June 1993

The Development of the Quebecois Identity: Literary and the Historical Images

J. I. Little

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Quarterly, Volume 29, no.2, June 1993, p.126-135

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
The Development of the Québécois Identity: Literary and Historical Images*

by J. I. LITTLE

While English Canadians are engaged in a never-ending identity crisis, the cultural uniqueness of French Canadians has been ensured by the very fact that they are a small minority in a largely English-speaking continent. Furthermore, the threat of assimilation has made the French-Canadian élite particularly anxious to promote the unique features of their culture. But to recognize that a people has a distinct historical identity is one thing, to describe it without resorting to stereotypical images quite another. The concept of a cultural identity is an abstract one, and it is largely defined by writers and artists whose particular biases and motivations act as distorting filters to the reality of popular hopes, beliefs, and daily lives.

The ideology of nationalism in particular has fostered images which have often been closer to some mythological ideal than to life as it was actually lived. Nowhere is this more true than in French-speaking Quebec where the writing of history and literature has traditionally played an important role in the struggle for “la survivance.” While gritty realism and scientific analysis have long since replaced the romantic vision fostered by novelists and historians of the past, a new consensus has remained elusive in large part because of the intensity of the ongoing nationalist debate and the increasing complexity of modern Quebec society. The term Québécois rather than French Canadian or Quebecker will be used here to signify that we are including neither the French-speaking minorities of the other Canadian provinces, though their historical and cultural links with Quebec are strong, nor the English-speaking minority of Quebec.

Rather than attempt a simple outline of the evolution of the Québécois identity, it would be more honest and revealing to trace briefly how interpretations of that identity have themselves evolved during the past century and a half. We will briefly examine literature as well as history, both in English and French, referring to English translations wherever possible. Historians may present a more objective view of reality than do novelists and poets, but it is the latter who explore the soul. Likewise, Québécois writers no doubt have a better claim to understanding their own culture, but, until recently at least, English-Canadian writing has made a greater impact on how the English-speaking world perceives Quebec society. Finally, even if we gain greater insight into the ideology of the

* My colleague, Kathy Mezei, was kind enough to offer her expert advice during the writing of this paper.
cultural élites than into the "mentalité" of the masses, it should be remembered that by definition élites are in a position to ensure the dissemination and absorption of their ideas and values at the popular level.

In his comparative study of French-Canadian and English-Canadian literature, Ronald Sutherland observes that writers in both camps have been "guilty of taking a small segment of the other society, albeit shaped into mythic reality, and using it as a substitute for the complex whole."

Despite the lack of mutual understanding and the often difficult relationship between the country's two founding cultures, however, English-Canadian nationalists have tended increasingly to view the bilingual nature of this country as one of its chief identifying characteristics, and therefore a source of strength rather than weakness. The image of the Québécois that emerges from English-Canadian literature is for the most part a sympathetic one.

Even in the Victorian era, according to literary historian Carole Gerson, English-Canadian writers were fascinated with the French Régime because of their own prosaic, materialist society’s desire for significance and adventure. They saw in New France "a unified, self-contained world, founded on an heroic past and composed of individuals representing distinct class and social types, secure in their language, religion, history, and traditions." William Kirby’s *The Golden Dog* (1877) is one well-known example, preoccupied as it is with the romantic settings, characters, and folklore associated with Old Quebec. Kirby’s search for the desired “vision of vanished grandeur” (Northrop Frye’s phrase) is illustrated in his opening paragraph where the Swedish scientist, Peter Kalm, speaks to Count de la Galissonnière, Governor of New France:

"See Naples and then die!" That was a proud saying, Count, which we used to hear as we cruised under the lateen sails about the glorious bay, that reflects from its waters under the fires of Vesuvius. We believed the boast then, Count. But I say now, ‘See Quebec and live forever!’ Eternity would be too short to weary me of this lovely scene - this bright Canadian morning is worthy of Eden, and the glorious landscape worthy of such a sun rising."

