



pierre boisard  
camembert

A NATIONAL MYTH TRANSLATED BY RICHARD MILLER

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## Chapter I | A MYTH IS BORN

### THE AMERICAN AND CAMEMBERT

Sunday, 11 April 1928: Vimoutiers, a small village in Normandy, is having a celebration. The streets are thronged with a lively crowd made up of the local population and others who have flocked into town from the surrounding countryside. The Eastertide fair with its carnival attractions is not the only reason for the festive atmosphere, for the people have gathered to witness a unique event. They are awaiting the arrival of Alexandre Millerand, former president of the Republic and senator from the Orne. The well-known statesman is to unveil a monument to the memory of Marie Harel, the local heroine who did so much for Normandy and for France.

It is a cloudy day, presaging the showers that will soon, if today's mild weather continues, water the abundant grassy fields for which the region is famous. The excitement builds as President Millerand emerges from the largest building in the village, Sauraire's garage, where a banquet for three hundred invited guests has just come to an end. He is accompanied by all of the region's notables, including Dr. Dentu, the mayor of Vimoutiers, and Joseph Saffrey, the chairman of the Syndicat des Fabricants du Véritable Camembert de Normandie (Associated Producers of Authentic Norman Camembert, or SFVCN). The official party proceeds

ceremoniously to the covered marketplace, where the monument dedicated to Marie Harel has been erected. In silence, President Millerand moves toward the statue, which depicts a farm woman in traditional Norman dress: bodice, apron, wooden shoes, and the local lace headgear with its descending panels down the back of the neck. Around her neck hangs a cross. On her right hip, she holds a copper milk jug, known in the local patois as a “cane.” Behind her is a bas-relief panel depicting a farmyard, at the top of which a few words trumpet the heroine’s claim to fame: “To Marie Harel, Creator of Camembert Cheese.” Below, the words “To the Norman Farm-Woman” include those humble laborers in this tribute being paid to the most famous among them.

Thus, in that republican ceremony on 11 April 1928, was Camembert elevated to the status of national symbol. At the time, the event had few repercussions outside the region known as the Auge, and it was soon forgotten. Yet the cheese’s official celebration by a former president of the Republic gave birth to a modern national myth in which Camembert was to become intricately associated with France itself. Since that day, Camembert has become France’s foremost cheese, and France has become the country of Camembert. This stereotype, which is sometimes annoying but which cannot be denied, is thus revealed to be of fairly recent origin, whereas it is generally thought to have existed forever. And what is even more surprising is that the initiative behind it did not come from a Frenchman but from an American. It is a tale worth telling.

#### The Emissary from the New World

At around 3 P.M. on 15 March 1926, an unknown man knocked on the door of the pharmacy in Vimoutiers. The man, his dark hair flecked with white, wore an elegant checked suit and spoke French with some difficulty. Auguste Gavin, the pharmacist, was also the deputy mayor.<sup>1</sup> With a M. David, a friend and local engineer, he had been making plans for the forthcoming Easter fair. His surprise at the arrival of his unexpected visitor increased when he learned the stranger’s purpose. The man, Dr. Joseph Knirim, claimed to be American and had come not to have a prescription filled, but rather to find out the schedule of trains to Camembert. He expressed a desire to go to that village to pay homage to the inventor of the eponymous cheese, whom he presumed was buried there. Gavin could not believe his ears. Camembert was a village with a popula-

tion of three hundred, perched high on a hill and difficult to get to, and everyone knew that it had no train service. A foreigner might think that Camembert would be accessible by train, but only a madman would cross the Atlantic with the sole aim of honoring an almost-unknown Norman farmer's wife! Stupefied, and disconcerted by Knirim's weird French, Gavin was unable to understand why the American was so set on seeing Mme Harel's tomb. In an attempt to make himself better understood, Knirim took from his cardboard suitcase a document printed in French. Astounded, Gavin read the following:

Savarin, the famous epicure, said that it was more worthwhile to invent a new dish than to discover a new star. How much more precious, therefore, must be the invention of a new dish of equal benefit to both the sick and to those who enjoy good health. This is the great merit of the late Madame Harel's discovery. I have traveled thousands of miles to come to honor her at the monument erected in her memory, and had I known the history of Camembert cheese earlier, I would have made this pilgrimage long ago.

France possesses many cheeses, all of which are excellent, but when it comes to digestibility, Madame Harel's cheese, the "véritable Norman Camembert," is surely the best. Years ago, I suffered for several months from indigestion, and Camembert was practically the sole nourishment that my stomach and intestines were able to tolerate. Since then, I have sung the praises of Camembert, I have introduced it to thousands of gourmets, and I myself eat it two or three times a day. I shall never tire of describing the value of this wonderful product of your town, and in my efforts to convince the doubters, I have asked them to engage in an impartial trial. May Camembert's popularity increase the world over and may your town produce other benefactors of mankind to equal Madame Harel. In humble expression of my great admiration for Camembert cheese, which is shared by thousands of friends in the United States, I have brought with me across the waters this wreath of flowers to lay on the monument of our common benefactress. May the French and American flags be forever united in the service of mankind.

