen who made up its membership. Widespread among the landowners of the province by the 1750s was an interest in agronomic improvement. Some of the original associates of the society, notably the *président* de Montluc and Louis-René de Caradeuc de La Chalotais were already prominent agricultural experimenters.[29]

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[24] *Corps d'observations de la Société d'agriculture, de commerce et des arts, établie par les Etats de Bretagne, 1757 & 1758* (Rennes: Vatar 1760), 176.
[25] *Corps d'observations, 1757 & 1758*, 118.
[26] *Essais de la Société de Dublin, traduit de l'anglois par M. Thebault* (Paris: Estienne 1759).
[27] *The Dublin Society's Weekly Observations* (Dublin: R. Reilly 1739). The volume was reprinted the following year in London as *Essays and Observations on the Following Subjects. Viz. On Trade, Husbandry of Flax . . . on Brewing. Published by a Society of Gentlemen in Dublin* (London: C. Corbett 1740). Another edition appeared in Scotland under the title *The Dublin Society's Weekly Observations for the Advancement of Agriculture and Manufactures* (Glasgow: R. & A. Foulis 1756).
[28] *Essais de la Société de Dublin*, 36n, 39n.
[29] On the former, see Henri Sée, 'Un mémoire du Président de la Bourdonnaye Montluc sur la culture et le commerce du lin (juin 1758)', *Annales de Bretagne* 39, no. 3 (1931), 301–5; on the latter, see Louis de Villers, *La Chalotais agriculteur* (Rennes: M. Simon 1894).

La Chalotais turned two estates into model farms where he cultivated turnips, clover, alfalfa, ryegrass and potatoes. The society became a forum for other agricultural improvers whose work clearly predated its formation.[30] Theirs was an economic agenda compatible with that of the Gournay circle, but not primarily motivated by the same kinds of political economic commitments.

Another set of local agendas that were largely congruent with the Gournay perspective, but hardly identical to it, were the demands of provincial Colbertists such as Julien-Joseph Pinczon du Sel des Monts (1712–1781), and François-Joseph de Kersauson, both founding members of the society. Pinczon du Sel was an improving noble landlord and the proprietor of a substantial textile manufacture established in the early 1740s to produce coarse cotton and linen fabrics, destined principally for the colonies. His *Considérations sur le commerce de Bretagne*, published in 1756, proposed plans for the commercial development of Brittany. Many of his recommendations were Colbertist staples: more punitive inspections of manufactures to prevent fraud; the enforcement of edicts against the sale of foreign cloth; the expulsion of vagabonds from the province, or their commission to forced labour; the standardisation of weights and measures. He also called for the reclamation of wasteland, the liberalisation of the grain trade, and the construction of canals.[31] Canals were a central concern for the comte de Kersauson also. He presented a memorandum to the Estates in 1746 calling for an ambitious program of canal construction, which he envisioned as a means to stimulate the commerce and manufacturing of the province.[32] His model was the Canal de Languedoc, constructed under Colbert to join the River Garonne to the Mediterranean. He argued that the network of canals he proposed would be a boon to the French East India Company, and to the navy, and that a privileged company sponsored by the Crown would offer the best means to finance and engineer the project. The society thus emerged at the confluence of diverse forces, some with a local orientation, others with a national, or international, frame of reference. The decentralised structure of the association – unburdened

[30] See *Corps d'observations, 1757 & 1758*, 75, 85.

[31] Julien-Joseph Pinczon du Sel des Monts, *Considérations sur le commerce de Bretagne* (n.p.: n.d. [1756]).

[32] François-Joseph de Kersauson, *Mémoire présenté aux Estats de Bretagne, tenus à Rennes en 1746* (Rennes: Vatar 1748). Kersauson published another memorandum on this subject in 1765. See, *Mémoire présenté aux Etats de Bretagne, séans à Nantes par. M. le comte de Kersauson* (Nantes: P.-I. Brun n.d.)

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by much in the way of precedent for its activities – proved capable of accommodating a variety of agendas.

