

Speaker's Corner

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The French Writers of New England

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“Les Franco-Américains sont les citoyens des Etats-Unis, descendants des Canadiens-Français, en majorité Québécois, mais comptant aussi quelques Acadiens, qui émigrèrent vers les Etats-Unis (et principalement vers la Nouvelle-Angleterre) à partir de la seconde moitié du dix-neuvième siècle.” (France-Louisiane Franco-Américanie)

Note : Two books on this topic are reviewed in the July 2011 Library: *Jeanne la fileuse* and *Canuck*.

The History of my People

As a child, I grew up in a Franco-American household, went to a Franco-American church and attended a Franco-American parochial school where one half of the day was spent in French and the other half in English. Although I grew up bilingual in Massachusetts and became a French teacher, I never really knew anything about my Franco-American heritage.

As a third generation transplanted Québécois whose grandparents were born in Quebec and whose parents were born in Minnesota (my father) and in Massachusetts (my mother), like so many of my peers, I refused to speak French in public. In fact, I was ashamed of being a French speaker and my memories of that time are mostly negative. Most of my grandparents' and parents' generation were mill workers for whom an education was for the rich. So many of us were ridiculed because we spoke English with a French accent, had difficulty pronouncing the letter “h”, and were called “Canuck”, “Frenchy”, or “frog” by those outside of our ethnic group. There was tremendous pressure to join the “melting pot” and to speak English and to become “American.”

At first, our priests and teaching nuns, being mostly French-Canadians or Canadian educated, demonstrated a loyalty more to Quebec than to the United States. With time, many of our priests and nuns were born in New England, and although they taught us the History of Canada as well as that of the United States, there was never any mention of the history of the vast migration from Quebec to the cities of New England by our ancestors or our near relatives. Little did I know that from 1840 to 1930 *“plus de 900.000 Canadiens-français quittent le Québec pour venir s'établir aux Etats-Unis et travailler, pour la plupart d'entre eux, dans les manufactures de textile et de chaussures des grands centres industriels des six Etats de la Nouvelle-Angleterre.* (Pacini)

It was important, however, that we speak and maintain the French language as the only means to safeguard our Catholic faith because English was the language of Protestants. The loss of the French language meant the loss of the Catholic faith and that had to be prevented at all costs.

“The preservation of religion and language, termed la survivance, was seen as the key to ethnic

survival of the Franco-American.” (Fournier)

As more and more farmers left the farms of Quebec attracted by the promise of a better life and security offered to them by the American Industrial Revolution, i.e., the cotton mills, the shoe factories, etc., the church encouraged the establishment of French-speaking districts in the cities, known as “Petits Canadas”, served by French churches, schools, and fraternal and social organizations. *“Les curés non seulement construisirent des églises, mais établirent tout un réseau d’institutions paroissiales pour ‘protéger’ leurs paroissiens contre le virus de l’américanisation.”* (Quintal) Consequently, the first generation of immigrants had no incentive to learn English because they did not really need it to survive on a daily basis. They all lived in neighborhood tenements, traded at stores owned by fellow immigrants, confessed their sins in French, sent their children to the local French parochial school, read the news in small local French language newspapers, and drank and laughed together in the local French social clubs. There was no reason to wander beyond the neighborhood and the children were encouraged to stay at home and to work in the mills. Higher education was out of the question because the clergy created, instilled, and perpetuated the mindset that they were not worthy of it. By keeping them in the French ghetto, the clergy protected them from losing their faith by preserving their language. It was fervently believed that *“Qui perd sa langue perd sa foi.”* (Pacini)

In the early years, those who came intended to stay just long enough to make enough money to pay off their mortgage on the farm and to return to Quebec to a life of relative comfort. However, with time, their children were becoming more accustomed to the American way of life and being bilingual, speaking French at school and at home, but English everywhere else, they integrated much easier into the life of the whole city whereas their parents rarely ventured outside the confines of “Frenchville”. They had no desire to return to Quebec that to most was a foreign country. They quickly assimilated, married, and had children to whom French became a foreign language.

