

ART, LITERATURE, AND IDEALS OF FRENCH CANADA

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THE art, literature and ideals of a people are three subjects which blend into a complete and harmonious whole. These are but other words to express the striving of a race toward an intellectual and moral entity, the inner and outer manifestations, on the highest planes, of its collective self. Hence, to compress an adequate description of these manifestations in less than a dozen volumes or so would be very difficult indeed, and I fear that the space limitations of a *Review*—however hospitable—must prevent me from doing justice to such a vast subject. Had my readers been savants, I would not have attempted it. Without previous knowledge on their part, of the European sources of the French-Canadian mind, and of the historical circumstances which have shaped and directed the evolution of French-Canadian thought, it would have been absolutely essential to the expounding of this subject to delve deeply and at length into a long past era, and indeed to retrace the complete sequence of the Mother Country's intellectual activities since French Canada has elected to remain a localized, microscopic extension of France. However, an all too brief stay in Halifax in the spring of 1924 has proved to me that no friendlier and more personal knowledge of the outgrowth of French Canada can be found than in the Maritime Provinces, and this allows me to dispense with an historical foreword which otherwise would have been necessary to the understanding of this subject.

Indeed, this truly extraordinary growth and perpetuation of a national spirit undaunted by the reverses of fate, and experiencing a constant and successful self-development,—this progress of a people giving perfect and loyal devotion to a sovereign power under which it came through the workings of destiny and not by the customary national inheritance,—this growth and progress are well nigh incomprehensible to any but those who are familiar with the history of our country. Lastly, and before going any further into this subject, we must remember that the three words *art*, *literature*, and *ideals*, although mysteriously bound by that undefinable and common tie which unites all things of the mind, cannot lend themselves to a cohesive study in the case of French Canada.

They are three titles of three chapters which, together, could not as yet make a book.

It is not impossible (and, indeed, it has been done frequently) to analyze at the same time the art of a nation and its ideals—or the literature of a nation and its ideals,—or, again, the art and literature of a nation, and draw therefrom highly instructive parallels and illuminating conclusions. For instance, I believe that Greek sculpture and the Greek drama have deep and admirable points of resemblance; that the poetical and the pictorial arts of Italy bear astounding similitudes; and, more clearly still, that the Gothic cathedrals of France and the French mediaeval ideals are inseparable. But French-Canadian art and literature must needs suffer from the very brevity of the period during which they have been cultivated and, furthermore, from this very important fact that when they endeavoured to reflect any national ideals they obtained results more French than Canadian.

Time alone could assure the formation of a nationalized intellectual effort, and already we may see the proof of its influence when we read the purely Canadian poems of Ferland or Dreu, when we see the *Evangeline* of Henri Hébert and the magnificent lumbermen and ploughboys of our great sculptor Alfred Laliberté, or when we admire the blazing maple groves of Suzor-Côté and the snow-clad hills of *la Baie Saint-Paul*, gleaming in the blue radiance which the brush of Clarence Gagnon so deftly gives them.

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In considering the art—and by this I imply painting, sculpture, and music—or the literature of French Canada, I should like to impress one main consideration upon my reader's mind. Proudly I can say that the French-Canadians have covered as much ground in a century and a half as most other nations during five or six hundred years. By this I mean that a handful of adventurous soldiers, sailors and pioneers, widely scattered over a tremendous territory and seldom in contact with the extremely small nucleus of really cultured aristocratic, bourgeois, or clerical French living in the settlements of Quebec or Montreal, have developed into a great people boasting of poets, orators, painters and musicians, all thoroughly proficient in their various activities, and all endowed with those qualities of intellectual method, order, restraint and discipline which characterize French art and literature, and this in less than two hundred years:

The French population of the province of Quebec considers its faithfulness to the religion, language and tradition of France as its greatest title to glory. To our artists and *litterateurs* this fidelity is also a guarantee of merit and a safeguard against errors and fancies.

just; to the population in general it has been a guiding light. Important numerically, we believe that we have a mission, a message, a duty toward ourselves as French, toward our English brothers as French-Canadians, and toward the world at large as Canadians.

