

Note

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TOWARDS A CONCLUSION

by

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As the fishery underlies Newfoundland so agriculture underlies Québec. Farming is the common experience in the background of most lives. There have been other experiences of course — in the western fur trade, in the Gulf fishery, in the timber camps in the pineries around the St-Lawrence Valley, in the early commercial and later industrial towns — but until this century agriculture sustained more lives in Québec than any other occupation. For some 250 years along the lower St-Lawrence it was the occupation of the majority. Parish church and rang loom in the background of Marc-Aurèle Fortin's splendid painting of Montréal (Landscape, Hochelaga) as, in one way or another, an agrarian past looms in the background of modern Québec. At times the experience and mythology of this past have been overwhelming; partly in reaction much of Québec over the last 20 years had pursued an alternative vision of technology and the future. In its way, academic geography has shared this quest. But the past, and the influence of the past, will not go away. To know Québec's past is to know a good deal about the countryside. To know the early countryside is, almost invariably, to work along the borderland of geography and history. This issue of the *Cahiers*, then, marks a too long neglected step in an important direction.

There is an obvious relationship, as Rodolphe De Koninck has rightly stressed, between agriculture and territory. More than most activities, agriculture requires space, and the expansion of agriculture, especially where technology is fairly static and the cost of labour fairly high, requires a lot more space. In general, the availability of space was the principal opportunity for Europeans in the middle latitudes of the New World before industrialization, but in particular, in Québec as everywhere else, this opportunity was subject to many constraints. However constrained, the availability of space for agricultural colonization encouraged population movement and, with each move, reshuffled people. New World settlement tended to mix people of different backgrounds in settings where the relationships among land, labour, capital, and markets were not those of the more densely settled areas they had left. Therefore, the occupation of territory was not only a conquest of space, but also a process of social and cultural change. There were common threads and endless unique details in the New World story. So in early, rural Québec there was pattern and variety. Both are inherent in the papers of this collection, but as pattern is the less readily discerned I shall comment on it here.

When French immigrants came to Canada they left a France where 20 million people pressed on the close limits of scarce agricultural land for a broad valley that has been emptied of Indians in the XVIth century and that received only about 9 000 immigrants between Champlain in 1608 and the fall of Québec in 1759. In relation to costs in France, land along the St-Lawrence was plentiful and cheap. Labour was scarce and expensive, its cost driven up by the availability of land. The characteristic shape of the long lot and the flexible geometry of *côte* and *rang* that Ludger Beauregard describes and Luc Bureau attributes to the French renaissance are probably less important than the simple fact that land was available. Throughout the French regime a young man could obtain a lot of 30-40 ha. He faced the often overwhelming task of clearing, but also the prospect of a modest farm to support his family. This was the principal opportunity of the early Canadian countryside. There were not plantation crops, and there were limited domestic and external markets for the crops and livestock from northwestern France that could be raised. The countryside was not attractive to capital, and proportionally received much less bourgeois investment than its French counterpart. When seigneurial revenues were low, as long they were in sparsely settled seigneuries, the countryside offered little support for mannered gentility. In these circumstances the social range of the French countryside could not be reproduced. Poor people found relatively more in the Canadian countryside than their counterparts found in France, prosperous people found relatively less. Settlement spread along the St-Lawrence in response to population growth. Semi-subsistent agriculture tended to reproduce similar farms and, as long as land was available and markets for agricultural products were poor, to discourage capital accumulation. In a weak market economy there was little need for villages. However villages are defined and counted, Serge Courville is certainly right that at the end of the French regime the village was usually no more than «une structure en voie de formation».

Immigrants to the St-Lawrence Valley came from most provinces of France. Most of the first of them were Normans, then immigration came from the Île de France and the hinterland of La Rochelle, and finally from the Midi and east as well. Only 250 married couples crossed the Atlantic to settle in Canada during the entire French regime. After the 1670's female immigration virtually stopped and immigrant men married daughters of Canadian families. Overall, immigration mixed different French backgrounds along the lower St-Lawrence with the result that the particular regional accents, superstitions, and customs of a still intensely regional France were blended on this side of the Atlantic in combinations without precise French equivalents. The early rural cultures in the St-Lawrence Valley were largely French in detail but not in composition.