As the nineteenth century progressed, French Quebec became a source of quaint contemporary material for the American magazine market in local colour and folk realism. Duncan Campbell Scott’s *In the Village of Viger* (1896) is an example of this genre, though an exceptional one due to its literary merit and its acknowledgement of the social impact threatened by the expanding city of Montreal.

3. For an analysis, see Gerson, pp. 113-18.
4. Gerson, pp. 110, 123-27. This was the period when some of the wealthiest and most prestigious families in North America began to build summer homes on the north shore of the St Lawrence area in the remote Murray Bay area, where they felt the peasantry had been unspoiled by modern industrial society. See Philippe Dubé, *Charlevoix: Two Centuries at Murray Bay* (Kingston and Montreal, 1990). Not surprisingly, the same stereotypes are to be found in British writing on Quebec. See R.G. Moyles and Doug Owram, *Imperial Dreams and Colonial Realities: British Views of Canada, 1880-1914* (Toronto and Buffalo, 1988), Chapter 4.
5. Gerson, pp. 130-31.
It was too true that the city was growing rapidly. As yet its arms were not long enough to embrace the little village of Viger, but before long they would be, and it was not a time that the inhabitants looked forward to with any pleasure. It was not to be wondered at, for few places were more pleasant to live in. The houses, half-hidden amid the trees, clustered around the slim steeple of St Joseph's, which flashed like a naked poniard in the sun. They were old, and the village was sleepy, almost dozing, since the mill, behind the rise of land, on the Blanche had shut down.

Some of the dialect poems of the immensely popular William Henry Drummond refer to the temptations of the New England textile towns, but otherwise they too caricature the carefree, timeless routine of the French-speaking "habitant." Thus, "How Bateese Came Home" describes how a farmer's son puts on airs after his first visit home from Central Falls, Rhode Island, then several years later returns with nothing:

I see Bateese de oder day, he's work hees fader's place
I t'ink mese'f he's satisfy - I see dat on hees face
He say "I got no use for State, mon cher Napoleon
Kebeck she's good enough for me - Hooraw pour Canadaw."

Drummond's popularity was such that one of his volumes, *Johnny Courteau and Other Poems*, went through ten printings between 1901 and 1907. *The Habitant* (1897) was reissued as late as 1959 and 1961, but Drummond has since been shelved, apparently to avoid offending modern French-Canadian sensibilities.

Drummond himself believed that, far from pandering to popular prejudices, he was engaged in a "wholehearted 'fight' for national unity." For better or worse, however, his twentieth-century successors retreated from the subject of French Quebec as a source of literary inspiration long before the controversy over voice appropriation arose in the United States. Hugh MacLennan's *Two Solitudes* (1945) is an exception. Indeed, it is one of the few Canadian novels ever to deal with the fundamental problem of French-English relations in Canada. Another notable anomaly is A.M Klein's *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems* (1948). Though published in the postwar era, when Quebec was anything but a rural backwater, Klein would still refer to the front-porch rocker as "a symbol of this static folk." "The Spinning Wheel," however, evokes the darker side of rural society:

Symbol it still exists; the seigneury still,
though now drab and incorporate, holds domain
pre-eminent; still, to his power-foaming mill
the farmer brings his grain
his golden daughters made banality.

8. Thompson, p. 684.
To be fair to English-Canadian writers, French language literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also cultivated the image of a God-fearing, simple peasant folk, though for explicitly nationalistic reasons. The dominant fictional genre was the "novel of the soil," or, more accurately, the "roman du territoire" since it largely concerned the expansion of settlement. The aim was to encourage the surplus population of the seigneuries to colonize the province's peripheral townships rather than leave for the United States. One of the first French-Canadian works of fiction, Antoine Gerin-Lajoie's Jean Rivard (published in two parts in 1862 and 1864) is full of practical advice for potential colonists. However, there ends its value as a reflection of the average settler's life on the marginal second frontier of Quebec. Indeed, this novel reveals the petite bourgeoisie's class interest in promoting colonization, for the hero is a well-educated young man who becomes the leading social and economic figure in the new community.

