

# FRENCH CANADA: ITS SURVIVAL

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**S**URPRISE is often expressed at the survival of French Canada. It seems strange that a small ethnic group—sixty thousand people at the time of the Conquest, about three million now—should have preserved its identity for so long in the vast North American agglomeration. The theory of the “melting pot” would not apply to the shores of the Saint Lawrence.

From the plain fact of survival, outsiders are likely to presume that French-Canadians are not adaptable; that they are immune from assimilation; or that they will indefinitely maintain their aloofness in the face of Americanization.

These presumptions are groundless. Such at least will be my argument. The reader will reach his own conclusions.

## *Assimilation at work abroad.*

Many French-Canadians in the past have drifted away from their racial moorings. They can be found everywhere, from Labrador to the Pacific Ocean. They migrated singly, or in bulk—as they did during the economic crisis of the eighties. Now they form part of the new collectivities that have absorbed them body and soul. What is left of their French, after they have spoken English from thirty to fifty years, sounds foreign. The few who came back fitted no longer in their former homes. For a French-Canadian individually is an adaptable person. Like the ancient *coureurs-des-bois*, he loves an adventure and welcomes a change. Left to himself, he merges into his surroundings. Language is no barrier; he soon learns another.

But he is sociable; he would rather live with his fellowmen. Unlike the British, he is seldom found solitary, away from his kind. That is why French-speaking emigrants usually have gathered in clusters on the prairies, in British Columbia, Oregon, California or elsewhere. They are an important element in the population of New England; their numbers there reach nearly a million. Some others are rooted deeper in the country of their adoption; they were the first settlers, as in Louisiana, on the shores of the Detroit River, in Michigan and Wisconsin. For, at one time, much of North America, from the Saint Lawrence to the Gulf of Mexico,

was a French colony. Louisiana was ceded to the United States in 1803, by Napoleon, and remained French till much later.

If individuals can be assimilated, this also is true of compact groups, like those of Louisiana and New England. But only in reverse proportion to their size. The larger the group, the slower it is to disintegrate. There is fairly little left in Louisiana of the ways and customs of the ancient Acadians that went from Louisbourg to exile, nearly two hundred years ago; and they were the majority. The Creoles there are not really French. The language, already adulterated, is not everywhere passing to the new generation. So we hear. And the language is the *last* rampart of nationality, after the other traditions have faltered.

The French-Americans in the northeastern states of the Union are more easily recognizable. But they are no longer French-Canadians. From farmers they have become labourers and city folk in a day. Most of their ancestral traditions are gone. They are satisfied with the country of their adoption.

All in all, French-Canadians have become Americans in the proportion, roughly, of one to three. And the process is still at work.

Within the Canadian border, the old French settlement of the Detroit River (Windsor, Sandwich and Amberstburg) likewise is fast shedding its individuality. Most of the Acadian groups of the Maritime Provinces have gone a long way towards assimilation—farther than they would themselves believe.

#### *The Isolation of Quebec.*

The major unit of Quebec is left to consider—well over two million French-Canadians, speaking their native language, Catholic, and supposedly conservative. Nationality stands here on firm ground; it is aware of itself—if not at times self-conscious—and is determined to preserve its birthrights. The French themselves acknowledge its existence; they seldom question the fact of their stability.

For over a century after the fall of New France, French-Canadians (or *Canadiens* as they were called) remained in majority on the Saint Lawrence. They were over eighty thousand to a few hundred British, a score of years after the Conquest. French Canada then was a force in itself. It was self-supporting. British immigrants—the Scottish in particular—intermarried with them and lost their nationality. Meuron and Darmstadt regiments of the American war were disbanded in Quebec, and were assimilated. This happened likewise to many British soldiers disbanded after the Napoleonic wars, or to Irish immigrants after 1830. My

paternal grandmother was one of these, and she no longer remembered English in her old age.

But the tables have turned. Quebec entered Confederation in 1867, when it became a minority. It is now part of the vast North American system of capitalistic exploitation. In sheer numbers it amounts to less than three against well over a hundred millions. It cannot help in most ways but swim with the stream.

The Secession of the American colonies soon after the Conquest furnished a vital alternative to French Canada—that of virtually entering the Union, or of keeping aloof, if it could get concessions from Great Britain. Their Church used this opportunity to secure its own rights. Mgr. Briand, the bishop, went to London and received full satisfaction. His clergy, under his instructions, saved the day for Albion. And it was the only well-organized form of authority at the time. Yet there were insurgents along the Saint Lawrence. At Ile d'Orleans, on the south shore, and elsewhere, pro-American riots took place. A few members of the clergy would have favoured joining forces with the rebels. I have seen bits of songs from their hand in parish records, in which they accused their bishop of selling the country to the enemy. Some British merchants in Quebec were cautious, while in doubt as to the American issue; they would jump with the cat—their interests being at stake.

Had the clergy favoured the Union or the American forces captured Quebec—they came near it; Montgomery fell at Quebec's very doors—French-Canadians would have swung at an early date from the negative policy of isolation to that of neighbourly co-operation. They would have saved themselves most of the political struggles that have since exercised their vigilance; but perhaps *at a price*—their own nationality. Semi-independent as a separate state, free of the colonial stigma and petty vexations that created nationalism, they would have been happily wed to the Stars and Stripes, like their Louisiana brothers. Satisfied, perhaps more prosperous, they might to-day count themselves among the so-called hundred per cent. Americans. Not without reason; they had ventured to these shores some time earlier than the advent of the *Mayflower*.

*Survival is due to tradition.*

In spite of French Canada's aloofness and the political feuds that awakened national consciousness, it is doubtful whether it would have survived without another factor, I mean the traditions of its country and town folk.

