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The French-Canadian Heritage in New England

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The French-Canadian Heritage in New England is the result of thirty years of research and provides a response, if not an answer, to a need expressed by Franco-Americans in New England.

It is difficult to classify this book: its contents show the author's interest in social history, folklore and contemporary politics, as they have continued to develop and affect Franco-American society and culture. The result is an historical depiction of a process of acculturation which eventually leads to enculturation of the francophone population in New England. Although they have striven to remain faithful to their language, religion, customs and worldview, the French, from the beginning of their settlement in New England, have been a minority and have suffered the socio-economic consequences of their situation. "Imbued with a strict brand of Catholicism and convinced that preserving their cultural heritage involved a fight against long odds, a considerable number [of New England French] became absorbed in the group's inner life and stood on the defensive in their relation with others throughout most of their history."¹ However, the author also argues that socio-economic conditions have been better in the United States than in Canada. The agricultural potential is higher in New England than in Quebec and this seems to have played an important role in the settlement of French Canadians in this part of the United States. Further, New England was the closest non-Canadian land which could be, and was, considered as a sanctuary for Acadian refugees after their deportation by the English in 1755.

French patterns of settlement, however, were not necessarily definite and unidirectional. As Brault illustrates from his own family

history over nine generations, there were tendencies for the franco-phone population to go back and forth between Canada and the United States. This is indicative of the problems encountered by the French-Canadian vis à vis adaptation in a milieu which was essentially anglophone and Protestant.

Gerard Brault grew up and was educated in a Catholic franco-phone environment. Although not a social scientist, (he is known for his research in medieval French language and literature) Brault shows in this book and a number of other publications, a meticulous interest in and devotion to the history of his own people. The extensive bibliography at the end of this book reflects a serious dedication to the subject.

In the first chapter, entitled "The Roots of Franco-American Culture", Brault gives an account of the ideology, mainly rooted in Roman Catholicism and rural values, which governed and affected the way of life of the community. Forty pages are devoted to what folklorists would classify as folklife, covering topics such as material culture, customs and the occupational organization of the community in agriculture and in the textile industry. Very little is said about oral literature. At the end of this chapter, the author gives a brief description of the dialect characteristics.

Chapter 2, "The Immigration Phase, 1865-1920," is oriented towards social history. The author looks at the social and economic as well as the political and religious conditions which characterized the community during this period. In this chapter and in fact throughout the book, Brault's concern is with common and working class people; the Franco-American elite is not his chief preoccupation, although chapter 3, "The Middle Phase, 1920-1960," gives an account of an intellectual elite. Brault describes the educational system as being bilingual, which helped establish an awareness of the need for a cultural identity. Assumption College, a Catholic institution founded by Belgian and metropolitan French priests, produced a number of clergymen and professional men who later became involved in Franco-American affairs. In this chapter the author also presents the dynamics of ethnic and religious factors, as well as the cultural forces which acted later, predominantly during the revival period.

Chapter 4, "Pages from a Family History", is self explanatory. The author brings the whole subject of the book down to the personal level by tracing the evolution of his own family over nine generations. This chapter is of value to the reader as a methodological example of tracing historical data through genealogy.

The final chapter, "The Franco-Americans Today," accounts for

the growing political concern expressed by the community for its culture. It is interesting to note that the influence, both political and cultural, and the forces which have encouraged this revival movement, originate in Quebec as well as in the United States.

Brault's style is clear and straightforward, as well as insightful. However, the work suffers from a lack of analysis. Brault is essentially and deliberately factual, yet some points, especially the characteristics that distinguish Franco-American folklore from Quebec folklore, both during the immigration period and today, would have benefited from further analysis. This would have been more enlightening than the statistics included in the appendices. The vast number of footnotes (40 pages) would have been more accessible and less interruptive had they been placed at the foot of the page.

All in all, this is an interesting and well documented cultural study which combines the interests of social history and cultural dynamics, heralding the beginning of a different approach to the social sciences.

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