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## IRIS Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award Report

With the generous support of the IRIS Graduate Summer Fieldwork Award, I spent the fall semester of 2021 in France, in Finistère and on the island of Ouessant. My fieldwork contributed to my ongoing research into the role of the modern lighthouse in French-language literature, comics, and film. While I used this award to visit and study in *le Musée des phares et balises* and *le Centre de recherche bretonne et celtique*, other libraries and bookstores, and several lighthouses and historical sites, I was most grateful for the ways in which it allowed me to be in the region I was studying, to follow up on leads, and meet new people. It was, in the end, person-to-person networking that led to some of the most fruitful experiences of my fieldwork. I feel that my familiarity with these sites and my newfound professional contacts will pay dividends throughout the duration of my dissertation project. Below I will report on what I was able to do thanks to IRIS's generosity.

I conducted research at the *Centre de recherche bretonne et celtique* in Brest. The center is housed in the *Université de Bretagne-Occidentale* where I worked previously as a lecturer and where I earned my first graduate degree. From combing through the stacks, I was reassured to find that I was already aware of many of the primary regional works on lighthouses. I also consulted two reference books on maritime literature, which was encouraging as I felt like the gaps I had previously identified in current literature here in Madison still needed to be addressed. I found some local comics as I had hoped to, but they were not relevant enough to my project to merit further study. As I had anticipated in my application for IRIS funding, there were a number of regional periodicals. Among them I found over a dozen articles from the past year alone on local lighthouses, primarily regarding their histories and new renovations. In addition to the print materials, I was able to view Jean Grémillon's *Gardiens de phares*, a film which I had planned on making a special trip to Paris to see.

On one of my later visits, I was able to consult the November 2021 issue of *Bretagne Magazine* which included an insert on the work at was being done to restore *l'Île Vièrge* and transform the former keeper's quarters into a vacation rental. The interesting part was that it was a former professor of mine, Andrew Lincoln, who has since become a local politician and who spearheaded the renovation and management of the site. I reached out and we met and had a long conversation about the project. The recently renovated dwelling included paintings by Emmanuel Lepage, a comic book artist whose work is the topic of the first chapter of my thesis. These watercolors focused on historical events that had taken place at the lighthouse or nearby. While this historical focus suggests that the lighthouses are no longer central to maritime safety, I was able to see the extent to which towns in the region base their identities on these structures and their stories. It encouraged me to reflect on how literary and artistic depictions are so intertwined with local cultural identity and tourism. Lincoln and I have kept in touch and I'm sure he will be a helpful contact as I continue with my project.

In a similar manner, I was able to meet Jean-Christophe Fichou, an historian and author of several books on lighthouses. Before my trip I was unable to reach him to arrange a meeting, but when I met with an old friend of mine and told her about my project, she suggested I meet

her friend's husband, who turned out to be J-C. We met in his home office and discussed lighthouses and keepers for an entire afternoon. He corrected some of my suppositions regarding lighthouse keepers and the importance of lighthouses today. He had a fairly extensive personal archive of collected, copied, and digitized materials from local and regional archives throughout Finistère. He shared so much with me that I no longer felt it necessary to visit *Les Archives départementales du Finistère* in Quimper. Among the stack were application materials from two lighthouse keepers who went on to be writers, providing an insight into what they were seeking in joining the service. We have stayed in touch as I have needed to use him as a resource several times since returning to Madison.

While in Brest, I was invited to a special screening of three Jean Epstein films. (I did not have access to these films in the US and had listed them in my fieldwork application, hoping to find some way to see them during my time in country). It was incredible seeing them on the big screen and discussing them afterwards. Once again, it felt like the texts I was studying were pertinent and enmeshed with contemporary regional identities. Despite all this, between the three films and the one I was able to view at the CRBC, I came to the realization that working with these films would be a much larger project than I could fit into one dissertation chapter. (Since I am focusing on intermediality and not film specifically, that was all the more space I could give the topic). I needed that experience of seeing the films to know for sure and this award gave me that opportunity. I look forward to studying these films in the future.

