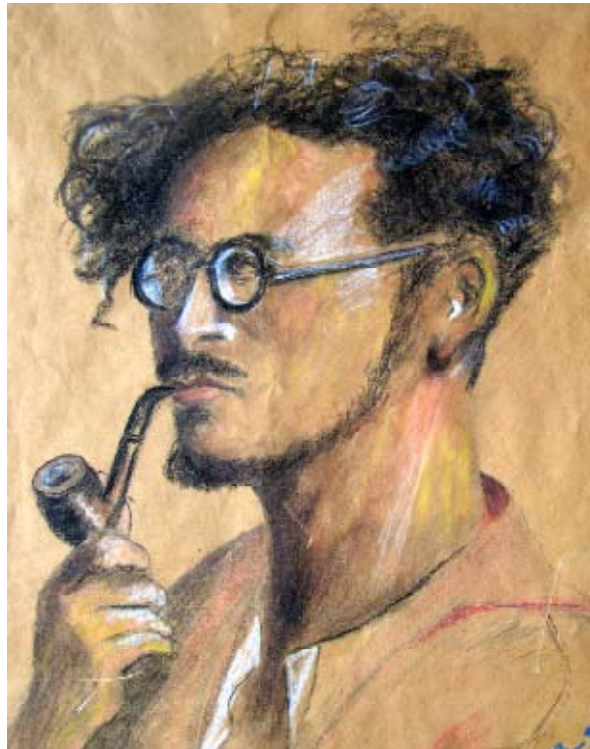


## Ichtyonymie bretonne - Author's biography



► **Alan-Gwenog Berr**  
(1913 – 1974), “*Sketched*”  
by Chkorn, a friend  
from Le Havre.

For those who, in their lifetime, did not have the pleasure to meet the character Alain Le Berre (1913-1974), it is hard to imagine why closer acquaintances seek the appropriate words to portray this man who must have definitely surprised them. His verve, his vividness and his insatiable curiosity concealed that reliability and accuracy specific to the researcher he was.

### Lan's one thousand and one lives

He was born in the Côtes d'Armor department, in Lamballe in 1913. His father, Alain, from Kervreac'h in Audierne, a fisherman, ship joiner and shipwright like his own father and brothers, fled the misery prevailing on Cap Sizun land as sardine disappeared from the bay of Audierne in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He then became a cartwright with the National Railways in Lamballe. His mother, Catherine Arhan, whose father was a fisherman and kelp harvester in Sant Dreyer, was native to Plouhinec.

Aged 14, Lan joins the Practical School of industry of Le Havre, where he graduates as a cabinet

maker. He subsequently becomes a draughtsman, until 1941. With a secure livelihood, he takes a fine arts course, then goes to further education at the Higher Primary School of Le Havre. This settles his vocation as a future teacher after the war. Mobilised as soon as the conflict begins, and very promptly demobilised, he joins the Civil Defence thanks to his qualification as a paramedic also previously obtained in Le Havre. His return to Brittany is favoured given this time of disturbance, yet he first takes the opportunity of an industry appointment in Paris (1941-1942) to register with the Practical School of Higher Studies at the Sorbonne, in Celtic philology. He reaches Rennes, where he is Yann Fouéré's secretary for the *Ar Brezoneg er skol* movement, in charge of Breton classes in primary and secondary schools. He is then very conscious of the divisions driving Breton activists, and strives to distinguish earnest individuals on each side. In his position he gets to deliver underground newspapers, to house defaulters and, thanks to his draughtsman skills, to print counterfeit documents. He is awarded the Resistance Volunteer Servicemen cross. His constant appetite for further knowledge prompts

him to enrol at university where he graduates in Celtic Studies in 1943.

After working as a press inspector at the Liberation and as a draughtsman in Quimperlé Fonderies & Ateliers until October 1947, he takes up a new career, this time in secondary education, in which he holds different posts all over Brittany and the western region for twenty years, as a mechanical engineering instructor. He is teaching in Landerneau when he comes across the first *Nautical toponymy* manuals published in 1953 by the Navy's hydrographic service. Noticed by Sein island geographer André Guilcher, then professor in Nancy, he is introduced to the National Navy by the latter. He is appointed "survey manager" in 1953 by general engineer Dyèvre, willing to modernise sea charts. To this end, Lan joins a training course... for students – he is only 40! – at the Roscoff Biological Station with marine biologists Claude Lévi, Gilbert Deroux and Louis Cabioc'h, who is fluent in Breton.

