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**A Limousin-French dictionary as a source on the history of cooking:
Potatoes in the Tulle area (Corrèze, France)
in the early 19th century**

Monique Chastanet¹

It is difficult nowadays to talk of the cuisine of Corrèze without considering the numerous recipes based on the potato. However, this plant of American origin only began to be cultivated in Bas-Limousin² during the second half of the 18th century, reluctantly on the part of the farmers since it was first used to feed pigs. The role of the upper classes in the adoption of the potato is well known, especially through their activities in the Agricultural Society³. Their work towards economic change, as well as a number of years of scarcity, finally overcame the peasants' resistance⁴. But the methods and stages of its adoption into the local cuisine have not aroused curiosity. Nicolas Béronie's *Dictionnaire du patois du Bas-Limousin (Dictionary of the dialect of Bas-Limousin)* provides valuable evidence of the stages of its adoption for the region of Tulle at the beginning of the 19th century⁵, a period for which we possess no recipe books. It shows that the potato was used for human consumption, but that it did not yet play the predominant role it enjoys today.

This is the first Limousin-French dictionary to have been published⁶. It calls itself a language dictionary, but it is much more than that, because its numerous terms and remarks evoke daily life at the end of the Ancien Regime and in the first years of the 19th century. Many examples are historically situated through the adverbs 'then' and 'now', which probably refer to 'before' or 'after' the Revolution. Analysis of the text also reveals an ethnologic dimension before the term was invented: it refers to town and country, as well as to the different social classes. The richness of this information makes the work a particularly interesting source. It is therefore amazing that, up to now, this type of document has not captured the attention of historians⁷.

Its author, Abbot Nicolas Béronie (1742-1820), taught humanities for 25 years at the 'Collège des Ecclésiastiques séculiers' in Tulle, then was appointed priest nearby at Les Angles. During the entire time, he collected material for his future *Dictionnaire du patois du Bas-Limousin*. After the Revolution, he became librarian at the 'Ecole centrale' in Tulle. He died in 1820, when the printing of his dictionary had just begun. The editorial work was

continued by his friend, the lawyer Joseph-Anne Vialle (1762-1833). Like Béronie, Vialle was keen on great literature and the Limousin language.

Though Béronie uses in the title the word ‘patois’ or dialect, a term with negative connotations, he uses the word ‘langue’, or language, in his preface. As we have seen, this dictionary was begun well before the Revolution and thus before the survey of Abbot Grégoire on ‘patois’ (1790-1792), then considered a legacy of the Ancien Regime. The second linguistic survey, carried out in 1806 under the direction of Charles-Etienne Coquebert de Montbret, established how much the ‘dialects or patois’ were in common use: at this time, there was no longer a question of causing their disappearance through administrative measures, though the issue of national unity was still a current concern⁸. Though a product of its time, this dictionary nevertheless conveys an undeniable interest in the language of the region⁹.

Vialle enriched the work of Béronie with new terms and examples. He also indicated his additions meticulously, putting them in square brackets¹⁰. This, in theory, allows us to distinguish between the contributions of the two authors. In actual fact, it is difficult in the absence of the manuscript to identify Vialle’s own work: are his additions entirely original, or are they reworkings? In any case, the information attributed to Béronie and those that appear in square brackets show differences that suggest the work of two authors¹¹. Consequently, in this article, I shall distinguish between the contributions of the different authors according to whether or not they appear in brackets. I am aware, though, that this method is open to debate.

The dictionary indicates the first appearances of the potato in the agriculture and diet in the region of Tulle. It appears tentatively, however: in fact, the *poma de terra* itself, as it is generally called in Corrèze¹², does not figure among the entries. It is nevertheless present under its French name ‘pomme de terre’ and under local terms in the definitions of certain items. Some of these definitions constitute recipes. But let us first look at the potato in agriculture.

I. Potatoes in agriculture

The best way to appreciate the distance covered since the earliest cultivation of the potato, during the second half of the 18th century, is to read what was written by Lascoux-Germiniac, doctor at Juilhac near Uzerche and correspondent for the Royal Society of Medicine, in his ‘Topographie médicale du Bas-Limousin’, dated 1787:

‘The potato is a plant which does not thrive at all well in the wooded canton of Bas-Limousin, except in well-manured earth like that of gardens: its taste is too bland and our peasants do not like it; those that we cultivate are thus entirely used to fatten up farm animals’¹³.