JOSEPH KNIRIM, March 1926

Gavin and David were impressed by their visitor's determination, but somewhat abashed by having to admit to a foreigner their ignorance as to the exact site of Marie Harel's grave; nonetheless, they were flattered by

this boost to their pride as Normans and they offered to help Knirim. First, they must find Mme Harel's burial site. Although the pair had of course heard of Camembert's inventor, they were unaware of the location of her resting place. Alert to the implications that this surprising American fondness for the cheese could have for the reputation of his region, Dentu set his office and all his acquaintances to work to glean information about Marie Harel. Upon questioning the inhabitants of Camembert, it was discovered that the Harels were supposed to have lived at a farm called Beaumontel at the time of the French Revolution. Some even maintained that the family had given refuge to a recusant priest who was said to have passed on to them the secret of making a certain kind of cheese, supposedly the one now known as Camembert. The father-in-law of the mayor of Vimoutiers recalled having been told by a well-to-do farmer named Paynel, while they were hunting together, that Paynel had served a Camembert to Emperor Napoleon III on the occasion of his visit to the region. Paynel had also told him that he made his own Camembert according to the recipe handed down to him by his mother, Marie Harel. Since Paynel had come from Champosoult, the village adjacent to Camembert, Dentu believed that both he and his parents might be buried there.

And indeed, there was an impressive Paynel family tomb near the entrance to the tiny cemetery in Champosoult. On the stone was engraved the name of Marie Harel followed by two dates: 8 April 1781–14 May 1855. On 17 March 1926, therefore, Knirim laid a wreath of gilt laurel leaves adorned with the French and American flags at the Paynel family tomb, a tribute to Normandy from the United States of America.

His mission accomplished, Knirim then intended to set out for Plzeň in Czechoslovakia, in order to pay homage to that region, where they produced a beer that, along with Normandy's Camembert, he believed had cured him of his stomach ailment. However, on 18 May, prior to his departure, he was entertained by the inhabitants of Vimoutiers. The owners of the Point de France hotel held a sumptuous lunch in his honor to which they also invited the mayor and his deputies. When dessert arrived, Knirim rose to thank his hosts and, in his shaky French, said:

Gentlemen, there are many statues throughout the world, but there are few great benefactors of mankind like Madame Harel. I beseech you to raise a

memorial to her. I am not wealthy, but I shall subscribe ten dollars to that end, and I shall add the contributions of three friends whom I treated and who were also cured with this same medicine, the “véritable Norman Camembert.”

After making his statement, Knirim handed Gavin a twenty-dollar bill. Before leaving Vimoutiers for Plzeň, Knirim also visited Émile Courtonne’s Camembert plant at Saint-Germain-de-Montgommery, near the village of Camembert itself. Then he departed and was never to be seen again. The inauguration of the statue eventually took place in the absence of the man initially responsible for its erection, for shortly before the ceremony, Dentu received word from the French embassy in New York that Knirim had passed away.

Camembert was well-known long before Knirim made the figure of Marie Harel known to the French. The dedication of a monument to the presumed inventor of Camembert did not increase consumption of the cheese; at the most, it added to the reputation of Norman produce. However, the Knirim effect is not to be measured in kilograms of Camembert sold but rather by its impact on the sphere of the imagination, in the realm of symbolism. The celebration of Marie Harel, the inventor who was reinvented after 130 years of obscurity, was to change the image of her cheese. Although by the 1920s Camembert was already the most widely consumed cheese in France, it was still but one among many. It may have been the most familiar, but it was also one of the least prestigious, a plebeian cheese in comparison to Roquefort, which could boast of a two-thousand-year lineage. The glorification of its creator gave Camembert a unique status that set it apart from other cheeses and made it stand out. From that time on, it acquired a personality all its own. Now, everyone knew that the cheese was Norman and that it had been created by a clever woman toward the end of the eighteenth century, and both of those merits raised it from the somewhat banal status to which it had been relegated ever since it had begun to be produced in large quantities in regions outside Normandy. Its popularity piqued the interest of the French, who wanted to know about Marie Harel and the circumstances surrounding her invention.

But although Marie Harel now had a statue, almost nothing was known

about her. Such ignorance was unconscionable. The woman's background had to be made known, and because there were no facts, facts had to be created. In becoming famous, Marie Harel was to find herself endowed with not only a past but also a host of tales recounting various versions of her invention of Camembert and its apotheosis. None of these anecdotes created to support the "facts" were ever recounted in the conditional tense. Each version purports to be historically correct. Should we deal with this body of tales, almost all of which include the same characters, with the critical eye of a historian and therefore brush them aside? Such an attitude might well seem justified for at least two reasons. First, these little tales are not worthy of being taken as serious history; second, a knowledge of the exact circumstances surrounding the invention of Camembert may not really be all that important. After all, the stakes involved in such an investigation seem very small. If we adopt this somewhat high-handed attitude, why waste time trying to make sense of the tangled versions about the invention of Camembert? Yet, all the same, the legendary account of the cheese's invention does deserve further attention because it is one of the basic myths of the French nation. It may seem somewhat eccentric to find elements of a national identity in a box of Camembert. However, no one will deny that Camembert has indeed become a national symbol. We may smile at this, but we must also—while continuing to smile—give serious attention to the fact. Furthermore, the fact that the legend tells us that Camembert was invented in 1791, at the very moment that the French nation was also being born, raises questions about that very opportune coincidence.

The raising of the statue to the memory of Marie Harel was the consecration of Camembert's renown. It was also the moment when the myth began to take shape. Regional oral tradition, family veneration, and the imagination of local historiographers came together to concoct the tale of the invention of Camembert. Eager to show originality, each new narrator, seizing on locally available materials, constructed his or her own version. By superimposing the various versions of the myth, and by setting aside the less frequently mentioned events, retaining only those that are part of the common fund of knowledge, a story begins to take shape, one that I shall relate in my own way, thus becoming a part of the narrative chain.