The structure and activities of the society

In modelling their organisation on the foreign Dublin Society, the Breton associates might be said to have rejected, or bypassed, a domestic model of sociability – the academies established in many provincial French cities. The academic model probably did not appear a promising one for fostering technical improvements or spurring economic renewal. Academies had originally functioned as ornaments of the state, monuments to kingly glory, and sources of royal panegyric.[33] They offered a model of intellectual sociability focused on producing theoretical and humanistic kinds of knowledge (albeit a pattern beginning to change in the 1750s, led by the Academy of Amiens). Academic culture could hardly have been more alien to the social world of the farmers and craftsmen whom the Breton associates ultimately wished to influence. Moreover, the society seems to have been anxious to avoid the kind of snobbishness typical of some provincial academies.[34] It opted for a structure open to gentlemen of all three estates, and when it was decided within weeks of its foundation to admit a number of dignitaries, they joined as simple associates rather than as 'protectors' – a fact commented upon by the *Journal de Trévoux* as indicating a 'taste for equality'.[35]

It was not the tradition of the provincial academies, but that of British voluntary associations, and the patriotism they were believed to foster, that the Bretons sought to emulate.[36] It was the exuberance of British associational life that caught Plumard de Dangeul's imagination, and it was as an exemplar of this kind of sociability that he recommended the Dublin

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[33] Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1992), 49–59.

[34] For example, of 181 academicians elected to the Academy of Bordeaux between 1712 and 1793, only four were merchants. Daniel Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2000), 169.

[35] Arch. dép. d'Ille-et-Vilaine, C 2687, fol. 244v. See *Mémoires pour l'histoire des sciences et Beaux-Arts (Journal de Trévoux)* (June 1757), 1516.

[36] Voluntary associational life was differently configured and less vigorous in France than in the British Isles. Confraternities and alternative forms of church-based sociability, or guilds and other privileged corporate bodies, dominated the associational life of French towns. The major secular exception was freemasonry, which enjoyed significant popularity, but it dwelt in a legal half-light.

Society. Dangeul placed his discussion of the society in a section on the value of the British constitution 'for directing minds towards the public welfare'. 'In a Constitution in which everyone participates, or imagines himself to participate in government', Dangeul noted, 'all citizens will be occupied with the public thing, each according to his capacity.'[37] The founders of the Breton Society hoped to animate a similar kind of patriotism. They referred constantly to citizens (as opposed to subjects) in their writings, and regularly invoked the good of the nation, the public, and the *patrie*.[38] But theirs was not a form of patriotism that made claims to a governing role, or that contested the authority of the Estates or the Crown. Rather they sought to serve the *patrie* by contributing to the enlightenment and prosperity of the province, and by stirring the energies of its citizens.[39]

Noting that enlightenment, so long as it was the possession only of dispersed and isolated individuals, had no 'utility for the Public', the *Corps d'observations* suggested that the society would function as a clearing house for information. Each member was called upon to produce a communication on a subject of his choice at least every two years. The society eventually established a central depository in Rennes, open several hours a week to the public, to permit interested individuals to consult its memoranda.[40] Many of these communications appeared in the society's *Corps d'observations*, its most substantial publishing project. Montaudouin and Abeille collaborated to produce the first volume, using annotations to recommend works by other members of the Gournay group as authorities on 'economic science'.[41] The society also published several short brochures on technical subjects such as flax husbandry, or fodder crops. Three thousand copies were printed of its brochure on clover cultivation.[42] Yet the society rejected the notion that

[37] Plumard de Dangeul, *Remarques sur les avantages et les désavantages*, 167.

[38] In his rendering of the Dublin Society's *Weekly Observations* into French, Thébault translated 'gentlemen' as 'citoyens'. See, for example, *Essais de la Société de Dublin*, 1, 41.

[39] See, for example, *Avertissement publié par la Société d'agriculture, de commerce, et des arts établie par les Etats de Bretagne* (n.p.: n.d. [1759]), 1.

[40] Arch. dép. d'Ille-et-Vilaine, C 3820, fol. 1335–6, 1442–3, 1462.

[41] The term appears in the *Corps d'observations, 1757 & 1758*, xi.

[42] *Mémoire sur la culture du grand Trefle* (Rennes, Vatar n.d. [1757]). For the figure of three thousand copies, see Jean Quéniart, *La Bretagne au XVIIIe siècle (1675–1789)* (Rennes: Editions Ouest-France 2004), 292. Other short brochures included the *Instruction sur les moyens de prévenir la maladie des grains, connue sous les noms de Nielle, de Charbon, ou de Carie, distribuée par la Société, d'agriculture, de commerce et des arts* (n.p.: n.d. [1758]); *Instruction sommaire sur la culture du lin, distribuée par la Société d'agriculture, des arts et du commerce* (n.p.: n.d. [1758]).

it occupied a directing role; the members were merely the 'depositaries of the instructions furnished by Citizens'. Not the associates, but the public, would revitalise the provincial economy.[43]