How have we given this message? How shall we perform this duty? On the one hand, by our activities in the field of art and letters; on the other by crystallizing our political ideals into definite formulas; and in the third place, by showing to the other nations that the cult of tradition is not incompatible with loyalty.

In 1760, the government of Louis XV abandoned 60,000 Frenchmen on the American continent. Our land became the home of the English conquerors and, had we been true to historical fate, we should have been swept away by this Anglo-Saxon wave in the course of a few years. But no. To this day, we are still a French race. The handful has become a great people of more than four million citizens, not including the regrettable exodus to the United States of America. Two million of us are in the province of Quebec. The others are in Ontario or New Brunswick, or doing yeoman service in the Prairie provinces, or again represented in the East by the outposts of this great army, the Acadians of Nova Scotia.

We are not, as it is commonly said and written, solely *Normands*. The founders of the colony included families from Bretagne, Picardy, Normandy, Burgundy, Charente, Anjou and the Basque mountains. Thus French Canada is a synthesis of France,—a miniature perhaps, but one which contains all her racial characteristics. With such an ancestry, it is no wonder that our progress in two hundred years has been equal, if not superior, to that of other races throughout five or six centuries. Hearty and strong physically, and morally healthy, we live in peace and unity in our wonderfully beautiful province of Quebec; and when we overflow its boundaries and unthinkingly settle over the border, we are still the only people who will not be absorbed, who will not blend in the great neighbouring melting pot where more than ten races have methodically and wilfully lost their racial characteristics. In the New England States, for instance, there are hundreds of thousands of us who have been struggling unwaveringly, parish by parish and for over forty years, in order that the catechism should be taught *in French*. How much more earnest and ardent, then, have we been in the very land which we have enriched with the sweat of our labour and the sacrifice of our patriots!

The Quebec descendants of these 60,000 Frenchmen have kept their language and their religion, their French customs and their

love for the Mother Country. But at the same time they have had the admirable talent to do all this without failing in their loyalty to Britain. They have given to Canada eloquent statesmen and orators, learned university professors and scientists, poets and historians, all bearing sound old French names and speaking the same French language which one hears to-day in Tours, Chartres or Poitiers. And still, these men have no greater desire than to consecrate the fruit of their talents and labour to the common cause of all British subjects, to the upholding and renown of the British Empire.

Indeed they must be praised for the latter, and they never should have been blamed for the former. It is one of the brightest spots of international psychology that certain races possess, to a high degree, the love of tradition and the pride of a glorious past. Since the French tree has such deep and powerful roots, since it has kept so jealously the treasury of its antique sap which periodically has blossomed forth in wondrous flowers and ripened into generous fruit, it is but logical, in the words of an eminent Frenchman, M. Louis Madelin, that the offshoots of this tree have given French fruit and French flowers, in spite of all strife and obstacles.

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Whoever says "French" in speaking of art, automatically suggests certain qualities of grace, charm, clarity and harmony. Let us now review briefly a few French-Canadian artistic manifestations, and see whether we have followed the road taken by our ancestors. It must, of course, be admitted without the slightest spirit of apology that our pictorial, sculptural and musical patrimony is not very abundant, and that enlarged photographs of the late Cousin Emma are still preferred, in certain social strata, to a reproduction of Ghirlandajo which would have cost many dollars less. But one can say with veracity that the French-Canadian farmer, at heart, is far from averse to the external manifestation of Beauty. Crafts, and the beautifying of the home, are naturally more accessible to him than the brush or the sculptor's mallet, and I feel quite sure that many a sombre Spanish canvas is less soul-satisfying than the colourful charm of a sunny Quebec garden, or the mellow light imprisoned in a bit of rose or lilac homespun from the looms of *La Malbaie*.