The colonization theme climaxed with Louis Hémon's classic Maria Chapdelaine, first published in 1914 and still widely read in English as well as French. By the time Ringuet's Trente arpents (1938, translated as Thirty Acres) was published, the American border was closed by the Great Depression, and the province's colonization program had essentially become a welfare measure. Not surprisingly, this novel marks a transition to a more fatalistic view of rural life in Quebec:

Sunrise follows sunrise and brightening skies melt the snow and free the earth, which in turn thrusts up towards the heavens shoots born of hot July days, when the sun's rays shine almost directly down onto the furrows and burst open the seed embedded in the soil. The crops grow taller and taller, until men come to rob the ear of the grain which Nature meant for its perpetuation, but which they arrogate to themselves and devour as a reward for their trivial intervention in the order of the universe.

Finally, with the 1960s, novels such as Marie-Claire Blais's savagely ironic Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel (1965, translated as A Season in the Life of Emmanuel) would reject the agrarian ideal as a cruel hoax. Only with the rise of social realism as a genre after World War II, well after Quebec had become a predominantly urban province, did working-class society become a subject for French-Canadian novels. Examples are the New England section of Thirty Acres, Gabrielle Roy's Bonheur d'occasion (1945, translated as The Tin Flute), and Roger Lemelin's Les Plouffe (1948).

Perhaps it was inevitable that an educated élite, preoccupied with French Canada's survival in a predominantly Anglo-Protestant continent, would sanctify its traditional cultural traits. Even during the Rebellion of 1837-38 the radical patriot leader, Louis-Joseph Papineau, refused to denounce seigneurial land

10. See Bernard Proulx, Le roman du territoire (Montreal, 1987).
tenure or the privileged status of the Catholic Church. The failure of the rebellion effectively ensured the increasingly ultramontane-oriented priesthood’s control over schools and other social institutions, with the result that not only writers of fiction, but historians as well, were pressed into the service of mythologizing French Quebec’s Catholic and agrarian destiny. They would remain true to their assigned mission throughout the next hundred years. 14

The decline of the Church’s influence over the intellectual élite in the post-World War II era was marked by the emergence of a neo-nationalist historical school whose chief spokesmen were Maurice Séguin, Guy Fréгуalt, and Michel Brunet. These secular nationalists argued that the colony of New France had essentially been a commercial and bourgeois-dominated environment. It followed that the British Conquest in 1763 was to blame for “decapitating” the progressive secular élite, whose members returned to France, thereby condemning the “Canadiens” to economic and political domination by the Anglo-Protestant merchant-official class, and to socio-cultural domination by the Catholic Church. 15 The message in terms of Quebec’s ongoing relations with English Canada was obvious, and the impact upon the policies of the Quiet Revolution and the growth of the separatist movement was considerable.

This debate is too politically charged to have ever been resolved, though articles by José Igartua and Claude Couture have done much to put it to rest by revealing the historical misconceptions on both sides. 16 Indeed, as Francophones have recaptured increasing control over the Quebec economy, historical studies have begun to stress the earlier economic successes of their business class. 17 The central historical debate has shifted to the nature of the habitants’ response to the rising market economy in the early nineteenth century, with Fernand Ouellet again representing the chief bête noire of the dominant nationalist school. At stake is the question of whether an economically backward peasant class turned in desperation to the nationalism espoused by the anti-capitalist liberal professionals who dominated the Legislative Assembly, or whether an increasingly market-oriented class of farmers was simply demanding the basic national rights defined by a progressive petite bourgeoisie. 18 The parallel with the contemporary political-constitutional debate is again obvious.