This initial blending was not the end of the process. As the population grew land would not long remain available near the parental farm. In Beauport all agricultural land had been conceded well before the end of the XVIIIth century. (Mathieu and Brisson). In such circumstances some sons and daughters of established families would move some distance to new settlements. Older areas exported people and had no land for newcomers (unless they could pay well for it); new areas received the exodus. Mixing of people of different background and exogamous marriage characterized the receiving end of this migration, and isolation and increasingly endogamous marriage characterized the sending end. Eventually the reception area filled up and became, in turn, an exporter of people — a process that usually took several generations in the XVIIth century and often was achieved in one generation in the XIXth century. Joël Rouffignat's study of matrimonial space at Saint-Jean-Port-Joli catches stages of this process. As

his analysis shows, there was both stability and movement in the countryside of the lower St-Lawrence, both increasingly inbred local communities and, in other areas, new blends of people drawn from different places. Nor was there a single threshold separating a period when land was available from another when it was not. Overall, land was becoming more scarce and the spatial expansion of agriculture was being increasingly blocked as the XIXth century advanced, but new agricultural land was being opened up in Québec well into the XXth century. The migration from the Beauce into space created in Compton township by the departing English (described by Marcel Bellavance) is a late instance of the protracted French Canadian expansion of its ecumene. Even so, by the mid-XIXth century the migratory system, on which French Canadian agriculture and rural society depended to syphon off its surplus population, was running out of land. Hence the accelerated migration to the United States in the second half of the XIXth century. Because migration tended to force change upon the emigrating young while protecting the society whence they came, migration directed towards the industrial towns of New England tended to deflect change from rural Québec. Marcel Bélanger's picture of a fossilised rural society suddenly transformed after World War II exaggerates — but correctly identifies — an important relationship between the migratory system and a conservative rural tradition.

As land became scarce its value rose. As the population grew markets increased. In these changed circumstances some people found more opportunity in the countryside. The socio-economic range increased, occupations became more diversified, and villages and small towns became common (Courville). Again, the increasing integration of the countryside with the larger economy and the associated diversification of rural occupations and settlements took place at different times in different places. These differences account for much of the variety that Jacques Mathieu and Réal Brisson find in the XVIIIth century countryside. Behind the arguments reviewed by Robert Lavertue is evidence for the sudden increase in the rural penetration of the market economy at the end of the XVIIIth century. The studies by Jean-Claude Robert and Michel Monette describe rural societies in the early and mid-XIXth century that undoubtedly were more stratified than their XVIIth century and XVIIIth century counterparts. And throughout the XIXth century an increasing number of French Canadians found non-agricultural employment — some in New England factory towns, others in the lumber camps around the fringe of the Canadian Shield, others in the Gaspé fisheries, others in hard-rock mines, and more and more in the lowland cities, particularly Montréal. Away from the protection of the old agricultural world they were often exposed to the unmitigated effects of industrial capitalism in settings where labour was now cheap and unprotected and capital unregulated. The traditional rural economy exported largely defenseless labour to this industrial and usually English-speaking world. The articles by John Willis and Roch Samson show what could happen when the support of family farming was left behind.

Shortly after the middle of the XIXth century, Québec began to urbanize rapidly although even in 1911 almost 60% of its population still lived in places with fewer than 3 000 people. By 1981 less than 20% of the population lived in such places and even there, as Clermont Dugas shows, agriculture was the occupation of a tiny minority. After a lifespan of more than 300 years agricultural, rural Québec has been overwhelmed. A short generation ago some Montréal sociologists (most notably Philippe Garigue) argued that Québec's society had always been urban, by which they meant that it had always participated in a vigorous exchange economy. But if, to be more simple minded, family farming is some measure of rurality, then until less than 100 years ago Québec was primarily rural. Much of this agriculture was substantially

subsistent, not because farmers lacked commercial ambition but because with the factors of production and the markets at their disposal commercial opportunity often was very restricted. Surrounding this family-centered agriculture was a rural tradition that certainly was not static; that also varied from place to place; and that in the tools it used, the skills and work routines it required, the integration of place of work and place of residence that accompanied it, and the web of sociability that surrounded it was a far cry from the world of wage labour, factory, and town. For some, certainly, the two worlds overlapped, perhaps for generations — a man had a farm and worked in the logging camps — but, overall, the urbanization of Québec has been a drastic, rapid change, the lingering effects of which, it seems to me, reverberate through the province.

So much for an outline of the story to which the articles in this volume are addressed. That story is at the heart of Québec, and deserves to be fully elaborated. In this elaboration geography, especially a geography rooted in a French intellectual tradition, should play a vigorous part. That it has hardly done so over the last two decades is a reflection of the view that, for all its charm, the Vidalian tradition has seen its day, and of the attraction of a theoretical geography that has downplayed the complexities of particular pasts and places. The limitations of this theoretical perspective are now clearer. On the other hand it is probably neither possible nor desirable today to write regional monographs in the style of the French classics. Perhaps we do not need to approach the countryside of Québec with defined models. So long as we keep our geographical bearings — our interest in place, landscape, spatial patterns and, if you will, human ecology — are open to interdisciplinary contacts, remember that we cannot study early Québec very profitably without immersing ourselves in the archives, are sensitive both to the variety of particular circumstances and to opportunities for generalization, keep in mind that it is safer to use theory suggestively rather than deductively, and throw our creative energies to the task, then some very good and revealing studies will be the result. This volume of the *Cahiers* is already evidence.