The persistent tendency to the survival of French sentiment and characteristics is found particularly in our French-Canadian *habitant*. Far from political dissension, although remarkably well informed on the subject, the soil holds him and will keep him. Cheerful, frank and hospitable, he is at work from dawn to dusk. In the cities, of course, the inevitable contact with various manifestations

of so-called civilization, and the insidious inroads of Americanism have somewhat modified this simplicity and rugged charm; but the essential factors have not changed, and, I believe, cannot change. The French-Canadian has in all things tact, grace and sincerity. And that is why, if we have not as yet many works of art, those which we have are always delightful, fresh and spontaneous.

More than an outline would be impossible, of course. The first years of the colony yield nothing of importance to the seeker or collector of masterpieces, beyond timid attempts at bead work, in the Indian fashion, which were for a time much sought after by the "élégantes" of Versailles. The pioneer's wife was too busy to wield even the fairylike embroidery needle of her native Bretagne. Still, if the higher artistic forms were neglected, as in the whole of the North American continent, we lay claim to a few interesting bits of furniture—bread boxes, bed-cupboards, tables, chairs and delicate spinning wheels—which would not have been unworthy of the Pennsylvania and Virginia craftsmen; and to a few dully coloured, but harmoniously conceived pieces of ceramics,—jugs, and pots, and bowls. I have known in Levis, near Quebec, a picturesque old fellow who was, I believe, the last representative of the potter's art. He shaped, tinted, and baked his own wares, and reproduced unconsciously every movement of the potters whom I had seen in Armenia.

Painting, as in all other countries, first appears in the form of timid attempts at reproducing religious scenes—altar pieces, saints, and carvings for altars and railings. Most of these works were painfully crude, however sincere. France had already outlived the silk-clad shepherds of Trianon and the quite unclad goddesses of the 1st and 2nd Empires, when Canada could not claim a single true artist, such a qualification being too lofty for such secondary toilers as Légaré (*circa* 1795), Hamel (1814), and Plamondon (1826). "The first artists" writes the eminent French painter and critic, M. Dyonnet, who has done so much for Canadian art, "were probably self-taught. One of the first to go to Paris to study painting was the Chevalier de Beaucourt, who was born about 1775. He returned to Canada, and practised his art, but it is not known whether he trained any pupils." An embryonic art school, a *maîtrise d'art* for wood carving and architecture, was also fairly active in 1800 at Saint-Vincent-de-Paul, near Montreal.

Such efforts, however, were scattered and deserve naught but passing mention. It can be affirmed that our first really noticeable painters—Bourassa, Huot, Franchère, Saint-Charles—did not attract the attention and respect of the public before 1880 or there-

abouts. Then, as in the case of literature, trips to Rome and Paris having become more accessible to thin pocketbooks, the Académie Julian and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts received French-Canadian students for the first time; periodical *salons*, or exhibitions, took place in Montreal; and an organized movement was launched, to which we owe the regular and daily attendance, since 1872, of hundreds of students in drawing, painting and modelling.

French-Canadian sculptors (like Philippe Hébert, and his son Henri), French-Canadian painters (like Henri Julien, Massicotte, Suzor-Côté, Leduc, Gill, Beau, Fabien, Lamarche) have given vibrant life to our local types and landscapes. They have been acclaimed by the European press and rewarded at the Paris *Salons*. There is scarce a gallery in France, England or Germany which does not own an etching by Clarence Gagnon, and on both sides of the Atlantic the masterly works in sculpture of Alfred Laliberté are being hailed with enthusiasm.