#### Notebooks to thesis

In 1960 and 1961, Lan publishes two initial manuals with reference to the southern coast of

coast of Brittany, with 4,500 toponyms added on to the first. This profuse compiled material gives rise to his wish to undertake a PhD. He already knows many people as a result of his curiosity and charisma. Professor Bachellery of the Practical School of Higher Studies in Paris and professor Fleuriot at the University of Rennes become his thesis advisors. This and further support favours his appointment as research associate at the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) in 1966, in the General Linguistics department. He thus leaves his teaching position.

In 1948, he discovers the article "Nautical toponymy of Brittany's coasts" published in the *Annales de Bretagne* by canon Falc'hun, then teacher in Rennes prior to becoming a professor of Celtic studies in Brest. To Lan, this article is fundamental and becomes a guide to his surveys. In 1967, Lan, constantly seeking knowledge, graduates in the field of Higher Celtic Studies in Brest. He is a member of the experimental phonetics laboratory of the Literary University College founded in 1969. He also belongs to UER (teaching and research component) Physics and Chemistry and Marine Science where I was actually appointed "Dean".

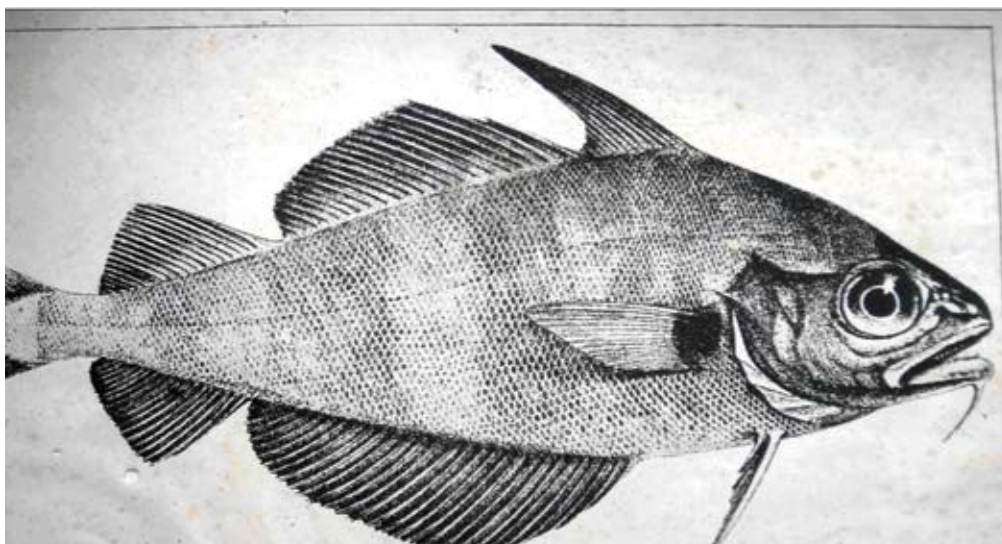
Within his area of research, there were only two pioneers of the Marine Fisheries Service, Joubin



► *Quiet weekend in  
Le Conquet with his Mrs...  
and sound reading  
(Penn ar Bed!)*

Brittany, listing 2,500 nautical toponyms. He then realises that many of these toponyms pertain to zoology and botany. Between 1965 and 1973, four further manuals follow regarding the northern

and Le Danois often based in Roscoff. They published a list of 210 edible marine animals in 1924. The authors' ambition was to provide a unique official name to each species to counter the



► **Gadus luscus** (now *Trisopterus luscus*), the famous bib on the cover of the Breton Ichthyonymy. Drawn by the author himself... Dessiné par l'auteur lui-même...

