

CHAPTER 1

The Legend of St Yves



Immaculately kept civic buildings at Tréguier.

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It is always fascinating to discover a new interest. That is how I felt about the life and work of Erwan Helouri, also known as Yvo H eloury, later St Yves. It was strange that I had not heard of him before. Even now, 25 years on, I have seen only the briefest of references to him except in specialist works. Yet his story is of great import to anyone involved with crime and punishment, or, indeed, resolving conflict of any kind. It is about how—in an age of bribery and corruption—a young man from a small town in France rose to become a touchstone for truth, fairness and justice. I hope that other people will find the legend of St Yves and its background equally stimulating and thought provoking.

IN SEARCH OF ST YVES

People involved with the administration of justice in Britain, the USA or other English-speaking countries might be forgiven for not pricking-up their ears when the name St Yves is mentioned. Sometimes called St Yvo¹ and described as the patron saint of lawyers, he has no great profile in those parts of the world. No emblems on legal stationery, no St Yves paperweights, no rings, medallions, symbols or motifs. Neither does he figure prominently in encyclopaedias, libraries or collections.² His single-handed fight against prejudice, discrimination, bigotry and intolerance goes equally uncharted. Yet, from a time when the monarch was all-powerful—and wealth and influence all-pervading—he has a claim to fame as valid as that of Robin Hood, Jessie James, Ned Kelly and individuals of similar ilk.

Champion of the poor

Like those other folk heroes, St Yves was a champion of the poor and disinherited, someone for whom no cause was too marginal or likely to

¹ Especially in France. For a short note on the quite different ‘St Ives’ of Cornwall and Cambridgeshire, UK, see the *Epilogue*.

² So far as I know, there is no (previous) book in English about his life and work.

be shirked due to its unpopularity. His reputation was founded on an ability to redress the balance between rich and poor—at least in the immediate sense—especially if this meant publicly shaming the better-off into the bargain. His popularity was enhanced by the ingenuity with which he was able to do this, causing many of the tales about him to take on a mythical quality. The belief was that he would never let the underdog down and would materialise, in body or in spirit, whenever he might be needed.

An age of corruption

The charming Episcopal market town-cum-fishing haven of Tréguier lies some 50 kilometres west of St Malo on what is a lesser road between Paimpol and Lannion. Despite its modest size and out-of-the-way location, Tréguier possesses a magnificent Gothic cathedral. There, shielded from the mid-day sun and no doubt somewhat mesmerised by the grandeur of the surroundings, is where I first heard the story that forms the central part of this book. On my return home I decided to find out more. Those early researches led to an article which was published in the courts newspaper, *Justice of the Peace*, announcing the existence of a hitherto (so it seemed) unsung hero of law, justice, counselling and mediation.

A somewhat flimsy *Dictionary of Saints* which I happened upon contained the following rudimentary information:

St Ivo ... judge of the Rennes diocesan court ... 'the poor man's advocate' ... mediator ... *the* patron saint of lawyers.

The tourist guides were and are more forthcoming. For example, the Automobile Association's *Explorer Brittany*,³ in a section headed 'Land of Saints', reads as follows:

Yves Helouri (1253-1303) was born in Minihy-Tréguier.⁴ The patron saint of lawyers, Yves combined religious duties with his work as a magistrate and advocate in Tréguier, and was famously incorruptible in an age when most lawyers took bribes. He was a champion of the poor, and is often depicted standing between a well-dressed client and a man in rags ...

³ 1999 (onwards), Hunt, Lindsay, Automobile Association.

⁴ Or, to be yet more precise, Kermartin, a hamlet nearby.

That entry continues by summarising one of the most famous stories about St Yves:

A rich man sued a beggar for loitering by his kitchen door and ‘stealing’ his cooking smells. St Yves heard the evidence, declared that the rich man had won his case, and awarded him appropriate damages—the sound of a coin rattling in a tin!

This and similarly iconic tales are a recurring feature of the legend. In amongst references to St Yves’ aesthetic life, death at the age of 49, marble encased tomb in Tréguier Cathedral and snapshots from his early life, other guides contain a patchwork of information concerning his career and miracles. Always, with varying degrees of embellishment, these are accompanied by some assertion along the lines: ‘He received the poor man’s petition, but refused the rich man’s purse’. Yet, outside of Brittany and in a pre-internet age, I could find few solid references to the events described in the following chapters. Indeed, it was a children’s book complete with speech bubbles and idealised images that first put me on the trail of the larger picture—and, eventually, *The Golden Legend* described in *Chapter 5*, extracts from which I have included in an appendix.