To-day we have in Montreal an *Ecole des Beaux-Arts* in which, from rudiments to the most advanced forms of mastery, painting, drawing, decorative art, sculpture and architecture are taught to an avidly receptive youthful generation. The province of Quebec may justly claim that for adequate and modern equipment, luxurious surroundings and excellence of teaching staff this institution has no second on the American continent. It is a new venture. It was inaugurated in October, 1923, and the seven hundred names registered on its books during the first four weeks following its opening are the best proof of the interest shown in art by young French Canada. The tuition is free, as the school is a provincial *State* institution. Canada owes this splendid innovation to the untiring efforts of a great French-Canadian, our Provincial Secretary, the Honourable L. Athanase David.

Of music less can be said. But I should not have dealt thoroughly with French-Canadian art without mentioning it. What description has been attempted of the development of painting could be applied to the development of our musical artists. The abundant store of musical folklore which we have inherited from our French fathers of the XVth and XVIth centuries has not been resorted to noticeably, as it is more interesting from the point of view of language and study of old customs than from that of melody or harmony. Thus it is that we have not, as yet, our national musician, our Grieg, or Rimsky-Korsakoff, or MacDowell. But a movement is on foot by which the countryside is carefully combed by experienced musicians, armed with reproducing phonographic disks, who visit the northern and lower-eastern regions of the province of Quebec,

and collect from the very mouth of elderly dames and "grand-pères" the lovely songs of yesterday. These songs are then written down and classified by periods and French provinces, and, eventually, we shall have a thorough musicographical library, where our young students may acquire inspiration and gradually give to French Canada the writers of national symphonies or operas without whom no country is artistically complete.

We have had a few composers of religious music: J. B. Labelle, Tremblay, Couture, Alexis Contant, Achille Fortier, whose fame did not reach the very high standing attained by Pelletier and Victoria Cartier, two artists of outstanding merit, whose works have been performed and praised in Europe as well as in America. But oratorios, masses, *motets* and cantatas are not sufficient for a people to lay claim to fame. In the field of *la musique profane*, especially, truly creative work must be accomplished before public recognition is merited, and that is, at present, in the hands of a very young school, whose leaders are actually in Paris after having won provincial scholarships, and who astound even this most blasée of all cities by their daring, novel and exquisite compositions.

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In the field of literature, it must be said once more that French-Canadian faithfulness to memory and tradition has been a truly prodigious phenomenon. This has been analyzed and commented upon by European critics and writers with something akin to awe; for the French-Canadians, in spite of time and distance, and having surrounded themselves with a wall of indifference to all external pressure and influence, have managed to live for two centuries in a perfect atmosphere of Old France, with its religion, language, folklore, proverbs and general idiosyncrasies.

And yet, we have had little time for the pen. We were too busy with the musket and the plough. But the day has come when we may justly claim an intellectual élite. We have writers and thinkers—I do not mean dreamers—and perhaps, until this last decade when the Honourable L. Athanase David has given a truly stupendous urge and encouragement to art and literature, perhaps we had not offered them sufficient praise and help. But all this is over, and the way is now wide open to those who, from the study of a glorious past and with the encouragement of a peaceful present and harmonious racial unity, are endeavouring to draw lessons, and crystallize definite formulas, which will eventually bring forth a French-Canadian literature, based on French culture, Canadian in its attributes and externals, and a future component part of the British intellectual offering to the world.

In 1839 a report was sent to Queen Victoria, in which Lord

Durham wrote: "One cannot conceive of a people more devoid of all that which might give strength and elevation to a nation than the French of Lower Canada. . . they have no history, they have no literature." Even at that date, the noble lord was wrong; but nowadays, I trust that an emphatic refutation would be more than superfluous. We have a history, and we have a literature. It would be idle to dwell on the former, but the following paragraphs will describe briefly our literary efforts and attainments.

True, our treasury of *belles-lettres* is not very large, but nevertheless the French-Canadians could invoke a thousand extenuating circumstances for this state of affairs, and answer without fear to any accusation of national indolence or concerted negligence. Briefly, one can say that all of French-Canadian literature is held within the nineteenth century. We had acquired its first elements in 1760, and then only did French writings in Canada attain any local significance or such characteristics as could authorize their being classified under the heading of "national literature."