The society proposed to educate farmers using the example of successful agronomic experiments conducted locally by associates or correspondents. In one trial, samples of flax from Holland, the Baltic, Ireland and Brittany were grown side by side to demonstrate the viability of local seed.[44] Another series of trials tested Henri-Louis Duhamel du Monceau's contention that the best harvests of alfalfa could be produced by planting the crop in rows and by thorough and frequent weeding. Duhamel's publications in the 1750s marked the beginning of sustained attention to questions of agricultural improvement in France, and his works were frequently referenced by the Breton associates.[45] Though the trials vindicated Duhamel's methods, the society recommended a less labour-intensive form of cultivation, for fear of putting off ordinary cultivators.[46] The society regarded the expansion of fodder crops as a key objective. In 1759, it persuaded the Estates to buy three thousand livres worth of clover seed to distribute freely in the province. At the same time the Estates established a fund of six thousand four hundred livres to be used to give prizes to the two farmers in each administrative district (*subdélégation*) who sowed the largest quantity of clover on land newly brought into cultivation.[47]

The society also hoped to use prizes to galvanise the emulative impulses of craftsmen and women and to enlist them in the perfection of local manufactures. The report of the committee of the Estates that established the society implied that the craftsman's sweetest recompense was 'consideration'; by offering him such symbolic rewards he might be induced to imitate the best practices of other countries.[48] Pinczon du Sel had proposed that a prize, 'a distinctive mark', be awarded in each parish to the farmer who brought the most waste land into cultivation.[49] Even ordinary farmers could have their 'emulation'

[43] *Corps d'observations, 1757 & 1758*, vi–viii.
[44] *Essais de la Société de Dublin*, 61n.
[45] Henri-Louis Duhamel du Monceau, *Traité de la culture des terres, suivant les principes de M. Tull, Anglois, Nouvelle edition corrigée & augmentée* (Paris H.-L. Guérin et L.-F. Delatour 1753–1761). On French agronomy, see André J. Bourde, *Agronomie et agronomes en France au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N. 1967).
[46] *Corps d'observations, 1757 & 1758*, 74–9.
[47] *Corps d'observations, 1757 & 1758*, 83n.
[48] Arch. dép. d'Ille-et-Vilaine, C 2687, fol. 182r ff.
[49] *Considérations sur le commerce de Bretagne*, 35–6.

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aroused by such distinctions, he observed. In practice, the prizes offered by the society seem to have taken a cash form. In 1763, the society arranged a prize competition to perfect the craft of spinning, so vital to the province's textile industry. The royal governor, the duc d'Aiguillon, put up the prize money, paid in 1764 to some women in the diocese of Tréguier by M. de Kergariou, an associate of the local bureau.[50]

The society also looked to the Estates to revivify the economy of the province. Indeed, this is hardly surprising considering how closely the association was linked to the provincial governing body. All new associates had to be approved by the Estates. The body paid all the expenses of the society, including the salary of the secretary, and the costs of printing the *Corps d'observations*.[51] The diocesan sections of the society were offered the use of the meeting rooms, and clerks, of the Estates' Intermediary Commission.[52] The provincial governing body seems to have envisioned the society as a consultative corps on economic policy. It asked the association to furnish memoranda for its deputies at court in order to support requests made by the Estates to the royal administration.[53] The Intermediary Commission corresponded with the society on questions of economic improvement, and some of the proposals sent to the Estates' Commerce Committee were forwarded to the society for comment.[54] General assemblies of the society were timed to correspond with the sittings of the Estates, and members of the society were occasionally referred to as 'commissioners' of the governing body.[55]

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[50] On prizes, see Arch. dép. d'Ille-et-Vilaine, C 3819, fol. 808–9; C 3820, fol. 2096; *Avertissement publié par la Société d'agriculture*, 5. The idea of using emulative impulses to produce economic improvement was ubiquitous in French economic thought of this period. See John Shovlin, 'Emulation in Eighteenth-Century French Economic Thought', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 36 (2003: 2), 224–30.

[51] On the secretary's salary, see Archives départementales de la Loire-Atlantique (hereafter Arch. dép. Loire-Atl.), C 443, fol. 294v; C 444, fol. 199v; C 445, fol. 190v. On printing costs, see Arch. dép. Loire-Atl., C 445, fol. 175v.

[52] Arch. dép. d'Ille-et-Vilaine, C 3913. Later, when the central branch established assembly rooms and a depository, the Estates paid the rent. See, Arch. dép. Loire-Atl., C 443, fol. 297r; C 444, fol. 229r–229v; C 445, fol. 190v–191r; C 446, fol. 212v; C 447, fol. 211r.