In other words, the potato is a flavourless plant, grown in small quantities in kitchen gardens and used only as food for livestock.

In the *Dictionnaire du patois du Bas-Limousin*, published 35 years later, the potato appears once, in the form of '*truffas*', when Béronie mentions pigs and boars who go '*moudza las truffas*', digging up potatoes. But he also uses the word '*truffas*' for truffles, the mushroom (*Tuber* sp.) much prized by the wealthy in Tulle, used in particular to stuff turkeys¹⁴.

The potato appears several times as '*poumas de téro*' in Vialle's additions concerning its cultivation, transportation, or preservation¹⁵. For the word '*tsobel*', meaning the haulm of certain vegetables, he gives the example: '*Mas poumas de téro o-ou bouta prou tsobel, ma sou pas bélas*; my potato tops were luxuriant but the potatoes themselves are not large'. For the word '*tso-oussa*', one of whose meanings is to bank up the earth around the lower part of a plant¹⁶, he gives the expression '*tso-oussa lou blas d'espanio, lous tsa-ous, las poumas de téro*; to earth up maize, cabbage and potato plants'. He describes the '*tsorillo*' as a cart used to transport manure or loose produce like potatoes. And finally, for the verb '*tudela*', to sprout, he gives the example: '*Las rabas, las pouma de téro o-ou tudela din lo cavo*; the turnips¹⁷ and potatoes have sprouted stalks in the cellar'.

Here, too, potatoes are still used 'to fatten up livestock, in particular pigs', especially when mixed with chestnuts, dried and reduced to flour. They played a role commercially, for in the vicinity of Tulle, according to Vialle, they were normally sold 'by the bag' like walnuts and chestnuts: it can be assumed that this buying and selling was aimed at human consumption¹⁸.

If potatoes could be 'dug up' by pigs and boars, and especially if one needed to use a cart to bring them to the farm, these are probably signs that they were no longer grown only in gardens near houses, like new plants being tried out, but that they were by now grown as field crops. Besides, the farmers had learned to preserve them in cellars, away from the light. In the various examples, they appear beside old crops like cabbages and turnips, beside typical regional products like walnuts and chestnuts, and even beside a new plant like maize, that was already well assimilated into agriculture and diet. The cultivation of maize was documented for the first time in the vicinity of Brive in 1663. As an additional cereal in lower Corrèze, it was eaten in the form of porridge, of '*mique*' or of *milhasson* (also called *tortel*)¹⁹, and was sometimes used in making bread, mixed with other cereals. In the area of Tulle, it was only fodder maize that was grown to feed livestock. This was cut green and given to the cattle at the end of summer (Chastanet, 1998). But to come back to the potato, the different remarks show that it had become a familiar form of produce at the beginning of the 19th century.

From the dictionary, it can also be seen how potatoes appear in certain recipes. However, they were not cooked on their own, but used to replace grain: rye, wheat or buckwheat²⁰.

II. Potatoes as a supplement or substitute for cereals

The lean years favoured the adoption of the potato in the peasant diet. For example, Béronie indicates that they were added to the batter of *tortons*, buckwheat pancakes, and Vialle mentions their addition to the dough of rye bread in periods of hardship. The end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century were marked by several years of poor grain crops, some of them aggravated by poor chestnut harvests²¹.

In the region of Tulle, chestnuts could be of great benefit when cereal harvests were insufficient. For example, for the word '*tsostani*', Vialle notes that in the country, during normal years, people ate one meal of chestnuts per day²², while in years of grain shortage, they ate them twice a day. But cold, hail or a too cool month of August could compromise their harvest.