Deciding to focus on written texts over film also meant I would not be going to the *Cinémathèque de France* in Paris. Instead, I chose to extend my time on the island of Ouessant. There, at the *Musée des Phares et Balises*, I immersed myself in exhibits on lighthouse technology, short films about the daily lives of lighthouse keepers, the systems governing lighthouses, and photos of perilous construction sites at sea. For years before my trip, I had been reading about these topics in non-fiction and literary works and it was overwhelming and invigorating to see them in person. The collection included the first ever Fresnel lighthouse optic whose installation bookends my project on the 19<sup>th</sup>-century side. It also included a model and architectural drawing of a lighthouse I had never seen before. Apparently, in the wake of the Amoco Cadiz shipwreck and oil spill, which took place between Ouessant and northwestern Finistère in 1978, the government proposed a new type of lighthouse, resembling a deep-sea wind turbine without the blades and with a helipad, which, because of growing reliance on better radar systems and GPS, was never built. This unrealized lighthouse feels to me like the other bookend to project. In contemporary works, I have been trying to understand when and how and why the lighthouse being depicted as a useful, necessary structure and when it becomes romantic, historical patrimony. I have been reading contemporary lighthouse texts as pre-1978 and post-1978 to see what I can find.

I learned that, while year-round residents of Ouessant rarely number above 500, at one point over 83% of the lighthouse keepers in France came from the island. After asking around for a few days, I was introduced to one of them, Patrick "Kiki" Richard, who had worked as a keeper for almost 40 years, beginning in 1977. I conducted a 5-hour interview with him at his kitchen table. We spoke at length about the way the job was portrayed in fiction and about what he liked to read during an average two-week stint on a lighthouse at sea like *La Jument*. He read about the history of the lighthouses, about math, and listened to Pink Floyd. For him, it seemed that the romance of the job, as depicted in fiction, was never at odds with the fact that it was just a job, a way to make a living like everyone else. After our interview, I began rethinking some of my research questions to include a focus on nostalgia. This reinforced my desire to devote the

final chapter of my dissertation to the last days of the lighthouse keepers. I think this “last of my kind” narrative is quite present in contemporary Western literature but is less overt in France than in America. It was thanks to this award that I was able to find my way to it. Kiki was the last official keeper of *Le Creac’h*, one of the most powerful lighthouses in the world. It went keeperless in 2017 when he retired.

While I have great support from my dissertation director and other professors here at the UW, there are few in my circles who have read the texts that I have chosen to study. On several occasions during my time in Finistère, I met someone new, told them what I was doing there, and they actually knew the works. For the first time since I began writing my dissertation, I was able to have a casual conversation about these films, comics, and literary works that I’ve been picking apart for over a year. It was refreshing and reassuring that what I was working on was culturally relevant and in fact helped define, in many places, how people who worked with the sea or grew up near it, saw themselves and their families in these works. Near strangers were incredibly generous. One day I was talking with a stone mason who was working on an out-building where I was staying. I told him about my project and the next day he came to the door with half a dozen books on local history that he thought I should read. Another acquaintance, a tugboat captain, gave me materials explaining how maritime traffic still used lighthouses and other signals at sea. While this practical and historical information might seem detached from the literary works that I am studying in my project, I was inspired and energized to learn everything that I could about this world. This knowledge has allowed me to ask more pointed questions of the works I’m studying, trying to understand the meaning behind fabricated facts and the implications of local depictions on a national and international scale as these works come to represent more and more this part of France.

More than anything else, to be present in the geographical space that I study helped me understand both accurate and fabricated depictions of the coastal landscapes, their people, and their structures. Beyond that, even, was the moral boost that came with having the focal point of my research be flashing on the horizon. In addition to all of the research described above, this award also allowed me to rent a bicycle on Ouessant where I was able to ride around at night and see the five lighthouses that surround the island. As I’m reading and writing about the region, and this island specifically in some works, I feel encouraged in my work here in Madison knowing what the paths feel like and where certain landmarks are. I also took a guided tour by night with a local historian and fisherwoman, and, from the top of *Le Stiff* lighthouse, I could see the 18 lights that watched over the *Mer d’Iroise*. Each lighthouse has its own signature, a particular number of flashes over a specific amount of time (a system invented by the French in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century). From the regional literature I’ve read, I was able to identify some of the lighthouses by night by their lights. Being there and seeing that helped me to feel connected to the place and through it to the works I’m studying.

This fieldwork was a wonderful success. I learned a great deal about regional maritime history and culture that will inform my analyses throughout the process of writing my dissertation. Beyond that, I returned from my trip with the confidence that my dissertation project as a whole was relevant and that the updated list of works that I was studying were sufficient to dialogue with my research questions.