Once again, some of the sting has been removed from the historical debate by a historian who approaches the question from a different perspective. Allan

18. Two of the many publications relating to this subject are Fernand Ouellet, Lower Canada 1791-1840: Social Change and Nationalism, trans. Patricia Claxton (Toronto, 1980); and Gilles Paquet and Jean-Pierre Wallot, Lower Canada at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century: Restructuring and Modernization, Canadian Historical Association, Historical Booklet No. 45 (Ottawa, 1988).
Greer argues that while the habitants placed self-sufficiency ahead of market production, much like any other pre-industrial rural society, political radicalization was nevertheless a rational, affirmative development rather than a desperate reaction to an agricultural crisis. Greer’s image of an unstratified, independent peasant society may be reminiscent of the old clerico-nationalist interpretation of an agrarian golden age, but it differs in one important respect. To the limited extent that he even mentions the Church, Greer associates it with the oppressive seigneurial class in its economic exploitation of the rent-paying censitaires. As population pressure on the land intensified in the early nineteenth century, seigneurial obligations increased. Consequently, the Rebellion of 1837-38 was essentially a peasant revolt, not an uprising inspired and led by the petit-bourgeois nationalists as historians of all schools have heretofore assumed. The feudal elements that were banished by the liberal historiography of the 1950s and 1960s have thus returned with a vengeance, but in a different guise than that depicted by the nineteenth-century romantic novelists.

Quebec historians have been too preoccupied with the nature of the rural society and economy during the pre-Rebellion era to pay much attention to the impact of industrial capitalism on rural society after mid-century. It is clear that the wheat crop failures of the 1830s and the potato blight of the 1840s reinforced a trend towards the production of oats for the timber shanty market, but, paradoxically, the lumber industry also had a retarding effect on agricultural commercialization. By providing an alternative source of income for many young men through seasonal labour, it delayed the consolidation of farms in the long-settled seigneurial zone, and facilitated the colonization of marginal land north of the St Lawrence and on the Appalachian plateau.

Church and state did their best to promote this colonization movement, though essentially in reaction to emigration out of Quebec rather than to urbanization within Quebec, as was long assumed. Gérin-Lajoie’s heroic Jean Rivard is not simply a settler, he also establishes industries which will help sustain the local agricultural economy. But the reality was that colonization brought poverty in most cases, even while it failed to prevent the exodus of half a million Québécois to southern New England cotton mill towns by the end of the century. Here, as in Montreal, their birth rates remained high, though not in response to the dictates of the Church so much as out of economic necessity. Recent research has suggested that children’s wages were needed to raise the

19. Allan Greer, Peasant, Lord, and Merchant: Rural Society in Three Quebec Parishes, 1740-1840 (Toronto and Buffalo, 1985); and Allan Greer, The Patriots and the People: The Rebellion of 1837 in Rural Lower Canada (forthcoming). Greer’s socio-economic interpretation is inspired by Louise Dechène’s path-breaking Habitants et marchands de Montréal au XVIIe siècle (Paris and Montréal, 1974), now available in English as Habitants and Merchants in Seventeenth-Century Montreal (Kingston and Montreal, 1992).
21. See Normand Séguin, Agriculture et colonisation au Québec (Montréal, 1980); René Hardy and Normand Séguin, Forêt et société en Mauricie (Montréal, 1984); J.l. Little, Nationalism, Capitalism, and Colonization in Nineteenth-Century Quebec: The Upper St Francis District (Kingston and Montreal, 1989); and J.l. Little, Crofters and Habitants: Settler Society, Economy, and Culture in a Quebec Township, 1848-1881 (Kingston and Montreal, 1991).
working-class family's income above the poverty line. Unfortunately, the result was that succeeding generations remained stuck in the poorly paid labour-intensive industries, much as depicted in Gabrielle Roy’s *The Tin Flute* or, more recently, the plays and novels of Michel Tremblay.