1817 was one of the bad years. For the word '*tsar*', expensive, Béronie gives as example: '*N'oven pu vi lou bla to tsar coumo en 1817; we have never seen grain as expensive as in 1817*'. And Vialle observes for the word '*onnado*', year: 'A bad year leaves its mark on history for the families of our peasants; so to say that a child was born in 1817, they say: *Nosqué l'onnado de-i mouva tem*' [he was born in the year of bad weather]. The Occitan terms '*bla*' or '*blat*', 'blé' in French, at that time meant 'the grain used to make bread and the plant that produces it'²³. But in Corrèze it usually signified rye, the food of the majority. In the country, rye bread made of more or less coarse flour was eaten: 'bread of *tomindze*' was of better quality than '*tourto*', 'tourte' in French or round loaf of black bread²⁴. Wheat bread, called white bread or '*mitso*', 'miche' in French, remained a luxury brought from the town when possible, on one's return from the market or the fair.

In years of shortage, various strategies were used to obtain bread, the staple food. Vialle documents an old-time use of vetches, or '*dzoroussa*'²⁵, that were mixed with flour to make bread 'in times of scarcity'. Also, for the word '*raspo*', he reports a new practice. This grater was 'a piece of tin in which holes are made with an awl. The rough surface thus produced is used to grate several types of food and sometimes to smooth down wood. Our farmers use the *Rape* [*sic*] to grate potatoes to mix with the rye from which they make their bread. In 1817, the grater was highly useful'. This evidence, which again mentions 1817, shows the use of the potato to supplement rye in bread dough²⁶. It also indicates that this large grater predated the cultivation of potatoes, though later the two were linked in recipes that I shall deal with later.

Buckwheat *tortons* were another food item that permitted a saving on bread, by replacing it at certain meals²⁷. But the cultivation of buckwheat had its ups and downs, as the authors of the dictionary remind us: hail, drought in August, heavy rain that knocked over the plants, weeds that choked them, partridges that ate them... Béronie presents the '*tourtou*' as a sort of pancake 'made of buckwheat flour which is sometimes mixed with barley or wheat, and in lean years, potato pulp. This batter [is raised] with yeast'. The wheat here was '*tersol*', meaning 'third flour' or unbleached flour, of lesser quality than fine or white flour. We can thus see another use of the potato, one sometimes still used by certain cooks, regardless of any

problem of scarcity. The same is true for buckwheat *pols* (written '*pous*' by Béronie), a porridge to which some have kept up the habit of adding one or two boiled potatoes²⁸.

Potatoes could also be used as filler in recipes, not only during years of poor harvests. This is how Béronie defines the term '*obo-ouvi*': 'This is said of certain meats that, prepared in one way or another, appear to be in greater quantity and provide more to eat'. The word 'meat' should here be interpreted in its old sense, 'food', for the author gives as an example: '*A-i bouta un plen boussou de pouma de terro din lou toupî per fa obo-ouvi moun soupa*; I put a basket[ful] of potatoes in the pot to increase the quantity of [my] supper'. In the same vein, Vialle gives the following definition for '*oboundansso*', abundance: 'This is said of wine whose quantity is increased by adding water. Our country cooks call it *Fa de l'oboundansso* when they increase the quantity of their stews with bread crusts, potatoes, etc.'

Potatoes were therefore on a par with foodstuffs of little value, like water and bread crusts. They played no role in the abundance of feast days or weddings, which suggests food aplenty, especially meat in the modern sense of the word. Used at other times to increase the quantity of food, however, potatoes no longer had the same status as when they were mixed with rye flour or buckwheat to make bread or *tortons*. Although they were not yet cooked on their own, their flavour was beginning to be appreciated and from that point on, other ways of preparing them were found. This symbolises the crossing of a threshold in the realm of cookery and marks the true entry of the potato into cuisine.

But the dictionary has other surprises in store for us, for the potato was absent where one would expect to find it today.