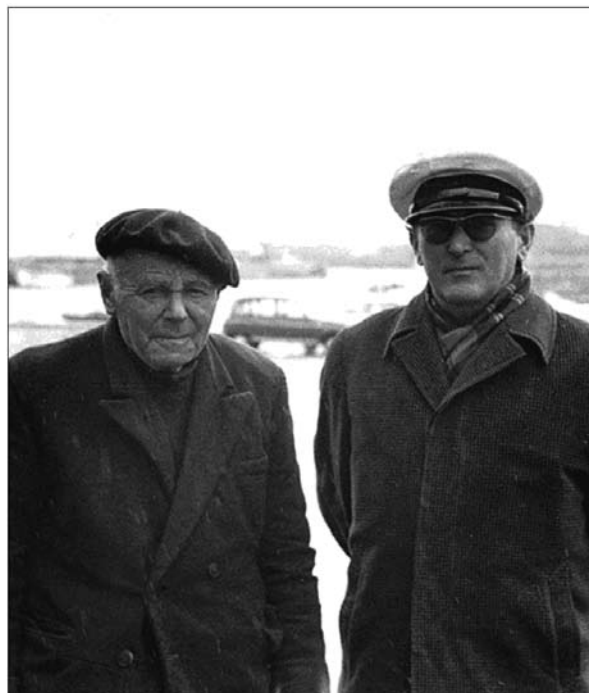
excessive number of vernacular names. Such an endeavour was rapidly refuted by the profession, which was quite contrary to Lan's goals. The latter enjoyed recounting: "When I was 7, on my table, bib was called *beurleg*; my uncle, Rumon Naour, a fisherman skipper, taught me that this *beurleg* was called *moulleg* in Douarnenez and *takard* in Loctudy." His first notebooks of ichthyonym records compiled with the help of his stepfather, Per Gouzien, and cousins, Lanig and Jos Naour, fishermen in Audierne, actually date back to 1934!

In order to facilitate his work as a researcher, the talented cabinet maker built a number of stands to show his informants the array of shells, animals and dried algae... He also displays 200 drawings of his workmanship, for he did not take fine arts pointlessly! His 2CV jam-packed with his jumble, Lan covers the coastline like an old-time junk dealer. The difference is he sells nothing; he is only there to learn the language of fishermen. From his childhood spent in this environment, he kept the sense of listening to others, and is willing to learn everything from them. It is a challenging task for in this sea environment anything in water is fish – "pesked". The author of these lines was always surprised to hear Roscoff fishpond workers speak of "fish" referring to crayfish or lobster. An oyster's flesh is also "fish" (as opposed to its shell). In short, thanks to his equipment and 600 informants, Lan manages to list 540 marine organisms or referents. Even tadpole fish *Raniceps raninus* – "morlogotenn zu" - is included, known to fishermen but almost completely disregarded by

scientists prior to the Amoco Cadiz grounding in 1978.

This thus represents the corpus of the Breton ichthyonymy thesis, all of which is far from being fish!

In this Breton lexicon referring to marine organisms, Lan's work is indeed to place all these ichthyonyms within the classifications used by marine biologists. Lan therefore links with the various specialists at the UBO, Albert Lucas, Jean-Yves Monnat, Jean-Paul Guyomarc'h - the



► With François Le Corre, pilot from Roscoff's harbour.

last two being fluent in Breton -, and I. Then begin what Lan calls his long and delicate trials and errors... It comes down to us to find in our Linnaeus classification the species and its positions within the classification hierarchy, according to the names provided by the fishermen.

Organisms such as sponges are assimilated to food, Breton custard, bread... with a colour clue. Phosphorescent *Noctiluca* are “night fires” (*tanno*). Anatomical features sometimes match a picturesque description: disguised spider crab is “dishevelled” (*penn-kreo*), red mullet is a redhead (*meill-ruz*), gurnard bears a mule head (*penn-kourn*), bib has big eyes... In this graphic language, physical or moral features are used. Various sexual characteristics are delightful to mischievous researchers, while some social categories are more often suggested than others... They include clergy members, bishops, hook-footed priests, altar boys, nuns... Women are also called on, hungry for love, others soft-faced yet their heart as rough as acorn-shells (small crustaceans with wounding calcareous plates for those who venture onto rocks). Customs officers with their colourful uniform,

countless research, *Lineus longissimus*. Derisively, the ichthyonym *pich matouter* (“customs officer’s penis”) is assigned to this worm. Lan is very proud to include an additional referent given that the identification was certified by a customs officer’s grandson!

In the time period following 1968, the completion of a PhD thesis becomes an obsession among academics as among CNRS researchers. Times for wearing out on one’s lifetime piece of work during a decade or more are over. Lan is stricken by the leitmotiv of hallway conversations at university and, somewhat humorously, invents the neologism “mythesis” which he uses wisely. The assertion “I am working on my thesis” thus becomes “I am working on my mythesis”. To Lan’s question “When are you completing your mythesis?” the answer may be as follows: “I am waiting for So-and-So to complete his/her mythesis.”