One can scarcely imagine a ground less fertile, and circumstances less favourable to literary development than French Canada and its mental atmosphere on the morrow of its relinquishment to England. For a population of some 70,000 Canadians, it has been calculated that Lower Canada contained fewer than 60,000 books in all—barely the library of a modern scholar of comfortable means. Two or three *gazettes*, or *papiers-nouvelles*, offered mediocre translations of articles culled from English journals, or reprinted uninteresting French texts which had nothing to do with our country. Moreover, of the four periods into which our literary history is commonly divided, namely—1760 to 1800, 1800 to 1820, 1820 to 1860, and 1860 to 1900, one only, the last, was not made blood-stained by internal strife. Furthermore, the clergy (who have always, amongst Latin races, been at the basis of all intellectual culture) were during the three first periods too occupied with the heroic and gigantic task of colonization to do more than limit their teaching to scholastic and religious rudiments.

Let us add to all this a certain practical and severe spirit, the result of dealing constantly with economic problems; a species of amused nonchalance (in certain sections of the population) which killed in the bud any timid literary aspiration; and lastly, the indifference to things academic shown by the majority of the rich, who allowed meritorious works to remain unsold on the shelves of our two or three bookstores. All this is no mere imaginary verbiage. I have translated freely from a letter written by one of our poets, in 1805.

Gradually, however, worthy writers were added to our national Pantheon. Intelligent men took hold of our tepid and ill-informed weekly or monthly press, and we all know that, since 1800, our French newspapers have increased in interest, literary correctness, circulation, and size, until now their number exceeds one hundred. About 1850, colleges and other institutions of learning helped powerfully toward instilling order and discipline into the minds of a young generation far too much influenced by French romanticism and undigested Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The insurrection of 1837, the Constitution of 1840, called our men to the rostrum. We had, yet, no poets and no critics, no novelists; but the first two periods have at least produced political orators, historians, and essayists with a strongly philosophical turn of mind. These men were called Etienne Parent, Garneau, Chauveau, Taché, the truly remarkable Michel Bibaud who, in turn, reveals himself as a satiric poet, a witty journalist and an erudite historian, and Denis Benjamin, a scholar and painstaking compiler, whose works are to-day of the greatest utility to the student of Canadian history.

During the third period, the efforts of our intelligentia were directed mainly toward giving a distinct and personal public existence to the French-Canadian people. And since nothing reveals more completely the national self than a "literature," our leading minds devoted themselves to fortifying and developing French-Canadian literature. Bibaud, Garneau and Ferland wrote their memoirs; Papineau, Morin and Lafontaine proved themselves to be aggressive and inspiring orators; our only philosopher, who was also a brilliant journalist and sociologist, Etienne Parent, published admirable essays; and, at last, French Canada hailed her first truly great poet, Octave Crémazie.

During the fourth and last period of our literary evolution, the intellectual efforts of my people became more and more accentuated. Foreign travel and studies being, of course, facilitated by the trend of the times, internal peace being restored, and academic strivings no more considered as a prerogative of the idle, the morbid or the rich, a veritable host of writers appeared in French Canada, headed by the excellent poet Louis Fréchette, and numbering in its ranks such men as Benjamin Sulte, Routhier, Pamphile Lemay (the translator of Longfellow's *Evangeline*), Napoléon Legendre and Charles Gill. Nowadays, literary France gives as much attention and admiration to the poems of Albert Lozeau, Nelligan (who, in spite of his Irish name, has been perhaps our most sensitive Latin cerebral), and René Chopin, as to those of her own writers, and it is not unusual to read in a Parisian newspaper or on a brightly

coloured poster of the *boulevards*—"To-night," in this or that hall or theatre, "there will be an address on French-Canadian poetry" or "readings of the works of French-Canadian poets." Amongst our historians, the name of Garneau ranks first, and our writers of historical monographs, Messieurs Roy, de Celles, and Senators L. O. David and Chapais have shown a mastery of the French language equalled only by their thorough knowledge of our splendid past.

