CHAPTER 5
THE BRETON BOOK WORLD

Printing books was about much more than just the pressing of a humidified page onto a rank of inked mobile characters. For the presses to be successful, they relied on a variety of other processes some of which needed to take place before the book was completed and others that had to be accomplished after the printing was over. They involved a variety of people of whom only a small proportion could be identified from the printed text alone. They included publishers, master printers, apprentices, companions as well as booksellers. All of these protagonists had different levels of responsibility in the production and distribution of a printed book.

As soon as it was decided to produce an edition it was necessary to locate and acquire the basic primary materials. In some cases the presence of a nearby centre of production could make the sourcing of these materials very straightforward. In the incunabula era in Brittany, this was the case in Bréhan where the most expensive element, the paper, came from a mill situated within the very same village. But even when the sourcing of the paper was this simple, it was still necessary to have a significant initial investment. Though transport costs were low, the paper still had to be bought and other raw materials such as ink had to be furnished. The wages of those involved in the production of the books also needed to be paid. The source of the necessary investment varied. In the simplest of cases it could be provided by a single patron, as in Bréhan. Elsewhere in Brittany, the money came from a variety of other sources such as local business men. The availability of such funds to set up a press was often crucial: buying a press, a set of type and some woodcuts required a significant outlay. It was often simpler to pay an established printer to move with his existing material and set up shop in a new town. But such initial financial support was insufficient to ensure the long term survival of a workshop.

The second essential element for the success of print was the development of a business model based on the distribution and sale of the items produced. Once a press had obtained financial backing for its initial venture, it was imperative that it transform its practices
to become less reliant on one-off commissions provided by local backers. The vagaries and inconsistency of such funding could not guarantee enough business in a region such as Brittany. Identifying or creating a market that would persuade a printer to produce works speculatively for the wider public was a vital step. This was true even if the works so produced were inexpensive items with small profit margins. But this was a step that the vast majority of the early Breton printers were unwilling to take. With high quality mass produced (and therefore cheaper) printed books being imported into Brittany, the competition was strong. A local printer had to find niche markets in which he could realistically compete.

**Papermakers and the printed book trade**

The paper or vellum on which the ink was printed represented the highest cost faced by a printer as he prepared to embark on the production of a book. The sourcing of this primary material was therefore an issue of vital importance. Vellum was an extremely expensive material and generally reserved for luxury editions and special presentation copies. We know only of isolated examples of copies printed in Brittany on vellum. These include a luxury edition of a popular work of fiction and a book of hours for Saint-Malo.1 Parchment makers had been active in the duchy from the fourteenth century onwards, but the small number of copies produced on vellum would have made the local sourcing of this material a secondary issue. On the other hand, the sourcing of the paper that was used for all other books was vital.

The production of high quality paper depended on the availability of its two main constituent parts: suitable cloth rags and ample, swift running water. Brittany was renowned for its cloth trade. Centres of manufacture such as Vitré and Quintin exported their production far beyond the kingdom of France.2 The quantity of water in a region known for the high level of precipitation certainly was not a problem

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2 The vitality of the cloth trade is shown by the diary of a merchant of Vitré, Jean de Gennes (BnF, Fr. Nouvelles Acquisitions 1723), and by the regulation of the trade in that town by Guy XVI and Guy XIX de Laval (respectively on 26 January 1527 (n.s.) and 20 July 1577, AN AA 55).