[53] Arch. dép. Loire-Atl., C 444, fol. 199r.

[54] Arch. dép. Loire-Atl., C 443, fol. 293r, 296r; Arch. dép. d'Ille-et-Vilaine, C 3818, fol. 1625–26.

[55] Arch. dép. d'Ille-et-Vilaine, C 3913. Arch. dép. d'Ille-et-Vilaine, C 3819, fol. 707; C 3820, fol. 1462.

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Some of the wider objectives of the society could only be achieved by appealing to the Estates, or the royal government. A key demand was for liberalisation of the grain trade. In the 1750s, the trade in cereals was still closely regulated by the royal administration and by local administrative bodies, with the chief object being to ensure supply and keep prices within reach of consumers.[56] There was wide support among Breton landowners, the Parlement and the Estates for freedom of the grain trade, including freedom of export.[57] The Intermediary Commission and the society exchanged views on the need for greater liberty.[58] Jean-Baptiste Gellée de Prémion, mayor of Nantes, and founding member of the society, laid out the case for liberalisation in a memorandum composed for the comptroller general (*contrôleur général*, effectively minister of finance) in 1761.[59] Through its *Corps d'observations* the society made the case for freedom of export, citing in support works by Jacques-Claude Herbert and Plumard de Dangeul.[60] Abeille and Montaudouin were active in the national controversy over liberalisation, publishing works calling for freedom of export.[61] La Chalotais also played a prominent role in the national debate, and was viewed in liberal Paris circles as a champion of deregulation.[62] A wide measure of domestic deregulation of the grain trade was, in fact, introduced by the Crown in 1763, with freedom of export following in 1764.

While the Breton social elite could unite around a call for the liberalisation of the grain trade, calls for relaxation of manufacturing

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[56] See Steven L. Kaplan, *Bread, Politics and Political Economy in the Reign of Louis XV*, 2 vols. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff 1976); Judith A. Miller, *Mastering the Market: The State and the Grain Trade in Northern France, 1700–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999).

[57] J. Letaconnoux, 'Les subsistances et le commerce des grains en Bretagne au XVIIIe siècle', *Annales de Bretagne* 20 (1904: 1), 126–35.

[58] Arch. dép. d'Ille-et-Vilaine, C 3818. fol. 1640, 1712.

[59] Jean-Baptiste Gellée de Prémion, 'Mémoire à consulter sur la liberté du commerce des grains', Arch. dép. d'Ille-et-Vilaine, C 69.

[60] *Corps d'observations, 1757 & 1758*, 100–2.

[61] Louis-Paul Abeille, *Effets d'un privilège exclusif en matière de commerce, sur les droits de la propriété, &c* (Paris: A. L. Regnard n.d. [1765]); Abeille, *Lettre d'un négociant sur la nature du commerce des grains* (n.p.: n.d. [1763]); Abeille, *Réflexions sur la police des grains en France et en Angleterre* (n.p.: 1764); Jean-Gabriel Montaudouin de la Touche, *Supplément à l'Essai sur la police générale des grains* (The Hague: 1757).

[62] Friederich-Melchior Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique, et critique, adressée à un souverain d'Allemagne, depuis 1753 jusqu'en 1769* (Paris: Longchamps 1813), vol. 4, 263–4.

regulations were more divisive. The second volume of the *Corps d'observations* carried an attack on what was represented as excessive regulation of the textile industry, charging that regulations intended to guarantee the quality of fabric were cramping the development of the industry and hampering the province's ability to compete with Silesian producers on Spanish-American markets.[63] A blistering critique of this argument was published by an anonymous critic, who asserted that regulation was vital to ensure quality, to create confidence among consumers, and thus to guarantee a continued market for Breton cloth. The critic rejected the contention that Breton producers were suffering from Silesian competition; in fact, *toiles de Bretagne* sold at a 15 per cent premium over Silesian linens. He implied, moreover, that memoranda supporting continued regulation had been suppressed by the society.[64] This critique represented the perspective and interests of an oligarchy of Saint-Malo merchants who dominated the trade in *toiles de Bretagne* with Spain and who remained committed to the view that quality control was the best guarantee of foreign markets.[65]