III. Dishes without Potatoes

Nowadays, many typical recipes of the cuisine of Corrèze contain potatoes. But, at the beginning of the 19th century, this plant has not yet appeared in these recipes. We can mention:

1) Soup, 'a favourite Limousin food', an everyday dish, according to Béronie, made with 'stock, slices of bread and vegetables'. He gives the example of '*bredzaoudo*', a soup 'made of rye bread, cabbage, bacon and other ingredients', or 'a soup of green cabbage and bacon or goose legs'. The word '*bredzaoudo*' comes from *brejon* (derived from *brejar*, to mash), which designates the piece of salted bacon put into the soup (Lavalade, 1999), which was reserved for the head of the family. Béronie also mentions '*soupo grasso*' without specifying its composition; the expression 'fatty soup' doubtlessly refers to the presence of meat. Of it he says: 'This is the way our peasants like it, though they do not eat it this way often: they say of somebody who is poorly cared for or badly nourished, *Li fo-ou pa lo soupo ga-ire grasso*' [they don't make his soup very fatty]. But at no point does he suggest that potatoes are put in the soup. No more than they are included in '*verdza-oudo*' mentioned by Vialle, a soup based on green cabbage 'wilted by the first frosts'. As we have just seen, potatoes can be used to

‘increase the quantity of the supper’, which probably means ‘the quantity of the soup’, but they do not appear in these recipes.

2) Pâtés, without which no feast would ever be complete. Béronie talks of two types. The ‘*tourtro*’, ‘*tourte*’ in French²⁹, ‘*Tourtro de poulets, d’enguialo, de troutso, d’espinars*’, chicken, eel, trout and spinach pie. And the *posti*, which is, in this region, a pâté made of ‘dough stuffed with minced veal or pork’, or even a pâté made with apples or other fruit. Meat *posti* was de rigueur on the day of Carnival, on Epiphany, for wedding feasts, etc. And he says that ‘there is hardly a housewife who, when making her batch of bread³⁰, does not save some dough *per fa un Posti dé pouma*, to make an apple Pâté’. But here again, there is no sign of potatoes.

3) *Farciduras*, or ‘*farcidures*’, to Gallicize the Occitan term, appear under the terms ‘*far*’, ‘*poulo sens os*’, and ‘*forci*’. Béronie presents the ‘*far*’ as ‘a stuffing made with buckwheat’ comparable to the one also made in Brittany. He refers the reader to the terms ‘*forceduro*’ and ‘*poulo sens os*’. The latter, meaning boneless chicken, is ‘a type of stuffing made with flour, bacon, onion, etc. It is folded into a cabbage leaf and cooked in the pot’ (that is to say in a stock). Béronie also gives the verb ‘*forci*’, to stuff, the adjective ‘*forci*, [*forci*]*do*, stuffed, and the noun ‘*forci*’, which ‘is wrongly used for stuffing, for which the correct dialectal expression is *Forceduro*’. Here, too, not a potato in sight.

The word ‘*far*’ is curious, and to date I have not found any other evidence of its use in Corrèze. Is it an ancient term in the Limousin language, which might have since disappeared? Or a scholarly reference gleaned from Béronie’s readings? Indeed, when he mentions this word with regard to Brittany, he cites the *Voyage dans le Finistère* by Jacques Cambry, published in the year VII (1798-1799)³¹. It is worth noting that a common origin is likely for *far*, *fars*, *farci*, etc.: from the latin *farsus*, past participle of *farcio*, *farcire*, to stuff, perhaps influenced by the Latin *far*, *farris*, meaning wheat or spelt, or else a cake made for religious occasions³². These different lexical forms can be found in the west of France from Brittany to the Southwest of the Massif Central, and designate dishes based on cereals and/or minced meat or vegetables. The *fars* has been documented in Poitou, Vendée, Quercy, and Rouergue (Mistral, 1878; Höfler & Rézeau, 1997).

Moreover, Béronie does not spend time on the recipes for the ‘*farcidures*’ of Corrèze, either on the ingredients, their method of cooking, or their regional variants. Made of herbs and bacon mixed with different types of flour and later grated potatoes, they were everyday dishes of poor regions. They took the place of both bread and meat, and their status was very different from that of the pâtés served at Carnival. It is only recently that they have taken on a festive significance and have become part of the regional identity.

There is also no sign in the dictionary of a thick pancake made of grated potatoes and cooked in a casserole, called in the Tulle area *milhasson* or *borraud* (and even sometimes *farcidura*)³³. This recipe, like the ‘*farcidures*’ cooked in stock mentioned above, has now become a speciality of central and upper Corrèze.