## THE MYTH AND ITS ORIGINS

Camembert, the flower of French cheeses, is said to have been created at a time of revolutionary turmoil, thanks to the clandestine combination of a Norman farmer's wife and the arts of a priest from the Brie region. During the great upheaval that produced the French nation, the fortuitous coming together of two regional traditions is said to have brought forth a new cheese in a country already possessed of several hundreds. The inaugural scene occurred in 1791 at the manor of Beaumontel in Camembert, a small Norman village in the Auge, where Marie Fontaine met her husband, Jacques Harel. Although the couple had resided in the village of Roiville since their marriage, they were often found at the manor house, where Marie's father and his second wife lived. In those troubled times, the farm family of Beaumontel offered refuge to a recusant priest. This clandestine priest, observing Marie Harel in the process of making cheese in the traditional Auge manner, suggested that she try the method used in his native region to produce the cheese known as Brie. Thus it came to pass that, making Brie in a mold used to produce Livarot, Marie Harel chanced to invent Camembert. Of course, the secret then had to be handed down to subsequent generations. Marie Harel's daughter Marie and her son-in-law Thomas Paynel took up the torch and carried it further by setting out to market the new cheese, which became increasingly popular, in the nearby towns of Argentan and Caen. The years passed, generation succeeded generation, and Camembert's realm continued to expand. In 1863, at the train station at Surdon in the Orne, Marie Harel's grandson, Victor Paynel, served one of his Camemberts to Emperor Napoleon III. The emperor found the cheese much to his liking; congratulated its producer; invited him to his palace, the Tuileries; and requested that he deliver the product to him on a regular basis.

Before separating the truth from the fiction in this narrative, I should like to note what it reveals. It would be a mistake to take it literally, to read it as fact, and to accept it or reject it. It introduces us to four characters: Marie Harel, a recusant priest, Marie Harel's grandson Victor Paynel, and Emperor Napoleon III. The play is in two acts: act 1, "Origin," and act 2, "Consecration."

Act 1, scene 1, involves the clandestine. It creates an atmosphere of mys-



tery. It takes place against a background of great historical change. The character of the priest produces several associations in the audience—with the church, with tradition, and with the sacred—in addition to invoking an atmosphere of antagonism toward the Revolution. In the popular representation, the priest is a kind of go-between. As part of the old order, his proximity to the people makes him the representative of a desire for change. A handful of priests did play a prominent role in setting off the Revolution and went on to join the Third Estate. When the Revolution entered its radical phase, and when the countryside, which had been pleased by the dismantling of feudal privileges, began to be affected by the unrest in the cities, some priests were caught up in the great turmoil they had helped bring about. The persecution of the clergy was to create the first great breach in national unity and was to increase, especially in western France, the oppositional contrast between city and rural area, between Paris and the provinces. As the bearer of tradition, the priest, if he had access to contemporary writings, was often the agent of modernity as well. A sacrosanct figure, he had near-supernatural powers that, in the collective mind, were allied as much to sorcery as they were to the Christian mysteries. In the farming regions of the western part of the country, peasants believed that priests possessed powers that were far greater than those of sorcerers merely because they owned more books. However, the imagined difference between Catholic priest and sorcerer was one of degree, not one of nature. After the Revolution, rumors spread that the books owned by emigrant priests had fallen into the hands of laymen, who were using them for their own benefit and handing them on to their descendants. This deep-rooted and widespread belief continues to enjoy some credence even today. An elderly Camembert maker who had managed a cheese factory in the 1930s gave me her version of Camembert's origins:

I have looked into the matter. In Normandy, when the Revolution began, they were killing priests, sending them all off somewhere. They pillaged the libraries in the priests' houses. That explains why there are so many healers of both sexes in small Norman villages; it's because all sorts of people got hold of such things. And why there are so many formulas for burns, for this, against that. And then you had people who practiced the laying on of hands.

I've known some myself. Well, I think that it was out of some book like that that Marie Harel or someone around her found the way to make this cheese.

By bringing a priest into the story, the history of Camembert is merely going along with a familiar platitude. Think of all the culinary innovations attributed to members of a religious order, beginning with Dom Pérignon and his champagne. However, our tale differs in two essential ways: it links the priest with a woman, an association that even the bowdlerized version does not entirely defuse, and it provides a precise historical setting. This adherence of the mythical narrative to history is a characteristic of the Camembert myth. As a narrative of origins or innovations, myth has no single meaning but is rather a construction made up of multiple and reversible meanings, one capable of generating new significations and of being reinterpreted to suit circumstances and needs. The fact that the birth of Camembert coincides with the birth of the Republic allows this myth to explicate the tensions that existed within the nation and to put forward solutions toward achieving a new unity. The scene of the cheese's creation at a crucial moment allows it to stand for the re-creation of national unity and to signify that it is also the heir to the old order. We can follow this operation of the myth through its various versions. One of the first, in 1927, was reported by Xavier Rousseau, a Norman scholar and the author of the first booklet known to have been published concerning Camembert's history.

It was during the Terror, in the Auge region, and a recusant priest, pursued by troops, was about to fall into the hands of his pursuers. He was taken in by some peasants, who hid him. Although totally without funds, the fugitive managed to express his gratitude. He passed on the secret recipe for a cheese hitherto unknown in the area to the farmer's wife who had risked her life for him. Her name was Harel. She went on to make good use of the secret, and her cheeses were soon appreciated throughout the region around Vimoutiers.<sup>2</sup>

In this narrative, the origin of Camembert is a manufacturing secret imparted by a fleeing priest. The scene is reminiscent of others in which some god or messenger of the gods passes on an art or a gift to a mortal.

Thus Saturn, after having been deposed, taught humankind the art of agriculture. Here, we have revelation rather than invention, the transmission of some ancient lore or knowledge. As a rule, such myths do not reveal the origin of the secret being passed on. They merely stage it and tell of the circumstances of its transmittal, but never actually explain it. Thus, in keeping with the tradition, Marie Harel does not invent Camembert, she is merely given the secret of a tradition threatened with extinction. Thanks to her, a bit of old France, of pre-Revolutionary France, will survive.

