

Parole de Clocher

Dig ding dong ! Bonjour, les frères Jacques !
 Cette cinquième volée sonnera en l'honneur du
 personnage sans doute le plus célèbre de
 Ploaré : René Théophile Hyacinthe LAENNEC
 qui donne son nom à notre rue principale, au
 square agrémenté d'une imposante statue et
 dont notre cimetière abrite la tombe.



BIRTH OF A VOCATION

René Théophile Hyacinthe Laënnec, son of Théophile-Marie Laënnec and Michelle Gabrielle Félicité Guesdon, was born in Quimper on the 17th of February 1781 and baptised in the Saint Mathieu church.

His father, previously a lawyer at the Parliament of Brittany, then Lieutenant of the Admiralty in Quimper, became Senechal of the Regales (episcopal jurisdictions and fiefs) and held the office of receiver of clergy taxes until the Revolution of 1789.

In 1786 his mother died, shortly after giving birth to a stillborn daughter. Like most of the family members she was suffering from the tuber, called at this time pulmonary consumption. Its eradication would become René's life mission as a doctor. René Théophile was not yet six years old at the time and will be affected by this loss for ever.

His father, both morally and materially incapable of looking after the three children (one daughter and two sons) left in his charge, entrusted them to his brothers' care; it is these uncles that were to give René the foundations of his faith, culture and vocation.



*Portrait of
 René Théophile Laënnec*



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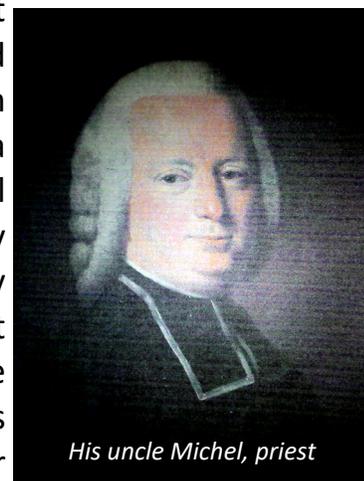
XVI^{ème} siècle

PLOARE
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His uncle Michel in Elliant

It was Michel-Jean Alexandre Laënnec, priest and doctor of the Sorbonne, who baptized René and would offer him both his affection and all the necessary fundamentals of a Christian life, along with a deep classical culture. René Théophile lived in the Presbytery of Elliant with his uncle and consequently learnt the Breton language through contact with the parishioners. Unfortunately, his uncle the parish priest was called for other functions by the Bishop of Treguier and it was no longer possible for him to take care of his nephew.



His uncle Michel, priest

His uncle Guillaume in Nantes

« Uncle Guillaume » in Nantes took over from his brother Michel.

Dr. Guillaume Laënnec, chief doctor at the medical school in Nantes, would inspire his nephew with both the desire and the persistence to study medicine.

René Théophile greatly admired his widely esteemed doctor uncle, and also held much affection for all his uncle's family; hence it was easy for him to follow the path traced out for him.



His uncle Guillaume, doctor

Medicine in Paris

In 1800, the family council took the painful decision to send René Théophile away to Paris to present his candidacy for the School of Medicine. He was hardly 19 years old. This brilliant and studious student was admitted as a doctor in medicine on the 11th of June 1804 after having defended his inaugural thesis with great talent: « *Hippocratic doctrine as applied to the practice of medicine* », in Latin. He proudly concluded his presentation with the words: « *I profess a free medicine* ». René Théophile had chosen his camp within the prestigious Paris School of Medicine - that of « *observational medicine* » - to which he would remain faithful for life.

His Parisian career is spectacular:

in 1812 he was appointed doctor at the Beaujon Hospital,

in 1814 he treated war victims at the Salpêtrière Hospital,

in 1816 he was appointed to the Necker Hospital where the whole of Europe's doctors followed his clinic.

The stethoscope and the mediate auscultation

René Théophile was not a scientist whose only aim was to make glorious discoveries. He was primarily a pragmatic person whose mission was to « *to cure* ».