A Silent People

According to Brault, *“Franco-Americans have long been perceived by others and, at times, by themselves, as having attained lower educational and occupational status than the population at large and certain other ethnic groups.”* This lack of self-esteem and the lack of pride in their heritage have kept the Franco-Americans in the shadows for a long period of time. They can properly be called the least influential large minority group in New England because by nature they do not like to call attention to themselves. Kenney speaking about Massachusetts stated: *“In the last national census, there were just under a million state residents of French Canadian and French ancestry. But despite their numbers, they remain a quiet presence, largely absent from high-profile public positions, their ethnicity rarely invoked. Theirs is often an inward culture, but one that remains rich, lively, and varied.”* When one learns that Franco-Americans are the second largest ethnic group in Massachusetts, Quintal goes on to explain that *“People fall over backward when they learn that; they can’t believe it. It’s because Franco-Americans are so low key; they tend to sink back into the woodwork and not be seen.”* Is it any wonder, then, that such a lack of pride and assertiveness has led to a relatively unknown literary production?

As I continued my education, I fulfilled a dream of mine by obtaining a Master’s in French from

Assumption College in Worcester MA, which was originally founded to educate the future Franco-American male professionals of New England. French was the lingua franca of the school and French was the only language spoken in the classrooms, regardless of the subject matter. During my time there, in the 60's, the school had reverted to English and had a co-ed student body but it still boasted of an excellent French department. It was not until many years later that I realized that, in spite of its original purpose, it did not include in any of its French classes any examples of Franco-American French literature. The curriculum concerned exclusively the French literature of France. This lacuna underscored in what little regard the works of the French writers of New England were held when the premier Franco-American College in New England did not include any works written in French by Franco-Americans. Ironically, due the diligent efforts of Claire Quintal, professor emeritus of French at Assumption College, that school now houses The French Institute, whose mission is the propagation of Franco-American Culture and Literature and whose extensive collection of documents and works are opened to researchers and other interested persons. In addition, The University of Maine at Orono has also carried the torch and has developed a series of courses about Franco-American Culture and History. The Franco-American Center in Manchester NH (www.francoamericancentrenh.com) also continues the effort by offering many activities and works for and by Franco-Americans. The Mason Library at Keene NH State College has an extensive collection of Franco-American authors who wrote in French and of those who wrote in English. It also houses the works of the now defunct National Materials Development Center for French that reproduced many of the works listed below.



Literary Production

The literary production of the French writers of New England includes both old and new. Unfortunately, some of the old works are sometimes difficult to find because they are out of print. However, there are enough to be found so that a French teacher can readily find them and include them into the French curriculum. Because this article concerns itself only with those who wrote in French, the following list can serve as a start:

Novels

Jeanne la fileuse, Honoré Beaugrand, 1878

Un Revenant, Rémi Tremblay, 1884
Les Deux testaments, Anna-Duval-Thibault, 1888
Mirbah, Emma Dumas, 1910
La Jeune Franco-Américaine, Alberte Gastonguay-Sasseville, 1933
L'Innocente Victime, Adelard Lambert, 1936
Canuck, Camille Lesard-Bissonnette, 1936
Sanatorium, Dr Paul Dufault, 1938
Les Enfances de Fanny, Louis Dantin, 1951
L'Héritage, Robert B. Perrault, 1983
Le Petit Mangeur de Fleurs, Norman R. Beaupré, 1999
A Perte de Vue, Grégoire Chabot, 2000
Lumineau, Norman R. Beaupré 2002
Deux femmes, Deux rêves, Norman R. Beaupré, 2005

Poetry

Les Fleurs du Printemps, Anna Duval-Thibault, 1892
Les Oasis, Rosaire Dion-Lévesque, 1930
Le Coffret de Crusoé, Louis Dantin, 1932
Ode à Québec, Dr. Georges Boucher, 1952
Un Mot de Chez-nous, Normand Dubé, 1976
Au Coeur du Vent, Normand Dubé, 1978
La Broderie inachevée, Normand Dubé, 1979
Les nuages de ma pensée, Normand Dubé, 1981

Theatre

Qui perd sa langue, Grégoire Chabot, 1970
Un Jacques Cartier Errant, Grégoire Chabot, 1997

Essays

Entre la manie et la phobie, Grégoire Chabot, 2000

Anthologies

La Littérature française de la Nouvelle-Angleterre, Soeur Marie-Carmel Therriault, 1946
Anthologie de la poésie franco-américaine de la Nouvelle-Angleterre, Paul Chassé, 1976
Anthologie de la littérature franco-américaine de la Nouvelle-Angleterre, Richard Santerre, 1980
Les Francos de la Nouvelle-Angleterre : Anthologie Franco-Américaine, XIXe et XXe siècles, François Roche, 1981