Succeeding versions specify that the priest came from Brie, a cheese-producing region where the ladle-molding method was traditional. The secret imparted is thus nothing more than the recipe for Brie. With their greater detail, these versions led to the accepted one. An outside influence is added to the scene of creation. The priest passes on both the tradition of the old world and the know-how of another region. Thus, Camembert becomes the product of an old tradition made new and of a linkage between the knowledge of two different regions, of the secrets held by a priest and the know-how of a peasant woman. The myth integrates opposing elements, combining water and fire, in this instance the woman and the priest, the Ancien Régime and the Republic, the regions of Auge and Brie.

The creation narrative goes on to mention Marie Harel's commercial success in selling her cheeses in neighboring towns. The religious factor represented by the priest is balanced by Marie Harel's business sense. All of these meanings are not always explicitly present. Some of them tend to prevail according to the period or circumstances. However, they are all present and can all be brought into play when needed, causing this plethora of different versions to end up telling the same story.

#### The Imperial Seal

The creation myth is further enhanced by the encounter between Victor Paynel and Napoleon III. It makes little difference whether the anecdote is true or not, which is something I have been unable to verify. The essential thing about it is why the story has stuck in the popular memory, why it spread, and what it signifies. Marie Harel creates a line of cheese makers who carry on her work. The secret of Camembert's manufacture is handed down generation by generation through the family. As in the

first act, the two characters, both by birth and by geography, are from two very separate worlds. In the normal course of events, their paths would never have crossed. Whereas in the first act the encounter between the farmer's wife and the priest took place because of Revolutionary events, the meeting between the emperor and Paynel occurs thanks to the railway. Like the former instance, the scene evokes French unity. However, between the two acts the factors underlying national unity have changed. Revolutionary violence in the former has given way to the peaceful construction of a network of railroads in the latter. Each encounter symbolizes a phase in the construction of that national unity. In the second act, Paynel, a peasant, finds himself in the presence of the emperor. This meeting is without, however, any hint of subjugation. Paynel acts independently, the relationship is commercial in nature, and its happy outcome will be the establishment of ongoing business dealings with the imperial palace. The process initiated by the priest's disclosure of the method of fabrication to Marie Harel continues with Marie's transmittal of the secret to her daughter, who herself then hands it on to her children. It culminates in the gift of the cheese to the emperor.

Marie Harel is also responsible for another development: the commerce of the new cheese. The meeting with the emperor marks the beginning of a new era, the progression from trade at the local level to national commerce made possible by the development of the railroad system and furthered by imperial approval. The first act showed a province, Normandy, benefiting from the national unification brought about by the Revolution; in the second act, Normandy bestows the fruit of that union on the entire nation. The figure of the emperor, like that of the priest, is fraught with many meanings. A president become emperor, Napoleon III united in his person ancient dynastic principle and elected legitimacy. He embodied the nation's authority and unity, notably via the railroad and its ever-expanding network, which he organized and endowed with a part of his majesty by traveling on it. The presence of the railroad, one of the peaceful fruits of the Revolution, gives the myth a mundane touch that marks the passage toward a new stage in the history of this cheese, which now achieves national consecration not only thanks to imperial recognition but also, and above all, thanks to its ability to be transported throughout France. The railroad, a powerful means of national unification that connected the provinces to Paris and emphasized the capital's

preeminence, is what enabled Camembert to expand beyond its native Auge while other cheeses remained confined to their native regions.

The emperor, in inviting Paynel to the Tuileries Palace, was honoring not only Paynel, but all of Marie Harel's descendants for the patrimony they had passed on. Family connections are what forge the link between our acts 1 and 2. Relationships, by ensuring the continuity of the dynasty founded by Camembert's inventor, also guarantee the cheese's durability. On the other hand, the historical continuity of the nation, brought to birth by the forceps of the Revolution and strengthened by the establishment of the railroad, is somehow lacking. Napoleon III is not really a legitimate heir, but merely someone who happens to be the incarnation of state authority. Dynastic legitimacy, which was destroyed at the top in 1791, persists in civil society as a method of transmitting patrimony and serves as evidence of its economic fertility. The nation's prosperity is the result of the transmission of working-class know-how via family ties.

From this point of view, the erection of the monument at Vimoutiers in 1928 would seem to represent the myth's apotheosis. The Republic consecrated a cheese born of the Revolution and thereby recognized its own heritage, both its heritage from the Ancien Régime and the heritage that is the fruit of republican ideals. It coincided with the (temporary) achievement of domestic peace by transcending the contradictions between tradition and progress by means of a product that was at once provincial and national, rural and industrial. Camembert's republican consecration, performed by a former president, occurred when it had demonstrated its universal success, especially in the United States, a country linked with the French Republic since its birth. Millerand's political background made him the person most suited to preside at the event. A former president of the Republic, he was now a mere senator from a rural département. Having begun his political career as a socialist deputy from Paris' 12th arrondissement, the first socialist to become a member of the government, he had moved slowly from the far left to the moderate right, from a defender of the working class to a representative of vested rural interests.

### The Flowering of the Myth

The myth as we have presented it did not spring up all at once. It was built up layer by layer over time and successively reworked, and it continued to

develop over the years. Most of its elements had always been there, ready either to be used or to be forgotten. Knirim's visit and the erection of the Harel monument brought them to life. Some of them had long been familiar, although such familiarity had been confined to the restricted circle of the cheese makers themselves. Other elements were borrowed from local oral tradition. The myth's astonishing vitality, which allowed for its continual renewal, is due to one basic reason: the close intermingling of legend with actual historical events. For, in fact, the myth does borrow from both history, in which it attempts to situate itself, and from local stories. It presents itself as both historical truth and as a tale. It also contains a further strength created by the tension between Norman provincial demands and national claims. Because it is an attempt to resolve such tension, the myth's form is unstable. As a legendary tale, it lays itself open to challenge by historical investigation. It would continue to be called into question by various groups, but its magnetism and its force are such that even while some of its elements have been disputed, others have come to be accepted as historically true. The myth has developed out of a combination of skepticism and credulity. This astonishing mixture of established historical facts and legend has made it enormously attractive.