At the same time, of course, many Québécois were involved in business enterprises, but their entrepreneurs tended to remain cut off from the technological knowledge necessary to launch manufacturing industries. Indeed, most of Montreal’s first factories were not established by the local English-speaking merchant élite either, but by immigrants from Britain and the United States. Where Québécois did have the necessary technological expertise, such as in the shoe industry, they faced monopolistic control by foreign-owned corporations. Even in the rural-based lumber industry, dependence on British and American markets fostered English-speaking control, a control sustained by the Canadian system of concentrating crown timber leases in the hands of a few powerful companies. External domination was further intensified with the rise of the pulp and paper and hydroelectric based industries in the late nineteenth century, dependent as they too were upon foreign technology, capital, and markets.

Quebec novels reflected an increasing resentment towards that domination: “Around us have come strangers we scorn as foreigners. They have taken nearly all the power; they have taken nearly all the money.” This statement by Maria Chapdelaine’s father became the refrain for Félix-Antoine Savard’s poetic and bitterly defiant *Menaud, maître-draveur* (translated as *Master of the River*), first published in 1937, and identified by one literary critic as the first “Québécois” novel. The political message became more assertive in the 1960s - the years of the famous Quiet Revolution - when novels such as *Prochain épisode* (1965) by Hubert Aquin and *Le Couteau sur la table* (1965, translated as *Knife on the Table*) by Jacques Godbout dealt sympathetically with the militant separatist movement. The death of the long-serving Premier Duplessis and the victory of the LeSage Liberals in 1960 had unleashed years of pent-up frustration and stimulated an

23. See, for example, Michel Tremblay, *La grosse femme d’à côté est enceinte* (Montréal, 1978), translated by Sheila Fischman as *The Fat Woman Next Door is Pregnant* (Vancouver, 1981).
28. See Jacques Pelletier, *Lecture politique du roman québécois contemporain: essais* (Montréal, 1984), pp. 2-5. Aquin’s novel was translated by Penny Williams as *Prochain Episode* (Toronto, 1967), and she also translated *Knife on the Table* (Toronto, 1968).
appetite for revolutionary change. With the belated but dramatic rise of an actively interventionist state, the provincial government not only took nearly all control of the education system away from the Church, launching a wide network of state-run colleges and universities, it also became directly involved in the economic sector, its major coup being the nationalization of the hydroelectric industry in 1963. With the concurrent explosive growth in the civil service, a state-centred French-speaking élite emerged, generally identified as the "new middle class." Additional room for social mobility was provided by the English-Canadian exodus, itself spurred by restrictive language legislation and the threat of political separation. Between 1970 and 1978, the number of Francophones in Quebec's management and administrative sector increased by 20,000, while the number of "others" in these positions actually decreased by 8000. In the scientific and technological sector, the same two groups increased by 26,000 and only 271, respectively. Not surprisingly, therefore, the growth in average income for Francophones easily outstripped that of non-Francophones in the same period - 24.5 percent to 16.5 percent.

To take two indicators of the improved standard of living in Quebec, between 1950 and 1974 the number of automobiles per 100 people quadrupled, from 9 to 36, while the ratio in neighbouring Ontario increased from 27 to 40. In 1950 Quebec's infant mortality rate was 50 per 1000, while that of Ontario was 30 per 1000. By 1974 the rate in the two provinces had equalized at 15 per 1000. There are also quantifiable indicators of the delayed impact that urbanization had on French-Canadian cultural mores, such as reflected in the birth rate, which became the lowest in North America, or the divorce rate, which skyrocketed from 59/100,000 inhabitants in 1950 to 200/100,000 in 1974. At this point, the rate in largely Protestant Ontario was actually lower, at 188/100,000.

Indeed, the "normalization" of Québécois society so sought after by René Lévesque had some disturbing implications for his "sovereignist" Parti Québécois after it rose to power in 1976. Not only was the fast-growing French-speaking business class becoming less dependent on government assistance and increasingly tied to the North American market, but heightened material expectations in a declining economy did little to encourage popular support for constitutional gambles. Consequently, the much-delayed sovereignty-association referendum was defeated in 1980, and the demoralized Parti Québécois was finally driven from power five years later. A certain disillusionment with nationalism as an all-consuming ideal was already discernible among Québécois novelists a decade earlier. Having lost much of its fervour, the separatist cause appears to persist largely in response to the stubborn refusal of English Canadians to accept any form of special status for Quebec, though this intransigence could still bring the

29. For an excellent socio-political analysis of the period from the 1950s to the recent past, see Kenneth McRoberts, Quebec: Social Change and Political Crisis, 3rd edition (Toronto, 1989).
32. Pelletier, pp. 7-9.
breakup of Canada.