History

Les Arts et la littérature chez les Franco-Américains de la Nouvelle-Angleterre, Dr Paul Chassé, 1977

The French-Canadian Heritage in New England, Gerard Brault, 1986
Les Francos-Américains de la Nouvelle-Angleterre 1776-1930, Yves Roby, 1990
La littérature franco-américaine : écrivains et écritures, Claire Quintal, 1992
Histoire des Franco-Américains de la Nouvelle-Angleterre, 1775-1900, Armand Chartier, 1999

Sample Excerpts

The following questions relate to the lives and to the feelings of the Franco-Americans living in New England both past and present. The answers are to be found in the voices themselves of the authors.

1. Why did the French-Canadians leave their homeland to settle in the United States?

a) Quelques-unes de ces familles qui avaient émigré dans les villes voisines de la frontière canadienne, s'avancèrent peu à peu dans l'intérieur des Etats de la Nouvelle-Angleterre, et trouvèrent du travail dans les nombreuses filatures de laine et de coton qui forment la richesse des Etats de l'Est. Ce fut à l'origine de ce grand mouvement d'émigration qui a jeté pêle-mêle, dans les usines américaines, les cinq cent mille Canadiens français qui ont abandonné le sol natal pour venir demander à l'étranger le travail et le pain qui leur manquaient au Canada. (Jeanne la fileuse, Honoré Beaugrand)

b) L'émigrant franco-canadien vient donc et demeure donc aux Etats-Unis, parce qu'il y gagne sa vie avec plus de facilité qu'au Canada. Voilà la vérité dans toute sa simplicité. (Jeanne la fileuse, Honoré Beaugrand)

2. Did the immigrants want to leave Quebec?

Pauvre fille...pauvre fille...si jeune, si belle, si intelligente, et se voir forcée de prendre la route de l'exil pour en arriver à obtenir le pain de chaque jour sans demander l'aumône. Ah! que les temps sont changés! La force et l'espoir du Canada français s'envolent avec cette jeunesse qui prend la route de l'étranger pour fuir la pauvreté de la patrie! (Jeanne la fileuse, Honoré Beaugrand)

3. How long did they intend to stay?

a) La vie arrangée de cette façon, on devrait, dans 4 à 5 ans, avoir amassé assez d'argent pour payer les hypothèques sur la ferme et s'en retourner y vivre. (Canuck, Camille Lessard-Bissonnette)

b) Pour les Franco-Américains, un de ces grands moments était certainement celui où la plupart des membres du groupe se sont rendus compte que l'idée (ou l'idéal) de retourner au Québec après avoir fait fortune aux Etats-Unis, n'était qu'un rêve. On avait préservé ce mythe pour une cinquantaine d'années, depuis notre arrivée en Nouvelle-Angleterre. Mais pendant les premières décennies du vingtième siècle, la réalité s'était imposée de force. On

était icit pour de bon. (Entre la manie et la phobie, Grégoire Chabot)

4. *How were the newcomers treated?*

Elle ne pouvait mettre le nez dehors qu'on lui criait: "CANUCK!" Et à ce titre dérisoire, on joignait les moqueries, les insultes et souvent les coups. Elle n'était pas la seule à se faire coiffer de ce bonnet d'âne, car les Canadiens qui quittent les bords du Saint-Laurent pour aller gagner leur vie dans les usines de la Nouvelle-Angleterre, se font invariablement appeler "CANUCK!" Et cela, non pas par les Américains, mais par leurs frères qui les ont précédés sous le drapeau étoilé. (Canuck, Camille Lesard-Bissonnette)

5. *After years of being here, how were their descendants treated?*

Sous prétexte qu'il était plus éclairé que moi,

Un aveugle

Dont je ne connaissais pas le nom

A voulu me dérouter vers l'Ignorance

De ce que je suis.

J'ai résisté,

Il s'est égaré loin de la route

Qu'il s'était tracée.

Quelques années plus tard,

Il reprit éperdument sa démarche

Vers la Négation de ma vie,

De ma langue

De ma culture,

De mon identité

(.....)

Aussi

Comme bien d'autres

J'ai déjà trop saigné

Aux mains de cet aveugle

Dont je connais aujourd'hui le nom :

PREJUGE!

Mais

Je refuse de mourir

Avant qu'il m'ait aimé!