#### Doubts Begin to Stir

Even as the story's heroine was being consecrated in stone, the edifying legend around her was beginning to be questioned. As early as 1927—that is, in the period between Joseph Knirim's appearance and the erection of the monument—a small fifteen-page brochure made its appearance. The brochure recounted the myth, but also challenged certain of its elements. However, in the end, this investigation of the story merely served to strengthen it and even led to the development of new versions. Certain of the myth's elements, in particular the unverifiable presence of the dissenting priest, were called into question, but the image of Marie Harel was preserved. And that, with very few exceptions, was to be the attitude of all succeeding criticism. Although historians contested and upheld the story and either tore it apart or enriched it, they all ended by accepting it as the basis of their scholarly lucubrations.

The legend of Marie Harel, scarcely credible historically and a source of real discomfort to those in competition with the makers of Camembert, could not help but give rise to criticism. However, whenever it was

contested, the only effect was the creation of additional versions of the cheese's birth. Of this plethora of tales—I have found at least twenty versions, all of them different—we can distinguish three principal categories. The first consolidates the different versions of the classic and legendary tale, and in answering the criticisms directed against them, attempts to establish the historical truth by pruning the narrative of its more questionable elements. Another category consists of the scholarly versions of Camembert's creation, which have nothing but contempt for the legend. These rationalizations of the mythic tale are in fact based on no historical investigation whatsoever, and their pretensions to “science” are based on their distancing themselves from the legend and on their authors' own reputations. In the end, all they do is to create other, apparently more logical legends that are bereft of charm, such as the one put forward by Professor Roger Veisseyre, a well-known specialist in dairy technology:

The historical truth would appear to be as follows: Marie Harel was born on a farm in the Brie region where Brie cheese had long been made. Following her marriage, she moved to Camembert, a village already famous for its Livarot cheese. Marie Harel can take credit for making a Brie-type cheese in a Livarot mold. This is the cheese that has come to be known as Camembert.<sup>3</sup>

That no facts are produced in support of this theory is apparently unimportant. The person presenting it need only be a scientist for his entire thesis to be given the imprimatur of science. Still in the guise of historical truth, the geographer Jean-Robert Pitte set forth a similar version.<sup>4</sup>

The third category of the myth's development is the one in which the imagination has been given free rein. The narrators, no longer feeling themselves bound by a widely questioned tale, have taken it upon themselves to invent their own versions. I will cite but one, somewhat more unusual than the others, to give some notion of the nature of these descendants of the original myth. I came upon it in an English encyclopedia of food. In this work, we read that it was Napoleon—Napoleon I, obviously—who gave the name “Camembert” to a hitherto nameless cheese offered him by a young farm girl, whom he, in his gastronomical enthusiasm, had embraced on the spot.<sup>5</sup>

Piously handed down, embellished with new variants, or contested, the legend of Camembert's invention has been hugely successful. Marie Harel

does not, of course, enjoy the popular audience granted Jeanne d'Arc, who was rediscovered and taken up by the Republic in this same period. Outside the Auge, she is unknown to all but a few of the initiated. At the same time, however, she reappears in articles by journalists or authors who are both charmed and amazed by her story, so redolent of the Norman countryside. Hundreds of thousands of French readers must once have heard the story of the origins of their favorite cheese and then, for the most part, forgotten it. Yet they will have retained a greater familiarity with that cheese and its linkage with the nation's history.

Joseph Knirim, convinced that he had cured his stomach ailment by the daily ingestion of Camembert "made in Normandy," certainly did not imagine when he went to Vimoutiers that he would be presenting France with a new heroine. The success of the steps he took on behalf of the modest Augeron dairymaid cannot fail to astound us. How can that sudden interest be explained?

Contrary to some subsequent statements, Marie Harel's name and the role attributed to her were not totally unknown at the time. Most of the existing treatises on cheese technology made mention of her as the creator of Camembert cheese. Furthermore, the directors of the SFVCN, some of whose founding members were descended from Marie Harel, knew of the role she had played. Yet, for the majority of the inhabitants of the Auge region where the village of Camembert is located, the circumstances surrounding the invention of Camembert were of no more than anecdotal interest. Knirim could easily have been regarded as a crank and his arrival in Vimoutiers could easily have left no traces. However, his initiative was immediately taken seriously and exploited. How are we to explain the fact that, in a region whose inhabitants are noted for being nothing if not frugal and down-to-earth, a decision was made to band together to erect a statue in honor of an unpretentious and nearly forgotten female cheese maker?

If Knirim's enthusiasm triggered and continued to be the impetus behind the enterprise, it is because he came along at the right moment and served various local preoccupations. For the town of Vimoutiers, his initiative was seen as a good way to add to its renown. For the producers of Norman Camembert, especially those who were members of the SFVCN, it represented an un hoped-for opportunity after a series of demoralizing setbacks. They quickly understood the advantage to be gained by honor-



ing Marie Harel and the Norman origins of the cheese. Knirim's pilgrimage to Normandy made them aware of the publicity to be gained from Marie Harel's story, which they had not yet thought of exploiting. They soon realized that in Marie Harel they had a trump card in their contest with those whom they viewed as unfair competitors, namely the cheese makers from other regions who were being so bold as to affix the label "Camembert" to their counterfeit products.