Custom, handicrafts and oral traditions for a long time were the outstanding features of French Canada. Therein lay, as in

the hair of Samson, the secret of its vitality in the face of adverse circumstances. A century after the fall of Quebec, the colony remained as French as the first day, not in political allegiance, but in the spirit and the blood. Its traditions continued unimpaired. The influx of newer elements, such as spread yearly from Paris to the provinces, ceased with the severance of relations with the mother country. Deep-seated changes renovated France after the Revolution and the wars of Napoleon. But the Saint Lawrence was too far removed for even a repercussion. Canadians, besides, professed no gratitude for a former government that often had neglected their interests in the colonial days, or relinquished them to Great Britain, in the Treaty of Paris. They reluctantly accepted the saying that when the house is on fire, no one cares for the barn. Yet the Acadians hold the same grudge for the seeming indifference of Quebec to them at the time of their Dispersion.

When Canada was thrown upon its own resources, after the Conquest, it soon regained confidence in itself. Its handicrafts largely provided for the needs of the rural population. Not many goods reached the rural settlements from the outside world.

The most typical instance of revival was that of architecture and wood-carving, after 1780. Mgr. de Laval, the first bishop of New France, had founded a school of arts and handicrafts at Cape Tourmente, at an early date—1672. He realized that the colony could not prosper unless it were self-supporting. Many trades were transplanted here from the motherland. The census for 1744 holds a list of no fewer than sixty distinct handicrafts that were practised in Quebec alone. Some of these were practically in the hands of guilds in the old style.

Architecture had already gone through two periods since the beginning, that of the early masters and their independent successors, De Lery, the LeVasseurs, Labrosse, and many others. After the Conquest, two schools came into existence, those of the Baillargés, in Quebec, and of Quevillon, at Ile-Jésus, near Montreal. Their architecture was in keeping with the traditions of the French renaissance, firmly implanted here. Wood-carving was practised on a large scale, from 1780 to 1850, for church decoration and domestic furniture. It formed the largest local industry of the day, and reached a high point of excellence and prosperity soon after 1800. What is left of their work, and there is much of it—as well as silver work—enables us to judge of their high standards and personal achievements.

French culture not only survived after the Cession of Quebec, but thrived for many years.



The clergy and religious orders were at the time—are to this day—the chief guardians of school education and learning. The crafts took care of their own perpetuity, through the system of masters training apprentices for a number of years. The school of carving, under Quévillon, at Ile-Jésus, is a good instance, though it lasted only from 1802 to 1820.

It may be remembered that French Canada was mostly rural. The bulk of its traditions was oral, that is, conserved and transmitted without the help of writing or school education—merely by word of mouth. Folk songs, tales, manual arts and devices were its innate form. The wealth of Quebec in this domain is hardly surpassed anywhere. Over 6,000 folk song texts and 4,000 melodies have already been collected, and are conserved at the National Museum at Ottawa. Many of them are of great beauty and antiquity. Hundreds of folk tales have been gathered. Old furniture, wood-carvings and artifacts are eagerly sought by curio dealers and museums. All these heirlooms have descended indirectly from the storehouse of ancient French troubadours, of Gothic and Renaissance art, or of classic antiquity. Hence their refinement and distinction. They are the fruit of culture, not of rusticity. The clergy and the educated city people themselves are largely of rural stock. So French Canada on the whole owes its national traits to its traditions and country settlers.

Should these traditions remain alive, survival might continue indefinitely, as in the past. But are they?

It was enough that two Sulpician fathers of Montreal should have seen James O'Donnell's Gothic church in New York, to kill a Canadian tradition that was 150 years old. A new Notre-Dame church was to be erected under their direction. As they admired the New York temple, they engaged O'Donnell to build one like it for them. All Quebec mistook the vast structure for a marvel, perhaps for its size; nothing like it had been seen here before. Protestant Gothic henceforth was the style wanted in Quebec. O'Donnell in Montreal and Peachy in Quebec were the new law. The French renaissance fell into disfavour. Berlinguette, the heir of Baillargé and Quévillon, gave up his business and built railroads. Architecture was the most firmly established of the traditional arts in the colony; it kept hundreds of hands busy. Yet it gave way—before 1850—to other things from without, in this instance not for the best.

Other manual arts likewise have come to the end of their long journey. Rural life has been robbed of its privacy and self-confidence. It has withered up under the dust of automobiles. Quebec

is becoming industrialized. Houses used to be built of stone or heavy logs; their roofs were hipped in the old Norman fashion. They are being razed to the ground, just because the people prefer American cottages with jig-saw trimmings or no trimmings at all, or plain suburban match boxes. Spinning and weaving still survive, but mostly for tourist use and only in a few counties—Charlevoix, Montmorency, Quebec. Folk songs and tales are dying out. Oral traditions and customs no longer are the staying power of the race.

It comes to what I said at the beginning. A French-Canadian looks for a change, loves an adventure, is a creature of fashion. In a word, he is adaptable. He hates being behind the times. What he would fight to preserve, were his right to it questioned, he is casting aside with contempt. His heritage is becoming dead letter.

After years of observation, I have come to believe that French Canada will accept its fate with complacency, whatever it is, provided *it seems* to come from within. Catholicism will perpetuate itself in Quebec; it is a powerful institution. But it is Roman—not French-Canadian. It does not concern itself primarily with language or race; it is universal. The language may not be so secure. It will be left to take care of itself. It may stay, though bilingualism is in the ascendant. Yet grape juice unawares may fill the old bottle of champagne. Survival in the past is not criterion for the future. Conditions now are different. The spirit of conservation is broken. The world is on the move.