Strange to say, there is but one form of literary endeavour into the field of which French-Canadian writers have not ventured, and that is the novel. We have had, of course, numerous historical novelists—Gérin-Lajoie, de Gaspé, de Boucherville, Marmette and Tardivel—who clad historical events with a thin veil of love, intrigue, and adventure, and our delightful philosophical *romancière*, Laure Conan, but French Canada still awaits her writer of true romance.

There is another thing which must be recalled whenever French-Canadian literature is being discussed, and that is the foundation, in 1923, of a yearly prize of five thousand dollars, offered by the province of Quebec, for the best book of the current year. This we owe again to the Honourable L. Athanase David, our inspiring and inspired Provincial Secretary, who in the few years during which he has directed our Department of Education has championed the cause of intellectual French Canada and ridden down all obstacles like a veritable Saint Michael. Some sixty books were submitted to the jury last year, all published between April, 1922, and April, 1923. They were not all masterpieces, but they were sincere, and clean, and fine—a true pledge of our literary future, the forerunners of an army of writers who by blending their Latin sense of beauty with the mental discipline obtained through Saxon daily contacts will make a place for French-Canadian literature in the universal Pantheon and reveal to the world the ideals of French Canada.

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The ideals of French Canada! How definite, how tangible, but at the same time how very difficult it is to put them into words!

The coining of a definition is a very subtle and dangerous problem, and I hesitate to undertake it—especially as a definition, *tanquam definitio*, should be brief, while the one which I am about to write here far from fulfills this quality. Brevity, however, must be sacrificed to clarity, and I believe that the following is sufficiently comprehensive:—*Our aim is to attain the highest racial development, both socially and intellectually, while maintaining unwaveringly the religion and language of our forefathers, and abstaining from the*

highest collective act which would be contrary to the interests of the Dominion and of the Empire.

France had established in Canada (Cf. Emile Salome, *La Colonisation de la Nouvelle-France*) a feudal régime which constituted for many years her principal means of colonization. Successively, the fief became parish, village, borough, town, city. It is there, as in so many trenches dug in the sands of history, that the survival of the French spirit has carried on, silently and victoriously, but no less loyally. Look at a map of the province of Quebec; it is covered with French names most of which date from the Louis of Versailles. They are the imprint that France has left upon Canada. They are the seal of the Past, a seal left unbroken by the upheaval of 1764 and long years of uneasiness and misunderstandings, *and which must not be broken*. The generous Quebec Act of 1774, by which French law was restored to us, and in 1791 the dividing of Canada into the two self-governing provinces of Lower Canada and Upper Canada, were our rewards and a proof, added to innumerable others, of the fairness of British government. Honest constancy cannot be overlooked. The French-Canadians have not forgotten and never will forget this liberal attitude. Their motto is *Je me Souviens*, and the unity of purpose which binds together the various elements of our country is the inestimable result of 1794 and 1791.

In the province of Quebec, so ably administered by the Honorable L. A. Taschereau, we are at last masters of our fate and captains of our soul. We are at home; we have our own laws, the French laws; we are free to speak our language; and we do not forget that we owe all this to the broad-minded and fair policies of Britain. In return, our influence toward the common good has not been unimportant, and such names as Pierre Bédard, Joseph and Louis Papineau, Morin, Etienne Cartier and Wilfrid Laurier show the magnificent share that the French-Canadians have had in the law-making of our country and the elaboration of England's admirable colonial politics. Friendlier relations and mutual understanding are the order of the day. Since all good Canadians have a common task to perform, they must share common ideals.

Racial origins may clothe these details with superficial discrepancies and variations, but we all know, deep in our hearts, that there is but one thing that counts—Canada!