#### The Defense of Norman Camembert

The year 1926 was a dark year for Normandy's cheese makers. Camembert's renown had never been greater, but Normandy was not the principal beneficiary of the increased demand for the cheese. In fact, the Norman producers, along with many others, had been greatly weakened by the First World War. In addition, they were now subject to a regulation that favored the provision of milk to city dwellers and restricted the quantity available for cheese production. They also complained of the barriers erected against exportation. The increase in demand principally benefited the new factories that had been set up in other regions. In addition, the English market had been invaded by Danish cheese makers. In 1909, the largest Norman producers had overcome their rivalries and created the aforementioned SFVCN—a confederation or association of Norman Camembert makers. The principal goal of that organization had been to achieve official recognition of Camembert's exclusively Norman character and to prevent the use of the designation "Camembert" by non-Norman producers. For a long while, the Norman cheese makers had worked for the issuance of a decree designating an *appellation d'origine* or "label of quality" for their Camembert cheese similar to that commonly granted for wines. In working toward that goal, they had mobilized all their local elected officials to bring pressure to bear upon the government. But their efforts were in vain; the legislature had remained deaf to all their appeals.

After considerable shilly-shallying, and after repeatedly having their hopes raised only to be dashed, the members of the SFVCN understood that they were not going to be granted a label of quality for their Camembert. Only one recourse remained: legal action. On the advice of its lawyer, an attorney named de Resbecq, the syndicate brought a suit for counterfeiting against a dairy cooperative at Ligueil. The trial ended in failure.

On 20 January 1926, the appellate court at Orléans dismissed the suit and ruled that “Camembert” had become a generic term and was not truly indicative of geographical origin. Normandy had no exclusive claim over Camembert.

Barely three months after that ruling was handed down, the Norman cheese makers learned of Knirim’s arrival on the scene. They viewed it as a godsend. In April 1926, they were among the first to subscribe to the fund for erecting a monument to the memory of Marie Harel. M. Henri Lepetit, one of the larger Camembert makers and the creator of the well-known Lepetit brand, donated 500 francs and urged his colleagues to follow suit. Thanks to this early contribution, a stele was erected in Camembert itself. In 1927, a second subscription was opened to erect a statue. The syndicate contributed heavily, to the tune of 10,000 francs, while many of its members also made personal donations. At the conclusion of the syndicate’s meeting of 22 February 1927, 3,800 additional francs had been collected. The sum needed to erect the monument to Marie Harel’s memory had been amassed in under two years.

The commemoration of Marie Harel meant a great deal of publicity for Camembert. First of all, it was an assertion of the cheese’s Norman origin and character. It meant that all of France could now be made aware that Camembert was a real Norman local community and village and that the cheese that bore its name was the result of the clever inventiveness of a local Norman dairywoman. Thus, the Norman cheese makers hoped that consumers would begin to remember that true and *véritable* Camembert had to be made in Normandy, as noted on the syndicate label affixed to the cheeses produced by its members. It is easy to understand why they would so eagerly seize this magnificent opportunity to boost their product.

This, however, does not explain why the event came to have such national importance. Had recognition of Marie Harel’s role concerned only Normandy and its cheese makers, it would not have had repercussions elsewhere. Yet, despite the fact that the event was not especially striking or in any way spectacular, the national press picked it up and it was widely reported.

In April 1928, newspapers were devoting space to the legislative electoral campaigns and to the brilliant exploits of the French aviators Dieudonné Costes and Joseph Le Brix, who had just completed their round-

the-world flight. President Gaston Doumergue congratulated the two aviators, whose plane had logged 57,000 kilometers. An enthusiastic crowd welcomed them on the Champs-Élysées. As for the regional press in Normandy, it was filled with details of the execution at Caen, before a large audience, of a certain William Follain, who had murdered a taxi driver and a colonel. Given the competition offered by those events, as well as by disturbing news from overseas—bomb attacks in Italy, communist subversion in Japan and Germany—coverage of the ceremony at Vimoutiers did not take up a great deal of newspaper space. But neither did it pass unnoticed. *Le Temps* gave it a few lines; *L'Illustration*, with its taste for the pictorial, gave it a full page accompanied by a large photograph of the ceremony. *Le Gaulois*, a newspaper with a longstanding reputation for exalting national traditions, covered the event in its column devoted to gastronomy, “The Table and Us.”

It was not only because of Camembert’s renown that the newspapers covered the story of Marie Harel. Their interest was not happenstance. Contemporary concerns predisposed the French to seek comfort in stories that flattered national pride and exalted the virtues of rural life. Ten years after the hecatomb of the First World War, the French were profoundly uneasy about the way in which their country was changing, about the questioning of traditional values and about the bases of French power. The particular context of the period explains the interest created by the story of Camembert and the impression that it had made, if not on individual minds, then at least on the collective unconscious. If we are to gain an understanding of this, more than seventy-five years after the fact, we must go back to the unsettled atmosphere of that uncertain time.

#### A Restless France

In the 1920s, the French had many reasons to feel anxious. Signs of national weakness were increasing at both the international and the domestic levels. The franc rose and fell erratically, the government had been forced to give in to American and British demands, and the countryside seemed to be in a decline and wasting away.

In 1926, England and the United States began to call in the loans they had made to France to support its war effort, but at the same time the government found itself unable to obtain any guarantee that the Germans were prepared to pay the reparations that had been imposed upon them.