Because nationalism had become a kind of secular religion for many Québécois, the disenchantment they felt with the defeat of the 1976 referendum was palpable. In 1974 the ratio of psychiatric admissions remained considerably lower in Quebec than in Ontario - 193 vs 341/100,000. A somewhat less marked discrepancy also existed in the statistics for suicides: 10.5/100,000 in Quebec vs 14.0 in Ontario. By 1982, however, Quebec’s suicide rate had climbed to an alarming 17.0/100,000, while the national rate was only 12.8/100,000. Within the province, Francophones were one third more prone to taking their own lives than were others, and youths were the most vulnerable group. The same pattern persists today, with suicides the chief cause of death for those aged twenty to thirty-nine years. In rejecting one cliché, therefore, we must be wary of adopting a new one - in journalist Lise Bissonnette’s sardonic words: “the nouveau Québécois, business-minded, entrepreneurial, dynamic, who seems to have been born suddenly in the 80s, in all his fashionable clothes, from a parent generation of less confident, more narrow-minded and defensive people.”

Certainly, Quebec society did not stand still prior to the Quiet Revolution. The neo-nationalist historians and the novelists of the postwar era challenged the status quo, and recent studies have revealed a surprising degree of militancy within the Catholic-sponsored farm and labour movements as they moved toward laicization. But the Church was nevertheless able to ensure that traditional institutions and values persisted to a considerable degree in the face of rapid industrial and urban development. While its influence may have been on the wane by the 1950s, the virtual collapse of the Catholic Church after 1960 did represent a revolutionary development for Quebec.

Any attempt to define a concept as nebulous as a people’s identity is fraught with the dangers of ethnic stereotyping. There has never been a single Québécois identity even within the same socio-economic class, much less outside it. But the French-speaking Quebeckers insist with some justification that they are a distinct society within Canada, for they represent a large majority in a province where they share a common language, a common cultural heritage, and a strong sense of pride in their achievements as a people. The main challenge now for this society of over five and a half million, who are descendant from less than 10,000

33. Caldwell and Czarnocki, p. 46.
34. La Presse, 16 Aug. 1983.
settlers of the French Régime, is to accommodate itself to the large numbers of immigrants who are arriving with sharply contrasting cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Fortunately, there appears to be a new sense of confidence among the Québécois as they exert increasing control over their province. This confidence can be detected in the writing of the younger generation of historians which is more concerned with themes such as class formation and the role of women than with “la survivance.” As for the novelists, Pierre Nepveu has announced “la fin de la littérature québécoise,” that is, a literature conceived as a project founded on a collective memory and a unitary goal. The new post-Québécois literature is instead characterized by “la pluralité, la diversité, la mouvance des textes, comme l’eau toujours changeant d’un même fleuve: le fleuve sans fin de l’écriture, utopique et exaltique, s’écoulant éternellement vers le Nouveau et l’Inconnu.” A more suitable metaphor could hardly be found for the future of the Québécois identity.

41. This approach can be detected in the detailed two-volume survey of Quebec history by Paul-André Linteau, René Durocher, and Jean-Claude Robert (plus François Ricard for the second volume), translated by Robert Chodos as Quebec: A History 1867-1929 (Toronto, 1983), and by Robert Chodos and Ellen Gamaise as Quebec Since 1930 (Toronto, 1991). Exceptions do remain, however; witness the recent stand taken by the deposed editor of the Revue d’histoire de l’Amérique française, Pierre Trépanier. See Le Devoir, 16 Dec. 1992, pp. 3-10.