Un aveugle, Normand Dubé)

6. *What were the working conditions in the textile mills?*

Une loi de l'état du Massachusetts fixe à 60 heures par semaine la somme de travail que l'on peut exiger des femmes et des enfants, ce qui, en moyenne, forme un labeur de dix heures par jour, quoique les travaux soient repartis de manière à permettre la fermeture des filatures à 3h de l'après-midi, tous les samedis, tout en fournissant les soixante heures réglementaires.

(Jeanne la fileuse, Honoré Beaugrand)

7. *What was the school experience like?*

C'est en octobre 1941 que commença mon affiliation avec les religieuses, les soeurs de la Présentation de Marie, les "capucines noires" de notre enfance.

Religieuses par vocation, éducatrices par tradition, elles provenaient de la maison mère à Saint Hyacinthe, au Québec. Elles s'entouraient d'enfants et se complaisaient à les soutenir de leurs efforts d'apprentissage: l'histoire, l'histoire sainte, la grammaire, les mathématiques, l'écriture, le catéchisme et la littérature. Le tout était soumis aux dictées d'une éducation bilingue, française et anglaise. (Petit Mangeur de fleurs, Normand Beaupré)

8. *How influential was the church in maintaining and protecting the Franco-American heritage?*

"Mes chers amis," reprit le curé, "vous représentez tous des organismes de l'élite francoaméricaine. Vous êtes tous des hommes de courage et d'honneur. Comme moi, vous êtes parmi ceux qui préféreraient mourir – sens figuratif, naturellement – plutôt que d'abandonner cette langue et cette religion... l'héritage sacré que nous avons reçu de nos pères." (Entre la manie et la phobie, Grégoire Chabot)

9. *In addition to the Franco-Americans who else immigrated to the United States?*

De par la frontière,
 Mes ancêtres, Français-Catholiques,
Avaient pris leur place
A la table de l'action de grâce-
 Dans les faubourgs
 D'une ère industrielle
Où dans l'espérance du temps
 Ils ont rayonné leur alliance
 A ton avenir.
Boston,
Matriarche qui réclame une progéniture
 Universelle,
Guide tes derniers-venus
De l'Europe, de l'Afrique, de l'Asie
 Et des Amériques.
 '(Le nuage de ma pensée, Normand Dubé)

10. *Were some still attached to the old country?*

Que je voudrais être au village,
En ce jour où l'on rend hommage
Naïf et gai comme jadis,
Au puissant patron du pays.

Ah! je voudrais de notre cloche
Entendre la vibrante voix,
Pendant que tout le monde s'approche
De la vieille église de bois!

Que la messe était solennelle
Et joyeuse tout à la fois!
Que la musique semblait belle!

Que touchantes étaient les voix!
(.....)
Mais, comme chez nous, l'on s'apprête
A célébrer ici ce jour.
Saluons tous en cette fête
Le beau pays de notre amour.

(*La Saint Jean-Baptiste*, Les Fleurs du Printemps, Anna Duval-Thibault)

Conclusion

By including some excerpts from the French writers of New England into the curriculum, French teachers will be satisfying the Cultures, Connections, and Communities Strands of the Foreign Language National Standards. Students will be exposed to the great world of La Francophonie and will realize how extensive a reach France has in the world of today. They will also become aware of the presence of the French language and culture in the United States and will perhaps recognize how important immigration was and still is in the creation of our great nation.

Footnotes

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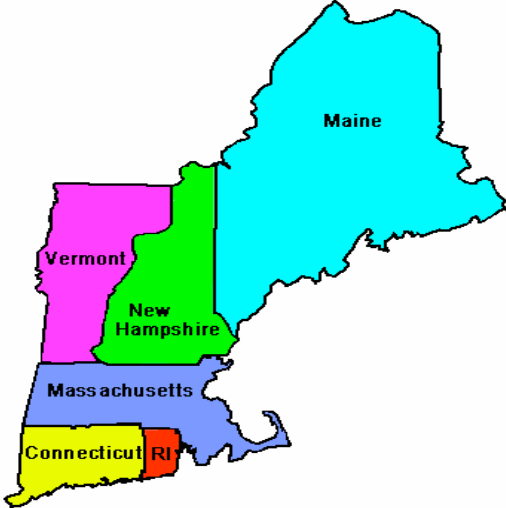
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