Other sources seem to confirm this relative absence of potatoes in the cooking of Corrèze at the beginning of the 19th century, as indicated by the *Dictionnaire du patois du Bas-Limousin*. A prefectural survey carried out throughout France in 1813 shows that, at that time in Corrèze, 47 kilograms of potatoes were consumed per person per year³⁴. Although this data should be taken with a grain of salt, this quantity is far too small for potatoes to have been eaten daily and at more than one meal, as would be the case in the 20th century. The findings of my study of the potato in the dictionary of Béronie and Vialle are also in keeping with those of a contemporary study of the role of the potato in Creuse, a neighbouring department. A.-M. Caron, working from written and oral sources, notes that probably:

‘For many years, in rural environments, no other way [was known] of using potatoes, other than cooking them in their skins, like chestnuts. Around 1850, peeling potatoes before cooking was introduced from the towns. Certain elderly peasants relate that they heard their grandfather say that he had first eaten potatoes “fried” (?) in the casserole with bacon when they went to the Mistress (to ask the hand of a girl in marriage on behalf of a military conscript)’³⁵.

Whether peeled potatoes were first cooked in town is contestable: no doubt the potatoes used to eke out stews by the country cooks mentioned by Vialle, as we have already seen, were also peeled. On the other hand, potatoes sautéed with bacon must have been sufficiently unusual in Creuse during the second half of the 19th century³⁶ to remain in the memory several generations later. It is also noteworthy that they were served for a special occasion, the request of a hand in marriage.

The potato made its way gradually into the cuisine of Corrèze during the course of the 19th century. The changes in the way it was cooked paralleled improvements in botany and agriculture. In particular, new varieties of *Solanum tuberosum* had to be perfected that were better adapted to European conditions than the plant of tropical origin, and that corresponded to new uses and to new tastes³⁷. It was not until the end of the 19th century or the beginning of the 20th century before the potato became the all-important food that it is today. Its slow spread throughout Corrèze brought with it a slow conquest of regional cooking.

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Notes

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Dominique Decomps for her valuable help, as well as to Alain Drouard and Yves Lavalade for their advice.

² Bas-Limousin was part of the province of Limousin. It became the département of Corrèze under the Revolution.

³ Agricultural Societies had been created in the French provinces during the 18th century. They resumed their activities after the Revolution and new ones appeared in different departments during the 19th century. They were ‘learned societies’, composed of economists and members of the social elite concerned with improvements in agriculture.

⁴ See Pouget (2003). According to this author, the cultivation of potato was documented for the first time in Bas-Limousin during the 1760s. As we shall see, its adoption in the human diet occurred later.

⁵ See Béronie (1823). Limousin is a dialect of Occitan, or ‘langue d’Oc’, spoken in the southern half of France. At the beginning of the 19th century, it was the language of the working-class, in the towns as well as in the country. But it was still spoken by the elite in addition to French, which became the official language of the kingdom in administrative documents after the order of Villers-Cotterêts (1539), and various edicts proclaimed in the 17th and 18th centuries, following the conquest of new provinces (Certeau *et al*, 2002: 11-12).

⁶ The dictionary of Léonard Dom Duclou (1779), of the spoken language of present Haute-Vienne, exists only in manuscript form.

⁷ An attitude that is changing: see Lemaître & Vielliard (2009).

⁸ See Certeau *et al* (2002): pages 13-30, on the questionnaire of Abbot Grégoire and its diffusion; pages 434-435 on the survey of Coquebert de Montbret, whose conclusions were published in 1831.

⁹ Here is how Béronie justifies the publication of his dictionary in his preface: ‘1. the character of a people can be understood through its language; 2. it may be useful for those who wish to see the beginnings and follow the progress of the French language; 3. parents accustoming their children to speaking French from an early age often do not know the names of the most common, ordinary things; 4. several deeds and contracts are written in this language’.

¹⁰ See page 44.

¹¹ It is particularly in the passages attributed to Béronie that etymological remarks, comparisons with other languages and references to sources are to be found.

¹² This expression is often abbreviated to *poma'r terra*.

¹³ See Lascoux-Germiniac (1787).