Calls for replacing imports with home produced goods struck a far more consensual note. Import substitution was both a key recommendation of the Gournay circle's model of international economic competition, and a central aspect of the Dublin Society's activities. In one of its earliest bulletins, the Dublin association complained that over £500,000 worth of goods were imported into Ireland each year that the country could produce for itself. A primary purpose of the fund with which Dr Samuel Madden endowed the society in 1739 was to offer premiums to encourage domestic production of goods then imported into the country.[66] The Breton Estates made a similar commitment to import substitution, offering premiums and encouragements, to be supervised by the society, for paper manufacture, twills, woollen cloth, muslins, printed textiles and beaver hats.[67] One of the obvious targets for import

[63] *Corps d'observations de la Société d'agriculture de commerce & des arts, 1759 & 1760* (Paris: Veuve de B. Brunet 1772), 357 ff.
[64] Anon., *A Cadiz le 30. avril 1763* (n.p.: n.d.) (Archives municipales de Nantes, HH 18).
[65] Quéniart, *Bretagne au XVIIIe siècle*, 346–8, 352. More broadly, see Philippe Minard, *La fortune du colbertisme: Etat et industrie dans la France des Lumières* (Paris: Fayard 1998).
[66] Samuel Madden, *A Letter to the Dublin Society, on the Improving their Fund; and the Manufactures, Tillage, &c. in Ireland* (Dublin: R. Reilly 1739), 28–32. On premiums, see Meenan and Clark (eds.), *Royal Dublin Society*, 7–8.
[67] *Corps d'observations, 1757 & 1758*, 17–27.

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substitution was Irish salt-beef.[68] Forbonnais remarked on the 'tribute' France paid Ireland each year for its salt-beef, to the ultimate benefit of Britain. He recommended that premiums be offered for salt-beef from other European countries, or better yet for French salt-beef. With an investment of just six hundred thousand livres a year France could deprive its enemies of a trade worth five millions.[69] The Intermediary Commission understood the potential for cutting out the Irish trade and corresponded with the society on methods for salting beef. It published a brochure on the subject in 1762.[70]

However, the imports that the Breton Society and Estates envisioned replacing with local products came not just from foreign countries but also from neighbouring French provinces. The society called for the establishment of a woollen manufacture to compete with those of Elbeuf and Louviers, for a muslin industry to replace fabric from Le Mans, and for the production of flour in the style of Nérac.[71] The society's *Corps d'observations* complained that the woollens of nearby Cholet 'inundate the province'. Here was a golden opportunity for import substitution, a chance for Brittany to substitute home-produced goods 'in place of consuming the production of the agriculture and industry of neighbouring provinces'.[72] With this vision of interprovincial import substitution, the imperatives of local prosperity and local politics trumped the national vision of the Gournay circle, which envisioned import substitution as a weapon in an economic and political struggle for preeminence with Great Britain. Such policies also raise the question whether the *patrie* the Breton associates claimed to serve was primarily a national or a provincial one.

The Breton Society and the politics of provincial autonomy

Brittany was unusual in the degree of self-government it enjoyed within the absolutist structures of the French monarchy. Nevertheless, from 1675, when the last great seventeenth-century peasant revolt was

[68] Bertie Mandelblatt, 'A Transatlantic Commodity: Irish Salt Beef in the French Atlantic World', *History Workshop Journal* 63 (2007: 1), 18–47.
[69] François Véron de Forbonnais, *Divers mémoires, sur le commerce, recueillis du meme auteur* (Paris: 1757), 83–5. The *Journal œconomique* suggested that Canada might be established as France's main supplier of salt-beef, cutting out the Irish trade. *Journal œconomique* (November 1754), 90.
[70] 'Méthode pour saler le boeuf', Arch. dép. d'Ille-et-Vilaine, C 3818, fol. 1625–26.
[71] *Corps d'observations, 1757 & 1758*, 17–27.
[72] *Corps d'observations, 1757 & 1758*, 252.

crushed, the region became more fully integrated into the administrative structures of the monarchy. A royal intendant was installed at Rennes in 1689, along with a network of subdelegates across the province who reported to him. One of the defining conflicts in eighteenth-century Breton political life set the 'bastion' – parts of the Breton social elite committed to preserving the ancient liberties of the province – against the intrusions of the administrative monarchy. The leading historian of the Breton nobility, Jean Meyer, has suggested that the Society of Agriculture, Commerce and the Arts was a front for such *bastionnaire* elements. From its inception, he claims, the organisation was 'marked by the political identity [etiquette] of its participants' not one of whom could be regarded as 'a partisan of royal policy'. Indeed, the society united nobles playing a prominent role in the provincial Estates, the likes of Pinczon du Sel des Monts, and Le Loup de la Biliais, with a parlementary noble opposition built around a core of political Jansenists, including La Chalotais, de Pontual, Cornullier and Grénédan. To this alliance of nobles, Meyer argues, the society joined the merchant oligarchy of the ports some of whom (including Montaudouin, he suggests) shared the Jansenism of the *parlementaires*.[73]