The ensuing decline in the value of the franc meant the end of illusions. Raymond Poincaré was returned to power in an attempt to restore confidence. For two years, from 1926 to 1928, the fate of the franc remained in suspense. Confidence finally returned, but problems remained, in particular an enormous budgetary imbalance. On 24 June 1928, after considerable hesitation, Poincaré finally moved to devalue the currency. Although his prestige enabled him to proceed with the devaluation of the franc and thereby impoverish those with private means who had invested heavily in treasury bonds, he did so not on behalf of heavy industry, which such a policy actually favored, but under the pretext of protecting small family properties, both agricultural and artisanal. In fact, no French government at the time could have justified a policy designed to benefit large-scale modern industry. The only policy that could have found legitimacy with the population was one purportedly designed to strengthen the traditional pillars of French power: small landowners, artisans, family-owned light industries, and agriculture. The success of the Camemberts being produced in small rural dairies was a valuable counterpoint to large-scale industrial development.

In the face of the changes that were affecting the country's traditional equilibrium, concern continued to increase. The bloodbath of the Great War, in which 1,322,000 men had been killed, had considerably weakened the French population, occurring as it had at the end of a century of demographic stagnation. The return of men from the front had not had the hoped-for effect on the birth rate, notwithstanding the government's exhortations. In 1919, Georges Clemenceau had launched a moving appeal for civic-minded procreation from the rostrum of the *Assemblée Nationale*. "The [peace] treaty," he said, "does not provide that the French volunteer to produce numerous offspring, but that is the first thing that should have been included in it, for even though it may acquire every German cannon, France will still have lost the war because there will be no more Frenchmen."<sup>6</sup> Though his appeal received applause, it was to no effect, notwithstanding the repressive law of 31 July 1920 that banned contraceptives and birth control propaganda, including a heavy penalty for abortion. Nor was the law of 11 March 1932, which established a system of family allocations, any more effective; the birth rate fell below what it had been before the war.<sup>7</sup> Many regions saw an exodus to the cities, and their population fell dramatically. From 1911 to 1936, 85 percent of towns

with one to two thousand inhabitants saw their population fall. Impoverished farmers and small artisans left for the big cities in droves. In 1931, the rural population represented no more than 49 percent of France's total population. Each year, the countryside lost some six hundred thousand inhabitants, eighty thousand of them farmers and agricultural workers. Poincaré's program of budgetary economy, which did away with 106 subprefectures and fifty-three local tax offices, brutally speeded up the decline of many medium-sized towns.

Far from being pleased by the growth of heavy industry, public opinion grew alarmed at the growing number of large working-class neighborhoods in the cities and at the emergence of a new proletariat with a high proportion of uprooted immigrants. The Renault factory at Billancourt, on the outskirts of Paris, took on forty thousand new workers. France, which produced 254,000 vehicles per annum, was the world's second-largest automobile manufacturer, although of course still far behind the United States.

Agriculture, sheltered by protectionist policies, stagnated. Small-scale agricultural units of 10 to 20 hectares (25 to 50 acres), exploited by a single family of five to ten persons, predominated. The very small output of such farms was not enough to make the country self-sufficient. The majority of the peasant class found itself unable to acquire industrial products and set money aside solely for the purpose of increasing property holdings and rarely for investment. Between rural France, stagnant and in decline, and industrial France, growing rapidly but underrepresented on the political scene and ignored by the media, the opposition was silenced by the apparent, albeit temporary, consensus that, thanks to Poincaré, prevailed for a time. However, there were in fact two French nations between which the gap was widening: a rural France of landowning notables and small farmers that the political class supported against all comers, and an urban and industrial France that enjoyed almost no public support. The fissure between them was growing, and no one could be completely blind to the country's weaknesses vis-à-vis the emerging new powers: the United States, with its industrial strength, and the USSR, a potent new force and hotbed of subversion.

France was changing, but the elite, as a group, along with the broad middle class, stubbornly continued to believe that the rural areas were still the country's center of gravity. As they began to be aware of signs of

change, their concerns increased, and they feared unforeseeable consequences while deploring the rural loss of substance, the gradual disappearance of distinctive regional features, and the rising flood of standardized industrial products. This retrograde attitude virtually ignored industrial growth. For years, the majority of historians and economists were to continue to attribute the greater part of France's backward industrial position to the events of this period. Although the situation in rural areas tends to support this view, if we are to rely on contemporary discourse, large-scale industrial development would appear to contradict it.

The paradox rests in the fact that France was changing while its political discourse was managing to ignore the change—apart from a vague undercurrent of concern—and was continuing to exalt the virtues of savings and small industry at the country's endless agricultural fairs. The French dreamed of achieving industrial modernization without creating a working class, factories, or a rural exodus. The industry they wanted was to be a kind of rural manufacturing that would not upset the social balance and that would manage to combine agricultural, artisanal, and industrial activities. The majority of the French felt that the development of Normandy's cheese production, which was a combination of agriculture and small-scale rural industry, was exactly the kind of thing that was needed. In addition, the product was exportable. Ah, if only the broader economy could follow that peaceful example!

By chance, two contemporary events had occurred to encourage those French who were seeking signs of their country's return to its former greatness. A Norman dairywoman and a pair of aviators, each in their own way, served to reassure a worried France, which feared and resented continued decline as if it were somehow unfair. Like the Bréguet airplane with its Hispano engine flown by Costes and Le Brix, Marie Harel's Camembert in its little round box was destined to go around the world. Exported to every major country, it manifested in its own way France's universal presence and its industrial strength. On the one hand, the country possessed the advanced technologies that had enabled the daring deeds of its modern adventurers; on the other, it had its traditional regional products produced through the know-how of its modest but solid peasant women. With high-quality technology and excellence in gastronomy, France could continue to dream of triumphantly reconciling old and new, peasant and city dweller, agriculture and industry. The radical Republic

had its feet planted firmly on the ground. While former President Mille-  
rand had praised peasant labor, current President Doumergue, his eyes  
lifted to the skies, congratulated Costes and Le Brix.

