

# WALTER OSBORNE IN QUIMPER AND PONT-AVEN 1883

A person might well make Quimper a centre of operations, for its precincts are little known, and the gardens shine with laden fruit trees, and the hills are rich in colour until late in Autumn.  
(Henry Blackburn, *Breton Folk*, London, 1880).

**I**n early 1883, Walter Osborne\* went to Brittany and spent about a year working at Quimper, Pont-Aven and Dinan. It is less surprising that he did go to Brittany, than if he had not. It had grown increasingly popular with painters, attracted by its cheapness, by its picturesqueness (local costumes, local customs, local landscape), and, as it attracted more and more of them, by the cosmopolitan gathering of other artists. Pont-Aven was one of their favourite places:

*Pont-Aven is a favourite spot for artists, and a 'terra incognita' to the majority of travellers in Brittany. Here the art student who has spent the winter in the*

*'Quartier Latin' in Paris comes when the leaves are green ... Pont-Aven has one advantage over other places in Brittany, its inhabitants in their picturesque costume (which remains unaltered) have learned that to sit as a model is a pleasant and lucrative profession and they do this for a small fee without hesitation or 'mauvaise honte'. This is a point of great importance to the artist ...*

wrote Henry Blackburn in 1880, adding that

*a painter might well make Quimper a centre of operations for its precincts are little known, and the gardens shine with laden fruit trees, and the hills are rich in colour until late in Autumn.<sup>(1)</sup>*

Blackburn's impressions are confirmed

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by the Irish painter Henry Jones Thaddeus<sup>(2)</sup> who was in Brittany for a while in 1881-82.

*Pont-Aven ... is a tranquil sleepy village, with one long street, terminating in the bridge over the Aven; the villagers, in their picturesque Breton costumes, providing the distinctive note so highly prized by painters. When in summer they arrive, laden with canvasses, knapsacks, and easels, local laws and mandates are made to conform to their wishes, and the village is given up to their sweet will. Comprising all nationalities and representing every school of painting, the cosmopolitan crowd devotes itself equally to the spoiling of canvases and to a thorough enjoyment of open-air life ... Nobody came to Pont-Aven in those days excepting painters, and they regarded the place as their own private property. The*



'Returning from Labour, Pont-Aven', from Henry Blackburn's 'Breton Folk'.



village itself resembled a gigantic studio, with its picturesque streets full of painters at work, whilst the villagers, from long, practice, were excellent models, and posed anywhere and everywhere.<sup>(3)</sup>

Randolph Caldecott's illustration, *Returning from Labour, Pont-Aven*, depicts not the expected peasant with a hoe or a hayrake, but an artist laden with easel, canvas and painting gear . . . Given the way Brittany exerted an attraction on so many painters, it is not surprising that Osborne went there, but there were also two fairly strong influences pushing him in that direction. Augustus Burke, who taught Osborne in the Schools of the Royal Hibernian Academy,<sup>(4)</sup> had already begun exhibiting Breton scenes in Dublin in the seventies . . . Indeed there was quite a strong Breton presence at the R.H.A. in those years . . . A large number of people associated with naturalist painting in Britain seem to have been in Brittany at this time. George Clausen was painting at Quimper in 1882.<sup>(5)</sup> H. H. La Thangue worked at Cancale with Stanhope Forbes.<sup>(6)</sup> Though there is no direct evidence, it seems extremely likely that Osborne made contact with some or all of them at this period. His painting in the eighties has a great deal in common with theirs, and he noticed and admired their work at the London exhibitions in 1884 and 1885. It is also significant that there was a remarkable influx of English painters and Breton subjects at the R.H.A. in 1884, the year that Osborne showed his Breton work. Brittany was clearly a place where Osborne absorbed all kinds of influences, and made contacts and friendships among other artists.

#### NOTES

1. Henry Blackburn, *Breton folk*, illus. by Randolph Caldecott, (London, 1880) p. 128-130, and p. 132.
2. Born Henry Thaddeus Jones (sometimes just Harry Jones), he reversed the order of his names and added a cubit to his stature.
3. H. Jones Thaddeus, *Recollections of a Court Painter*, (London, 1912), pp. 22-25.
4. For the influence of Augustus Burke see Julian Campbell's *Irish Artists in France and Belgium*, The National Gallery of Ireland, 1985. In 1898, Osborne made a posthumous portrait of his brother, Thomas Henry Burke, who was murdered in the Phoenix Park in 1882.
5. *Sir George Clausen R.A. op. cit.*, p. 29.
6. *Art Journal*, 1893, p. 169; *The Studio* IX, 163 and XX LV, 81.

\*Walter Osborne, one of Ireland's major artists, was born in Dublin on 17 June, 1859. He worked in Limerick in 1893, and some of his paintings can be seen at the Limerick Art Gallery. He died in Dublin on 24 April, 1903, at the early age of forty-three.



*'Early Morning in the Markets, Quimper', 1833, by Walter Osborne.*



*'Apple Gathering in Quimper', 1883, by Walter Osborne.*