CHAPTER 2

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE PRESSES

We know of over a hundred works printed between 1500 and 1523 that feature the name of a member of the Rennes or Nantes book trade either on the book’s title-page or in its colophon. This might seem to imply that there was a modest but continuous production emanating from Breton presses after the initial outburst of editions in the incunabula era. In fact, inspection of the books themselves shows that of these works only nine were actually printed within Brittany. The vast majority of these editions were printed elsewhere but destined to be sold by Breton booksellers. A typical example of this phenomenon was an edition of a text of particular interest to Breton readers, a history of the kings and dukes of “Great Britain” and of Brittany. The title page proclaimed only “On les vent a Renes chiez Jehan Mace pres saint Saulveur a l’enseigne saint Jehan l’evangeliste et a Caen chiez Michel Augier pres le pont saint Pierre”. This has led it to be identified with Rennes. Yet the book was in fact printed in Normandy: the colophon reveals that the book was printed “a Rouen par M. Pierre Olivier demourant audit lieu pres l’esglise saint Vivien”.1

The analysis of the entire corpus of books published in the period 1500 to 1523 shows that not a single book was printed in Rennes and that only five came off presses based in Nantes. Such figures contrast sharply with those compiled from the analysis of the editions that mention those towns on the title page or in the colophon. We know of over a hundred editions that state that they were sold by the Rennes bookseller Jean Macé during this period, but they were all printed outside the duchy. Over these years we find books printed in Caen, Rouen and Paris for Breton booksellers. The business relationship which connects them is revealed by the names of Breton booksellers on the title page, in the colophon or by their device used somewhere in the book.

1 Les croniques et genealogie des tres nobles roys, ducz et princes tant de la Grant Bretaigne que de la petite avesques les tresexcellentes victoires et triumphes d’iceluix roys et princes faictes sur les rommains jadis leurs tributaires et sur toutes autres nations, (Rouen, Pierre Olivier, for Michel Angier in Caen and Jean Macé in Rennes, 1510) [BnF, Rés. Nb 290] FB 20331.
Printing Breton material outside Brittany was a lucrative commerce that attracted a number of different printers. By the beginning of the sixteenth century such foreign imprints had become commonplace. The customs of Brittany were printed at least six times in the duchy during the incunabula age. Yet the first surviving edition of the customs of Brittany came off the presses of the Parisian printer Guillaume Le Fèvre on 23rd September 1480. Thus, over four years before the first book was produced by Robin Fouquet and Jean Crès in Bréhan-Loudéac, printed copies of the customs could have been available in the stalls of Breton booksellers. The edition does not indicate in any way where the book was to be sold or what its market was to be. But it seems unthinkable that the very first print-run of this legal handbook was not meant at least in part to be sold to the very market that would have needed this vital work of reference.

The edition was printed in the smaller octavo format to make it more portable and was clearly destined to be of practical use to lawyers and notaries. The copy that is kept in the municipal library in Rennes demonstrates that Breton lawyers were indeed very keen to have such a tool at their disposal. This copy bears two manuscript inscriptions which indicate that this copy was in the hands of Olivier du Chastellier, lord of la Hautays, and his wife Olive du Boisbaudry in 1575. Olivier du Chastellier was a Breton nobleman whose main land was situated approximately half way between Rennes and Châteaubriant in the parish of Tresboeuf. He pursued a legal career and, a year after he had inscribed his name on the customs, he was named councillor in the Breton Parlement before being promoted to the prestigious position of président à mortier in 1594. A large number of customs of Brittany were printed outside the duchy during the sixteenth century, but only one does not have the name of a Breton bookseller either on the title page or in the colophon. The Breton market for the books was thus virtually always openly acknowledged.

---

2 Les coustumes et establissemens de Breaigne (Paris, Guillaume Le Fèvre, 1480) [BM Rennes, 76795 Rés.], FB 7470. The inscriptions read “Olivier du Chastelier”, “Olive du Boisbaudri” and “1575”.
4 The edition in question is the Coustumes, constitutions, establissemens et ordonances de Breaigne printed for the Paris based consortium of Jean Cornillau, Jean Adam, Jean Bienayse and Jacques Ferrebouc in 1521: FB 7487 [Harvard Law Library, N BRIT 90 521].