Although Costes and Le Brix flattered national pride, their exploit also  
had its unsettling aspects, promoting as it did the power of a new tech-  
nology that was the fruit of modern industry. Aviation had of course  
played its part in battle during the Great War, but the nation felt that  
the debt was owed to the pilots who flew the planes and who were for  
the most part from the peasant class. Public opinion, nourished by the  
speeches of every French politician, believed that these men had once  
again upheld French grandeur and that it was also they who had paid the  
heaviest price. The war had left France with the belief that the country's  
strength and equilibrium came from its peasant class. The country was  
not against progress, but it rejected the achievement of progress at the ex-  
pense of the rural population and the tranquil order of the countryside,  
which were the solid bases of the French empire.

#### A Monument to Peace

In the ten years that followed the end of the First World War, every  
French village had a monument to commemorate its dead. Following the  
mayor and the village curé, agnostic laymen and practicing Christians  
marched together in half-Republican, half-Catholic ceremony. However,  
the repeated extolling of the heroism of the *poilus* (the French soldiers),  
although it strengthened the fiber of Republican nationalism, was of  
no help to France in meeting the challenges of peace; in facing up to the  
combined power of its allies, Great Britain and the United States; or in  
dealing with Germany's resurgence. Other forces and other skills had to  
be brought into play. There was a growing realization that the victory over  
Germany was not going to yield any dividends. New myths were needed  
to reduce new tensions and to ensure that the notion of the permanence  
of French values prevailed.

The celebration of Marie Harel and of Camembert had its role to play  
in this regard. The fact that her name had been forgotten meant little,  
since Camembert, whose greatness and prestige were already known, was  
an omnipresent expression of the permanence of rural values. It may seem  
surprising today, especially to those who do not salivate when confronted  
with a Camembert, that consumption of the cheese had a role in alleviat-

ing the concerns of French people in the late 1920s. Joseph Knirim would never have imagined that his favorite cheese would end up assuaging the anxieties of an entire nation. Let us turn to the columns of *Le Gaulois*, a newspaper whose very name expresses the desire to proclaim the nation's ancient roots and the permanence of an identity aloof from the convulsions of mere politics. For this chauvinistic publication, the monument to Marie Harel embodied the reassuring values handed down by tradition: "The effigy exudes strength, balance, a sense of labor and frugality. This is obviously a rural Frenchwoman over whose eyes no one would dare attempt to pull the wool."<sup>8</sup>

Such was certainly the message that the sculptor had intended to transmit. It was why his proposal had been chosen over the seven others submitted to the selection committee made up of Camembert producers and local notables. In selecting Eugène L'Hoëst's statue, the members of the sponsoring group were choosing a peaceful evocation of female labor. The monument to Marie Harel was in sharp contrast to the veritable embarrassment of monuments exalting heroism in combat. Postwar sculptors were working in a bull market, and the tiniest hamlet paid homage to its dead by erecting a monument. The theme was a given, as were its figures. Over the years, hundreds of sculptors were to depict proud *poilus* with flags unfurled. From 1920 to 1925, no fewer than thirty thousand public funerary monuments were erected, an average of sixteen per day over five years. This devotion to a single subject imposed its own style and terms of reference.

In contrast, the monument to Marie Harel is obviously a contemporary work, but it is a monument to peace and to the glory of peaceful industry, and the theme and the symbolism of peace have replaced those of war. The sculptor, all too familiar with warlike themes, proceeded to invert those signs in magnifying Marie Harel's pastoral activity. The war has little place in L'Hoëst's work. The fifty-four-year-old sculptor had a predilection for rustic scenes. His own personality is reflected in the statue of Jeanne d'Arc he created in 1921, which is quite unlike the usual bellicose depictions of the national saint. Instead, in a statue notable for its curves, he portrays her as a shepherd lass. The only sharp and salient elements in the composition are the maid's lifted breasts and the distaff, an obvious symbol of the female universe, which she holds like a lance. In 1905, he had created a monument to three professors of agronomy. A haut-relief in



white stone with three bronze medallions, it was erected in the park of the school of agronomics at Grignon. It, too, represents a young shepherdess gathering wild flowers amid her flock.

Warlike effigies are frozen in bronze, and the monuments to the fallen stand, sharp and menacing, in the center of town squares, near the city hall or the church. Sculpted in stone, the monument to the memory of Marie Harel was affixed to the wall by the portico of the public market. In the foreground, instead of a soldier, was a peaceful Norman dairywoman standing in front of a stele that depicted not a battlefield but a farm courtyard. The monument was not protecting a territory; it was welcoming commerce. There were no sharp edges, only rounded forms: the arch over the stele, the milk jug the woman supports on her hip. A Norman headdress replaced the soldier's helmet. The dairywoman, shod in wooden shoes, wore a fichu, an apron, a lace headdress, and a cross. The monument was not dedicated to those who had died for France but "TO THE FARMWOMEN OF NORMANDY." Just as the soldiers on the monuments were anonymous, the better to represent all who fought in the Great War, so the farmwoman sculpted by L'Hoëst was not offered as an exact portrait of Marie Harel but as the effigy of a Norman farmer's wife. Ten years after the Armistice, peace once again found representation in a public monument. The population's deep pacifism, evoked in some of the monuments to the fallen, was here given expression free from any reference to the war.

The vast majority of the French yearned for a future of peace, for the maintenance of their country's prestige, and for the preservation of a profoundly rural France. They regarded Camembert's success as testimony to the vigor and success of a reassuring form of technological modernity that was compatible with traditional order under the aegis of the Republic. The myth that was created, beginning in 1926, around the person of Marie Harel illustrates this synthesis between tradition and modernity, between rural activity and urban development.