It is tempting to read the politics of the society through such an optic, culminating in the celebrated *affaire de Bretagne*, one of the great political crises of the *ancien régime*, in which several members of the society were embroiled. The *affaire* is too complex to describe in detail, but it derived its power from the way it conjoined layers of political conflict from the local to the national level. In 1764 the Parlement of Rennes, in support of *bastionnaire* elements in the Estates, issued an edict designed to prevent an increase in indirect taxation in the province. The Royal Council quashed this declaration and, in response, most of the magistrates resigned. Over the following years, the resistance of the magistrates became a focal point for the parlements' national struggle against the perceived 'despotism' of the monarchy. Underlying these quarrels, was a conflict between political factions led in Brittany by the *procureur général* of the parlement, La Chalotais, and the royal provincial governor, the duc d'Aiguillon, with both sides enjoying support from opposing factions at court. In 1765 when Louis XV received threatening letters identified by hand-writing experts as written in the hand of La Chalotais, the *procureur* and his son were jailed. La Chalotais was later joined in prison by another leading

[73] Jean Meyer, *La Noblesse bretonne au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N. 1966), 580.

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member of the Breton Society, Pinzcon du Sel, who had published an attack on d'Aiguillon.[74]

Notwithstanding the important role played in the *affaire* by members of the society, an interpretation reading the politics of the association as those of provincial liberty is not convincing. While the society harboured oppositional elements, some of its prominent members were linked to d'Aiguillon's faction rather than to La Chalotais' (see below). It is unlikely that the association was conceived by its founders – even by La Chalotais and Pinczon du Sel – as a stalking horse for a politics of provincial autonomy. The horizons of La Chalotais and Pinczon were not so limited. The former rose to national prominence in the early 1760s when, in his capacity as an officer of the Parlement of Rennes, he attacked the Jesuit order, and later published a treatise on education in which he called for the replacement of Jesuit education with a training more attentive to the sciences and to civic values.[75] In 1764 he told the Parlement that liberalisation of the grain trade would make possible 'a plan of taxation based on true and unique principles', by which he meant the Physiocratic principles of the *impôt unique*.[76] Though the connections are murky, La Chalotais appears to have established links with François Quesnay, the founder of the Physiocratic movement, in hopes of using Quesnay's close relationship with Madame de Pompadour to ascend to the comptroller generalship.[77] (Henry Pattullo, a close associate of Quesnay, had become a free associate of the Breton Society in 1759, and may have served as the liaison between the two men.[78])

If Pinczon du Sel was pushing for a scheme of provincial economic development in 1756 this was not a plan conceived under the aegis of provincial political autonomy. As an entrepreneur he had long solicited the support of the royal Bureau of Commerce. His operation was perpetually starved of the capital necessary for expansion and, over a period of almost ten years, he had looked alternatively to the Bureau and to the provincial Estates for financial subventions. In 1746, he petitioned the former for a loan of 30,000 livres, the right to characterise his establishment as a royal manufacture, and for immunity from duties imposed

[74] Quéniart, *Bretagne au XVIIIe siècle*, 108.
[75] Louis-René de Caradeuc de La Chalotais, *Essai d'éducation nationale, ou Plan d'études pour la jeunesse* (n.p.: 1763).
[76] Kaplan, *Bread, Politics and Political Economy*, vol. 1, 159.
[77] Jean Meyer, *La Chalotais: Affaires de femmes et affaires d'Etat sous l'Ancien Régime* (Paris: Perrin 1995).
[78] Arch. dép. Loire-Atl, C 443, fol. 304v.

by the tax farms on the entry of his raw materials into the province. He applied again to the Bureau of Commerce in 1747, securing an exemption from some duties, and an immunity from militia service for his workers. But he felt he had been dealt with ungenerously by both the Bureau and the Estates. He was nostalgic for the age of Colbert when he might have been more munificently subsidised – a sentiment hardly in keeping with a *bastionnaire* vision.[79]

Pinczon du Sel was also frustrated by the difficulty of finding local investors to back his manufacture, even when some of the risk was absorbed by government. When the provincial Estates agreed to stand guarantee for a loan of 40,000 livres, Pinczon was able to secure investments of only 21,500. For him, the Society of Agriculture, Commerce and the Arts surely constituted a vehicle to foster a more expansive entrepreneurial culture. In his *Considérations sur le commerce de Bretagne*, he entered the lists in support of the abbé Coyer's recently published *La noblesse commerçante*. Following Coyer, he cited as obstacles to economic development the 'gothic' prejudices that still persisted against noble investment in commerce, and he endorsed the idea that poor nobles ought to throw themselves into entrepreneurial activity, representing this as a form of service to the *patrie*.[80]

