

## Compte rendu

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### Ouvrage recensé :

Courville, Serge (1990) *Entre ville et campagne : l'essor du village dans les seigneuries du Bas-Canada*. Québec, Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 335 p.

par Cole Harris

*Cahiers de géographie du Québec*, vol. 35, n° 96, 1991, p. 605-607.

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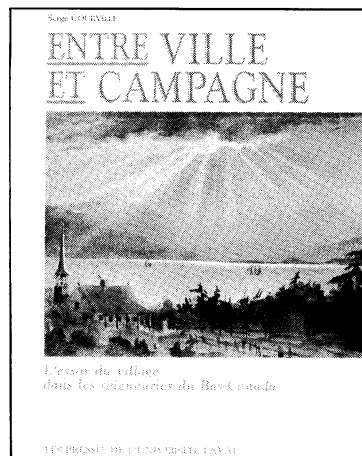
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COURVILLE, Serge (1990) *Entre ville et campagne: l'essor du village dans les seigneuries du Bas-Canada*. Québec, Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 335 p.



Serge Courville's work on the evolution of rural society in Québec has grown, over the years, to become a very substantial contribution to the literature. Increasingly, this work has turned to the analysis of villages in the early nineteenth century and to the related study of transportation and communication. Appearing first in a series of articles, it has now led to a substantial book on the Québec village during the years between 1815 and 1851. Not intended as his last work on the subject — rather, Courville says, it is a *tour d'horizon* — it does mark an important stage both in a major research project and in our understanding of rural Québec in the nineteenth century.

The book begins with a discussion of the early evolution of villages in St. Lawrence Valley and with their extraordinary expansion in the early nineteenth century (from some 50 in 1815 to some 300 in 1851). This is followed by a consideration of the forms and internal structure of villages (including their sacred and profane spaces), and of their characteristic buildings. The village populations are shown to be remarkably diverse: a product not only of local migrations but also of long distance movements within and from outside the St. Lawrence Valley. While predominantly francophone and Catholic, almost all villages were ethnically and religiously diverse, places where different assumptions and ways of life met and, to a degree, mixed.

Important as were religious institutions, the village was not primarily a religious centre nor primarily a place of residence for the elderly from the *côtes*. Its essential functions were commercial and industrial. As a commercial centre, it lay between city and countryside, interposing merchants and shopkeepers, millers, fairs and market days. As an industrial centre, it provided a base for a great variety of artisanship, much of it domestic but destined for local or more distant markets, some of it becoming organized in small factories — carding and spinning mills, breweries, distilleries, hat or chair-making establishments, and so on — that depended on water power and employed 20-30 or more workers. The villages clustered around the towns, particularly Montréal. The largest of them, by 1850,

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had virtually become towns in their own right, considerable central places in an emerging hierarchy of central places.

Essentially, Courville interprets the villages as points of transition between traditional rural and modern urban society. They were more open to the market than the traditional countryside, more subject to regulation, more inclined to juxtapose people of different backgrounds, more inclined to provide salaried labour. As the rural population grew and agricultural land became scarce, they became important destinations for the surplus farm population. In some regions by mid-century, villages housed 30-40 % of the total rural population. Later in the century, as steam engines and factories concentrated in the towns, urban populations grew spectacularly, but between such towns and the traditional countryside lay, for many, a village world that already contained many elements of urban life.

Such an analysis stands many interpretations of rural Québec on their heads. To the sociologists' argument, waged a generation or more ago, about whether the ethos of rural Québec was inherently rural or urban, Courville would reply that, at least by the early nineteenth century, it was both. To the view that the early nineteenth century was a time of profound agricultural crisis, Courville would insist that along with the debilitating effects of midge and wheat rust was a great deal of rural vitality. To the ethnocentric conclusion, expressed by Lord Durham and many others, that a subsistent domestic economy, resistant to innovation, prevailed in the nineteenth century, Courville would adduce a great deal of evidence to show that, overall, this simply was not so.

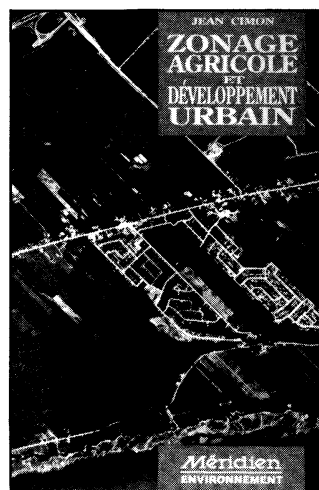
This is an important book, not only for these reasons, but also because it reveals an historical geographer's perspective. It is a study of villages, that is of a changing geographical reality, one that, of course, is incomprehensible other than in social terms. But — and this is less appreciated — the reverse is equally true: societies are incomprehensible other than in their geographical contexts. To put it abstractly, society and space exist in ongoing, reciprocal interaction. Courville knows this full well, and a good deal of historiography in Québec, grounded in the *Annales* tradition, comes close to making the same assumption. But in Courville's work the emphasis is explicit and central. *Entre ville et campagne* is not a study of rural society. It is a study of places that are conceived not simply as the products of social formation, but rather, as part and parcel of the ongoing interpenetration of society and space.

Serge Courville would be the first to admit that there is much more to be done. At this stage, the work is more morphological than, eventually, he may want it to be. The social and economic networks that operated in and through the villages remain largely to be worked out. No simple task. Personal space needs somehow to be recovered, at least with a few examples. For the moment, the study largely rests on a necessary but, I think, preliminary level of statistical generalization. The units of production need to be explored much more carefully. We don't know enough about how artisanship was pursued in the villages, how work was organized when there were 10 or 20 employees. The comparative analysis could well be a little more

elaborated: with Ontario, New England, and, although the timing is quite different, with Britain and France. The concepts of traditional and modern might well be explored. But this is an ongoing work, proceeding in careful stages, and what already has been accomplished is enormous.

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CIMON, Jean (1990) *Zonage agricole et développement urbain*. Montréal, Éditions du Méridien (Coll. «Environnement»), 249 p.



Dans une lettre adressée à un ami, l'illustre Goethe tentait une classification tout impressionniste des lecteurs de livres. «Il y a, écrivait-il, trois sortes de lecteurs: une première [qui] éprouve du plaisir sans jugement, une troisième qui juge sans éprouver de plaisir, celle du milieu qui juge en éprouvant du plaisir et éprouve du plaisir en jugeant» (*Correspondance*, lettre à Rochlitz, 13 juin 1819). Ne souhaitant passer ni pour un lecteur débonnaire ni pour un censeur assassin, je tente ici l'impossible aventure du juste milieu qu'affectionnait Goethe.

D'abord le plaisir. On le trouve à plusieurs niveaux dans le livre de Jean Cimon. À celui de l'observation d'une grande fresque du développement de l'agriculture «au pays du Québec» où se mêlent les personnages quasi mythiques de Champlain, Pehr Kalm, Louis Hémon. À celui également de la mise en scène de la confrontation contemporaine du rural et de l'urbain, où chaque combat voit succomber toujours le même vaincu: «dans cette confrontation agro-urbaine, l'agriculture ne fait pas le poids» (p. 25). À celui des batteries de lois et règlements qui, par un effet de perversité, aggravent le plus souvent le mal qu'on entend traiter.

Reste à savoir si ce monde rural, à l'instar des économies du tiers-monde envers nos sociétés dites avancées, n'est pas condamné de toute éternité à être sacrifié sur