¹⁴ See the word *forci*, to stuff. In the quotations, I have given the transcriptions of Béronie and Vialle. These are much earlier than the first works on the written form of Occitan, dating from the second half of the 19th century. For terms in Occitan that I use myself, I have used the standard form.

¹⁵ Béronie also gives an example with the form *pouma de terra*, as we shall see later.

¹⁶ Its first meaning is ‘to put on stockings or shoes’.

¹⁷ The turnips referred to here are a local sort (called ‘raves’ in French). Under the Ancien Régime, the inhabitants of Limousin were often referred to as ‘mangeurs de raves’ (turnip-eaters).

¹⁸ Vialle gives this information for the words ‘setsodour’ (meaning a dryer for chestnuts) and ‘sac’, bag.

¹⁹ On this porridge or *pols*, see *infra* note 28. ‘Mique’ is dough, leavened or unleavened, cooked in a broth (this dish is also popular in the Southwest of France). *Milhasson* ou *tortel* is a thick pancake cooked in a casserole. In the area of Tulle and in upper Corrèze, this recipe is nowadays based on grated potatoes, as we shall see later. On these recipes, see Chastanet (1998), Poulain (1984) and Rossi-Lagorce & Houdart (2004).

²⁰ I have included buckwheat among the cereals, even though, botanically speaking, it does not belong to this category.

²¹ See Forot (1989: 90-93).

²² For ‘dinner’: a meal at that time eaten at about 10 a.m.

²³ Nowadays ‘blé’ means ‘wheat’.

²⁴ According to Béronie, ‘tomindze’ likely comes from the word ‘tomisa, sifted’. A finer sieve is used for this bread than for the black bread called ‘tourto’ or ‘tourte’.

²⁵ A legume usually grown for the purpose of feeding poultry.

²⁶ For the word ‘tinta’, to drain off the liquid, Béronie mentions the production of potato flour, without specifying its use.

²⁷ This was usually the case for the meal eaten at about 4 p.m. in summer. This meal was not eaten in winter.

²⁸ The word *pols* comes from the Latin *puls*, *pultis*, porridge made with flour (Gaffiot, 1934; Lavalade, 1999). The word and its meaning can be associated with the Italian *polenta*. It was a thick porridge eaten hot with cold milk. Additionally, it could be allowed to cool, then cut into slices and toasted. It was also made with oats, wheat or maize. According to Béronie and to Forot (1989: 193), it might be called ‘etso-ouda’ or ‘echauda’, scalded, in the Tulle area.

²⁹ When the Limousin language uses two different words, ‘tourtro’ and ‘tourto’, the French uses the same word ‘tourte’ to refer to either a sort of pie or a round loaf of rye bread.

³⁰ In the country, each family baked its bread in the village oven. In Tulle, there were collective ovens used by the lower classes. At that time, only the middle class bought their bread from a baker.

³¹ Cambry was one of the founders of the ‘Académie celtique’, a society active from 1805 to 1813, which contributed to the ‘creation of French ethnology’ (Ozouf, 1984: 351-379). See also Certeau *et al* (2002: 289-297).

³² See TLF (2009) for ‘Far’ and ‘Farce’, and also Gaffiot (1934). The current Breton transcription is *farz*.

³³ As indicated above, this pancake is made with maize flour in lower Corrèze. Thick pancakes of this sort were eaten as a main course until the 1970s. The recipe based on maize still exists in its sweet form, as a cake. The recipe based on potatoes has not changed, but in restaurants it is often served to accompany meat. According to Dominique Decomps, the final ‘d’ of the word *borraud* is a suffix characteristic of some colloquial terms in the Limousin language.

³⁴ This survey is mentioned by Vanderbroeke (1992:126-129).

³⁵ Carron (1951: 46, note 1).

³⁶ Carron has probably collected her oral sources at the end of the 1940s.

³⁷ The first varieties, originating in Peru, produced their tubers during shorter growing days. Up to the end of the 19th century, most of the varieties did not reach maturity before August or September. It was with the introduction of Chilean potatoes that early potatoes could be developed, able to produce tubers during longer days (Thorez, 2000: 46, 56).