Rather than striving to protect provincial liberties, the Breton Society offered a mode of participation in public life that transcended traditional political fault lines. Here may lie another parallel with the Dublin Society. According to James Livesey, the Dublin association sought to negotiate a place for Ireland in a British Empire that denied full political or economic partnership to its provincial members. Instead of challenging Ireland's political dependency – instead of seeking political autonomy or equality for Ireland within the empire, as some Irish 'patriots' were wont to do – it elaborated a privatised vision of the public good based on creating utility and happiness, and it sought to make that

[79] On Pinczon du Sel's economic activities, see Charles A. Foster, 'Honoring Commerce and Industry in 18th Century France: A Case Study of Changes in Traditional Social Functions', Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1950, 278–94.

[80] Pinczon du Sel des Mons, *Considérations sur le commerce de Bretagne*, 125ff. Gabriel-François Coyer, *La noblesse commerçante* (London: 1756). On the controversy generated by the text, see J. Q. C. Mackrell, *The Attack on 'Feudalism' in Eighteenth-Century France* (London: Routledge & K. Paul 1973), chp. 4; Jay M. Smith, 'Social Categories, the Language of Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution: The Debate over *Noblesse Commerçante*', *Journal of Modern History* 72 (2000), 339–74.

vision a reality through instruction and improvement.[81] While the situation of the Society of Brittany was different, it seems to have embraced a similar strategy, opting for a patriotism of the private sphere which sidestepped confrontation with the administrative monarchy.

The decline of the Society and its legacy

The Breton Society was active from its foundation in 1757 until 1764, but from this point forward there was a general slackening of activity. In itself, this is unsurprising. Most voluntary associations in eighteenth-century Britain, Peter Clark suggests, lasted no more than three or four years, plagued by structural problems of low attendance, lack of suitable venues, conflicts between members or inadequate resources.[82] The Society of Brittany suffered from the same kinds of troubles. In a reflection on the reasons for its decline, a 1768 report mentioned the number of vacant places, the breakdown of communication between the diocesan sections and the central bureau in Rennes, which was accused of high-handedness, and the slighting of the individual contributions of some members.[83] There is also some evidence from this period that the Estates was becoming impatient with the society's demands for money.[84] Yet the difficult political circumstances in the province during the *affaire de Bretagne* also, likely, contributed to the slackening of the society's activity. The *affaire* began in 1764, the point from which life began to ebb from the association. The society could not very well have avoided the fallout from the crisis; its own ranks, notably those of the central bureau at Rennes, were divided among the partisans of La Chalotais and those of d'Aiguillon. One of the associates, the bishop of Rennes, was virtually driven from the province after the reestablishment of the parlement in 1769, and the society's secretary since 1765, Julien Busson, who was physician to the duc d'Aiguillon, seems to have left the province under similar circumstances.[85]

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[81] James Livesey, 'The Dublin Society in Eighteenth-Century Irish Political Thought', *Historical Journal* 47 (2004:3), 615–40.

[82] Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580–1800: The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000), 60, 234–44.

[83] Arch. dép. Loire-Atl., C 449, fol. 170v–171r.

[84] In May 1767 an annual payment of 1000 *livres* was authorised for its upkeep under the express condition that there be no demands for an augmentation for the next five sittings of the Estates. Arch. dép. Loire-Atl., C 447, fol. 211r.

[85] On the bishop's links to d'Aiguillon's party and his departure from the province, see Quéniart, *Bretagne au XVIIIe siècle*, 104–5. On Busson, see Jean-Prosper Levot, *Biographie bretonne*, 2 vols. (Paris: J. Le Doyen and P. Giret 1852–57), vol. 1, 217.