But to do that it was necessary « *to know* » and above all « *to make sense of* » what happened inside the body, in this case in the lungs where diseases were incurable at this time.

He had already noted that a solid body, for instance the trunk of a tree, if hit at one extremity, will faithfully transmit to its other extremity the impression received.

Having used a rolled-up notebook as a cylinder during an auscultation, he was satisfied with the results and created what he called a « stethoscope » (from the Greek etymology: « chest » and « observe »).

He quickly improved his idea, shaping a wooden cylinder, hollowed out in its centre and broader at one end like a funnel.

Medicine also owed him the development of mediate auscultation through percussion. He carried on to contribute to progress in pathological anatomy due to his practice of precise autopsies.

In 1819 he published his treaty on « *mediate auscultation* » which was crowned with the prize of the Academy of sciences. His reputation was fast growing, so he couldn't refuse attending to the Duchess Madame de Berry, thus becoming the Court's official doctor. Subsequently he had to take on heavy teaching responsibilities at the creation of the Chair of Medicine in the « Collège de France ».

The dangers of clinical teaching and the harshness of the scientific environment weighed heavily on his health. But he always knew how to gauge his teaching responsibilities and protect his independence with exemplary tenacity. He treated the great names of this world, and, free of charge, many poor people, especially Breton soldiers suffering from typhus.

His aim: not glory and fortune but the relief of suffering and, when possible, full healing.

Kerlouarnec his homeland : « Medice, cura te ipsum ! » (= Doctor, cure yourself)



The manor house of Kerlouarnec

René's health hardly allowed him any respite. From childhood he had always had a sickly disposition that could at times cause worry. But the huge charge of work he had taken on in Paris often caused him to forget to look after his own health. The time inevitably comes when the body is exhausted and it's necessary to take a rest. These breathing spaces and fleeting moments of happiness were spent at the far west of Brittany, at the extremity of « Finistère », in his beloved « Cornouaille », more precisely in his homeland of « Kerlouarnec ». It was there that he finally felt himself come alive.

It was there he really felt at home.



The doctor Laënnec and his stethoscope

The noble manor house of Kerlouarnec, situated in the barony of Le Juch, had been bought by René's grand-father Michel Laënnec in 1753.

The house belonged to the Laënnec family and not to the Guesdons.

His uncle Guillaume was called the « *Laënnec de la Renardais* »; « *renard* » meaning « *louarn* » in Breton, thus giving the house its name: « *Kerlouarnec* ».

The house stood on the plateau of Ploaré, protected from the ocean winds by beautiful woodland; at its feet stood the small harbour of Pouldavid, the port of Douarnenez and the magnificent ocean bay.

At his mother Michelle's early death, René's father had to take over the management of the manor. As ever, his father had no interest in Kerlouarnec, so he neglected it, both the house and its land. His own mother's land!

From childhood **René Théophile** was motivated to take on the care of Kerlouarnec so he had to face his father with the problem. But with his well-known strength of will he managed to obtain the entire property of Kerlouarnec. His love story with Kerlouarnec only ceased at his death.

From time to time he travelled from Paris to rest, and as soon as he had some money he used it to make urgent repairs: reinforce the roof, bring the outbuildings back to working order, restore



the farm. This simple farmhouse had originally been bought to be used as a hunting lodge or for short holidays in the countryside. Nonetheless, René Théophile decided to live there permanently and this inspired him to imagine a multitude of projects which filled him with renewed vitality: to give the simple house greater prestige, give it a cachet that it had not enjoyed until now. So, he added a floor and built a turret where he installed a staircase. These extensions greatly enhanced the building and raised its standing.

He was for ever making improvements, modifying the gardens, planting trees, opening up paths. He noted down everything in large notebooks, applying as much precision as in his scientific works. He was never short of ideas and even planned, in his most optimistic moments, to build a tower at the highest point of the forest, a « *belvedere* » from which he could see the sea. Never was he so happy as when he wandered through his woods, towards the village of « *Kerlaz* », with his retrievers « *Kiss* » and « *Moustache* ».

Then he would come home, exhausted but at peace with the world.