Myth, fable and hard evidence

As with many legends, no doubt much will have changed in the telling and re-telling. In St Yves’ case, translation first from the Latin, the only written language of his own time, into Breton, then French, and finally English is bound to have led to the kind of discrepancies inherent in such processes. Then there are questions about how well things carry over time, the reliability of the original witnesses who gave evidence to a Papal Enquiry that lasted for several years during the 1330s and the paraphernalia, rituals and euphoria that have sprung up in more modern times in support of the legend that will have served to bolster a certain understanding of events. Some re-assessment and critique may thus be appropriate at a later stage.

SAINTS FOR ALL SEASONS

There are, I have learned, saints for virtually every occasion, event and group of people (and animals and inanimate objects) under the sun. There are saints for everyone from pregnant women to speleologists

(people concerned with the science of caves) and explosives workers, from fishermen to brewers—who qualify for no less than three! There are saints of tax collectors, people who have been poisoned and those suffering from toothache. Brittany itself is over run with saints, popular wisdom having it that there are ‘seven thousand, seven hundred and seven score and seven’.⁵

Examples of sainthood

In the context of crime and punishment alone, there is a saint of jurists (St John of Capistrano); one for policemen (St Michael); one for social workers (St Louise de Marrillac); four for prisoners (including St Barbara and St Dismas⁶—the ‘good thief’ who, according to the *New Testament*, was crucified alongside Jesus Christ); and a quite distinct saint for the prison itself (St Joseph). It must also be a comfort to the ‘falsely accused’ to know that not only do they have the Court of Appeal and the Criminal Cases Review Commission to safeguard their interests, but heavenly guardians in the shape of St Raymond (Nonnatus) and St Dominic Savio.

This tendency to place matters in neat pigeon-holes may have done St Yves a disservice—as I will urge in later chapters—since his attributes seem to go far wider than those of any lawyer or judge in that capacity alone. Further to this, my experience of legal gatherings (albeit in the UK) suggests that St Yves goes unrecognised and is perhaps best described as anonymous. I have never witnessed a toast being drunk nor a vote of thanks cast to his memory. Maybe it is different in France where even ordinary citizens show overwhelming gratitude: *Chapter 6*.

Other contenders

Only St Yves is generally claimed as *the* patron saint of lawyers and to occupy that role internationally (or even globally: despite the somewhat parochial nature of his travels and activities as noted in *Chapters 2* and *4*). However, it seems right to acknowledge two other leading contenders, St Genesisius and St Thomas More.⁷

⁵ I make this 7,847.

⁶ Hence ‘Fragments of a Deposition of Christ: The Good Thief’ a painting by Perino del Vaga, acquired by Charles I and still part of the Royal Collection; and The Society of St Dismus, a charity for ex-prisoners in Southampton.

⁷ Others include St Mark and St Raymond of Penyafort.

St Genesis

St Genesis, who died at around the start of the 4th century, was what in modern times would have been described as a lawyers' clerk or, in more up-to-date terms, a legal executive.⁸ But he is also sometimes described as a notary, which in some countries is a synonym for lawyer. Like Asterix, the indomitable French comic book character, St Genesis hailed from Gaul, and is often described as 'a servant of the court'. When the Emperors Diocletian and Maximian ordered the persecution of Christians, Genesis, to his eternal credit, refused to recognise their decrees. He was singled out as a trouble-maker, forced to become a fugitive and was captured and beheaded on the bank of the River Rhône.

St Thomas More

The other chief contender is the Englishman St Thomas More (1478-1535)—a statesman and dissident who was also beheaded. He studied law at the Inns of Court in London and was called to the bar by Lincoln's Inn in 1501. He was appointed Lord Chancellor in 1529, only to fall from favour under Henry VIII, including for his 'reasonable silence' in refusing to comment on the Act of Supremacy. Thomas More is known for actions beyond those that relate to his professional background and is thus perhaps best treated as a saint who happened to be a lawyer.

Keeping his head

St Yves did not lose his head; rather his reputation rests on his keeping it when people all about him were finding life difficult. Without knowing anything of the finer points of the arrangements for saintly elevation, which it is to be hoped are unimpeachable, it is possible to venture that it appears to be a regular feature that the subject will, at some point, have stepped out of line, challenged or been in conflict with authority, the latter often being cast, with hindsight, in the role of the oppressor. In one atypical situation, Erwan Helouri 'relieved' King Philippe III's generals of property looted from Tréguier (a matter of only marginal weight in the decision to make him a saint). But normally he does not appear to have acted radically by engaging skirmishes with the powers that be. He challenged the status quo more by 'shining example' than direct action.