A virtual refounding of the society was undertaken early in 1769 under the auspices of the new royal governor, the duc de Duras, his right hand man in Brittany, François Bareau de Girac, Bishop of Saint-Brieuc, and the new royal intendant, François-Marie d'Agay.[86] The Estates allotted a generous subsidy to the society and admitted a new slate of members.[87] But the new association does not appear to have got off the ground. The secretary, Busson, apparently was not replaced, La Chalotais' nominee Thébault having been rejected.[88] There is some evidence that the noble contingent in the Estates was reluctant to vote further funds for the society in 1770 – perhaps in reaction to the slighting of La Chalotais.[89] Mention of the Society, which is routine in the minutes of the provincial Estates from the late 1750s and 1760s (and, between sittings, in the deliberations of the Intermediary Commission), ceases after 1770. In 1785, the comptroller general, Charles-Alexandre de Calonne, attempted to contact the society through the intendant, only to be told that there had not, for a long time past, been an agricultural society in the province.[90] Two years previously, a Patriotic Society (*Société patriotique*) had been established in Brittany, and in 1785 it called for renewed attention to agricultural matters in the province, but the appeal does not seem to have been answered.[91]

Most historians of the Society of Brittany agree that it achieved little of lasting importance in the realm of agricultural improvement or economic transformation. Its chief legacy lay elsewhere, in the network of agricultural societies established by the royal administration in the 1760s. The foundation of the Society of Agriculture, Commerce and the Arts received wide publicity in France. Most of the major journals

[86] Arch. dép. Loire-Atl., C 449, fol. 204r; Arch. dép. d'Ille-et-Vilaine, C 3913.
[87] Arch. dép. Loire-Atl., C 449, fol. 171r. The Estates approved another round of new members late in 1770. Arch. dép. Loire-Atl., C 450, fol. 208v.
[88] La Chalotais nominated Thébault in the summer of 1770. See Arch. dép. d'Ille-et-Vilaine, C 3913.
[89] Arch. dép. d'Ille-et-Vilaine, C 1789.
[90] Jean Quéniart, *Culture et Société Urbaines dans la France de l'Ouest au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck 1978), 439.
[91] Arch. dép. d'Ille-et-Vilaine, C 3913. The reasons for this inaction are unclear, but it may be that the Patriotic Society was perceived to be intruding on the prerogative of the Estates. The *Société patriotique* was a different kind of organisation than the Breton Society. It was devoted to literary pursuits and to the animation of public and private virtue. During the 1790s, an agricultural society was established in Nantes, though little can be discerned from the archival record of its organisation or subsequent history. Arch. dép. Loire-Atl., L 370.

serving the French republic of letters commented on it enthusiastically.[92] By 1760, a convinced *agronome*, Henri Bertin, had become comptroller general, and turned for advice to several members of Gournay's circle, especially Abeille and Dangeul. In the autumn of 1760, Bertin decided to establish a national network of agricultural societies modelled on the Society of Brittany.[93] Over the following years, more than a dozen societies were established, coordinated by another of Bertin's collaborators, Louis-François de Menon, marquis de Turbilly, who had been a free associate of the Society of Brittany since 1760.[94] These bodies did not devote the same attention to manufactures as their Breton forerunner, specialising generally in agricultural matters, but in several important respects they continued the precedents established in Brittany.

They promoted a revivification of rural prosperity as a means to regenerate French power in the aftermath of the disastrous Seven Years' War, while pressing the government to consider the interests of agriculture in the formulation of its economic policies. The new societies served as key supports for the government's policy of liberalising the grain trade. Like their Breton predecessor, they sought to activate the energies of cultivators using a combination of instructions and prizes. They became centres for the diffusion of a discourse linking economic improvement and patriotism. The rhetoric of the societies, feeding into the broader currents of French patriot discourse after mid century, moulded public understanding of the political economic predicament of the nation, and would later shape public perceptions of the financial and economic crisis of the monarchy in the late 1780s.[95]

Apart from its immediate legacy in a French context, the establishment of the Society of Agriculture, Commerce and the Arts represents a singularly important moment in the development of European economic societies. Its foundation brought renewed attention to the model of sociability and improvement offered by British voluntary associations. It served to naturalise the Dublin model in France – and perhaps more broadly on the continent. Its establishment highlights the transnational spread of ideas and practical models of action in eighteenth-century Europe, and also the globalising economic context in which

[92] See, for example, *Journal encyclopédique* (15 June 1757); *Journal œconomique* (November 1757), 124; *Journal des sçavans* (August 1757), 519; *Journal de Trévoux* (June 1757), 1509–16.
[93] Bourde, *Agronomie et agronomes*, 1102n.
[94] Arch. dép. Loire-Atl., C 444, fol. 122v.
[95] Shovlin, *Political Economy of Virtue*, passim.

that transnational migration of ideas and models took on meaning. While the ultimate decline of the Breton Society may underline the limits of economic societies as vehicles for a transformative political economic agenda, the very fact of its establishment suggests the power of political economic visions of international rivalry at mid century.

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