The final PhD work tires Lan greatly, and as he is able to carry on with his job, he claims “to be among the happiest men on earth”. A posthumous thesis defence is presented by his wife on 9 March 1974, that is three weeks following Lan’s



*Smiling portrait with two informants... and the good old tartan tie...*

their beret... are also called upon. In this case, the questioning of much aroused Lan refers to a very long and very thin worm, which is totally unable to fulfil a breeding male’s role. I identify, through

death, at the age of 60. The UBO is highly honoured by this unusual defence, in a lecture hall filled with emotion and gathering fishermen, servicemen, clerics, academics...

1. *Evel ar raskou, a veze lavared bronnou bihan merhed euzouto, med a roge treid ha pennou daoulin ar vugale o vond war kerreg an aochou.* Traduction : « c’est comme les balanes, on dirait des petits seins de fille, mais elles déchirent les pieds et les genoux des enfants qui vont sur les rochers des grèves »

## An engaging personality

This engaging personality Lan was could draw the liking of all those approaching him. He would indeed respect individuals all the more since they were felt to be sincere. Curious about everything, he would cleverly sidle in all circles and the use of the ichthyonym *ar zilienn* (*Conger conger*) in his regard, in the term's noblest sense, certainly would not have displeased him.

Lan very soon consorted with the *Seiz Breur* (Seven Brothers) group founder René-Yves Creston. This all-around artist, furniture designer among other things, seaman on the "Pourquoi Pas?", joins the CNRS as an ethnologist at the Liberation. No one can doubt he was an example to Lan. Xavier De Langlais, who succeeds to Creston at the head of the *Seiz Breur*, is a professor at the Rennes Fine Arts School. This painter is also a wood carver, in further "collusion" with our cabinet maker.

Lan is appreciated by the Plozévet phalanx. It includes the president of the Rennes Academy Henri le Moal, professors Pierre Trépos, Pierre-Jakez Hélias, chroniclers at Radio Quimerc'h in particular and members of the "Ar Falz" movement bringing together individuals of all political standpoints in defence of the Breton language (Armand Keravel, Charles Le Gall...). Taking complete responsibility for his "non-belief", Lan consorts with Quimper Bishops Barbu and Favé, monks of the Abbey of Landévennec. At his table one may meet admiral Georgelin, Gwenaél Bolloré, Madame De Valera, the President of the Irish Republic's daughter.

Enlightened music-lover, Lan entrusts one of his sons to Christian Lardé, professor at the Paris Music Conservatory. Artists performing at the PAC (Quartz in the present day) are invited, sometimes unexpectedly, and are likely to rub shoulders with the poor wretch encountered on the Gambetta boulevard sidewalk.

An internationally renowned scientist was invited to the official opening of the UBO in 1968 to symbolise the institution's oceanographic vocation. It was oceanographer Leslie Cooper of the much famed *Plymouth Marine Laboratory*. It oddly occurred to him to give his talk in Welsh before a dumbfounded lecture hall where a number of uniforms represented the various corps of the French government. Lan was then the only one to understand this speech, both solemn and full of humour. He intentionally spoke up to tell him a few words of the same nature to the great surprise of the

audience. Lan serenely and discreetly displayed his celtitude by wearing a tie, as all teachers did at that time. It was always a tartan tie, sometimes varied, as a tribute to the diverse and strong cross-Channel friendships he had built.

Lan is the father of two sons illustrating two essential aspects of his personality. The eldest, Hervé, together with his wife perpetuated this teaching vocation which they passed on to two of their three children; the second in place, Youenn-Gwenog, a classical musician, rapidly became one of the best architects of Celtic music revival.

## The roots issue

In the conclusion of his thesis written at the Abbey of Landévennec, Lan questions himself about "modern time rootless man, far afield from his father, our 1920 galley slave bound to wrack and rocks"... This thesis takes him back to the issue of happiness.

Can a tree live without roots? An observation is essential to this serious question. The seaman setting foot ashore naturally recalls his roots. On the other hand, he must also persuade himself that all marine organisms (with the exception of sea-grass beds), which he knows well, and to which he gave the most comical nicknames, have no roots. They draw all substances they need from the surrounding liquid environment. Man yet has much to learn from this "rootless" living environment. Lan *ar zilienn* managed to sidle and blend into this coastal environment and perfectly absorb it.

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Biological oceanography