⁸ Perhaps he should be adopted for that specific role. He is sometimes styled the patron saint of actors, dancers, clowns, attorneys and victims of torture!



Statue of St Yves in the nave of Tréguier Cathedral.

Saintly protocol

Given that there are innumerable saints (especially in Brittany: see above), they must share their annual day with other incumbents, as St Yves does with St Ciarán, St Emeliana, St Pudentia, St Theophilus and others. But his own festival, held on the closest Sunday to May 19—and known as the Pardon of St Yves—would seem to far outshine those of his peers. This is the day on which upwards of 10,000 lawyers and other pilgrims congregate in Tréguier for the weekend to seek forgiveness (i.e. ‘pardon’) for the sins that they have committed during and maybe throughout the year!

Yet St Yves might still disappear without trace in Brittany with its seven thousand, seven score, etc. saints. But many of those saints only aspire to the lower rungs of sainthood—what is sometimes called ‘local sainthood’—and they go unrecognised except by custom, tradition and usage. In contrast, St Yves is what might be described as a fully accredited saint. Another pointer to his high status is the fact that he was canonised just 44 years after his death. He transcends popular culture and mythology, and in France stands shoulder-to-shoulder with such notables as Joan of Arc and Bernadette of Lourdes.

ORIGINS OF THE LEGEND

If Brittany is a place of saints, it is also a land of ghosts, intrigue and mystery. It is where, in the Paimpol Forest, the Knights of the Round Table first set out on their quest for the Holy Grail. It is the home of Merlin and other makers of magic. There is a powerful culture of folk tales such as that in many Celtic parts of Britain and Ireland or remoter regions such as Cornwall or parts of Wales. In parts of Brittany there are traces of earlier civilizations evidenced by monolithic riddles that challenge Stonehenge with their claim to world heritage status. It is a heady mix.

A place of ghosts, myths and superstition

There are also ghosts of a more recent variety, Brittany having lost more of its population per head in the First World War than any other part of Europe, and on either side in that conflict. Reputedly, there was a time when menfolk were so scarce that the survival of the region was at stake, with mass migration to the cities an added complication in terms of

keeping up the land. It is also for longstanding historical reasons a place of separatism, if not naturally radical or given to uprisings. Even today the Black and White flag of Brittany is proudly displayed by people who, like many people in Wales, Scotland or, say, the Basque region of Spain, regard themselves as naturally apart. It is also a place of contradictions: where the *Bonnets Rouges* (Red Caps) rampaged against the unbridled taxation of the Sun King, Louis XIV and yet the *Association Breton* (or Chouans), remnants of the aristocracy, banded together with other local people against the 'Godless excesses' of the revolutionaries of 1789. It is where the French underground acted in secretive ways to create and support Allied escape routes in the Second World War.⁹ It is a place with ample reasons for its people to seek out some bridge between the here and now and whatever may follow, whilst its mystique, sometimes faded elegance and history of reprisals, counter-reprisals and atrocities is all part of this same backdrop.

Witnesses and evidence

St Yves has been a favourite son of the Bretons since his own time and his remembrance pervades the town of Tréguier especially. But he is also to be encountered elsewhere. I came across his effigy in Quimper to the west and in the porch of the church at Belle Isle, the tiny and isolated offshore island a couple of hours sailing time from the historic naval port of Quiberon. There, the rich man's bag of gold was even more in evidence, virtually thrust into the hands of the visitor as a form of temptation as he or she enters the building.

The story of St Yves is frequently told in flashback, via the accounts of the 200 or so ageing witnesses who assembled in Tréguier from 1330 onwards to relate matters to the Papal Enquiry. That enquiry scrutinised every corner of the subject's life, every known day of it, right back to the time of his birth. Each witness was then cross-examined concerning his or her personal experiences of Erwan Helouri. Two bishops and an abbot listened on 23 separate days spread over several years to the life of the child, boy, youth, student, lawyer, judge, priest and miracle worker before reporting their findings to The Vatican. What follows is based in part upon what those witnesses told the enquiry as it has been handed down through the generations.

⁹ It is also, in passing, where Jules Verne, author of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, and other works came from.