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FRANCO-AMERICANS IN PERIODICAL LITERATURE:  
A Critical Review of Selected Articles,  
1898-1976

by

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In the field of ethnic studies in the United States, the Franco-Americans are nearly invisible despite the fact that they were the fourth largest non-English mother-tongue grouping in the United States in 1970. Certainly there does not exist for the French Americans a bulk of literature such as one finds for the blacks, the Mexican-Americans, the Puerto Ricans, the native Americans, or the Italians. Nor does there exist an academic landmark study for the French such as the Polish-Americans have in Thomas and Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant*. A number of factors seem to have contributed to this paucity of serious treatment: first, the high level of language maintenance which channeled serious writing into French; second, the French-Canadian migration was to small towns in New England outside of the interest of the large research universities; third, ethnic studies never flourished in New England as they did in the mid-west; fourth, our leaders were often educated in a tradition relatively untouched by social sciences and consequently we did not develop our own social scientists nor did the Franco-Americans support the study of their ethnic group by outsiders. A case in point, is the reception given to the article published in 1898 on French Canadians in New England by Professor William MacDonald of Bowdoin.

This is the famous (or infamous as some of my compatriots would say) article using the phrase "Chinese of the East" with reference to the hard-working and frugal characteristics of the Franco's. The phrase became a rallying cry of opposition to the article without consideration of the
excellence of the content. It is to be noted that it was almost fifty years before another Bowdoin faculty member published a scholarly article on the Franco-Americans. As Alice Stewart of the University of Maine at Orono notes, "It is the article to read in Franco-American history." MacDonald's themes were to be repeated again and again by students of Franco-Americans. The questions he covered include the immigration, size and distribution of the French population in New England, the decline in fertility, the incidence of intermarriage, occupation and income levels, degree of political participation, parish and school organization, language maintenance, the development of self-contained enclaves and the probability of absorption into the larger community. Condescending in tone as it sometimes was, it was nevertheless an excellent beginning for the serious study of an unknown ethnic group. The controversy this article generated among Franco-Americans may well have stifled other studies by non-Franco's.

An article from the French point of view is found in the Catholic Encyclopedia article of 1906 by J.L.K. Laflamme, David E. Lavigne and J. Arthur Favreau entitled "French Catholics in the United States." This is particularly good in those aspects of institutional life so important to Franco-Americans, the parish, the religious orders and the schools, the Franco-American press, and the 'provident organizations' as the article terms the national societies, since national societies had been condemned in 1889 by the Baltimore Congress of the Catholic Church. In these few pages the authors managed to respond to the criticisms of the stay-at-home French-Canadians
that those who left for the states were forced to by their own habits of "luxury and dissipation" and were causing a depopulation of the farming communities in Quebec. The authors cite the difficulties of a large family system under conditions of land shortage combined with the long-term neglect of the economic conditions leading to high levels of deprivation of the rural population. With regard to the Catholic Church, the authors tread a narrow path between the French militants who called themselves Franco-Americans in those days—a term the article does not use—and the assimilationists who were dominant in the church.

A more recent survey article is that of Mason Wade in the New Catholic Encyclopedia of 1967. Based on a lifetime of academic interest in the Franco-Americans, it is not only brimming with information but the facts are laced together with the sure hand of a scholar of North American history and highlighted by insight from his French-Canadian studies. Given the space limitations, the immigration history is a "tour de force" while the section on religious life treats forthrightly if not in depth with the controversies in this sphere with the Irish with "know-nothingism" with Protestant proselytism and with the authorities in the Catholic Church.

The most recent of the overviews of Franco-Americans is found in Robert B. Perrault's "One Piece in the Great American Mosaic: The Franco-Americans of New England." It is an example of the scholarly journalism associated with the Association Canado-Americaine. In my view, he correctly assesses the diminished visibility and vitality of church,
school, newspaper, national society and language for the Franco-American. Where I believe he errs is in the judgement that this implies a loss of identity. Sociologically "an ethnic unit is any major collectivity that is socially defined in terms of common descent." Thus Allen defines a Franco-American as an American who considers himself or herself a Franco-American and who feels a sense of identity with other descendants of the Canadiens and Acadiens. Language and religion have been used effectively in the past as indicators of ethnicity, but they will not serve as well in the future. In any case one should not, I think, confuse the objective indicator with the subjective sense of peoplehood. The turn of the century Franco-American community was a creative adaptation of the 19th century rural Quebec culture to the realities of American life in the small industrial town of New England. The realities have changed, the distance from the 19th century rural Quebec culture has lengthened, therefore, we should not expect the continuation of the ethnic presence in the same form. I believe that the answer to Perreault's plea for polishing up the American mosaic is that the American social fabric is not set in stone but rather is like a piece of cloth in which the pattern is constantly being rewoven and the threads themselves are constantly changing in composition, continuing the coloring of the past but adapting to the present and the future. The strengths of the Perrault article are that it is more than a chronology, it is interpretative history both accurate and comprehensive.
American migration data was inadequate in the 19th century and is still relatively inadequate. Given the lack of official data, it is surprising to find three excellent migration studies on Franco-Americans. Mason Wade is responsible for the study of the movement of the Acadians to the Madawaska territory shortly after the American revolution. We badly need similar studies of the original migration to other areas of New England. Whether free individual migration can be as well documented as politically controlled migration is an open question. But perhaps records of U.S. manufacturing companies which recruited workers in Quebec might give some clues to the development of the movement of the Quebec population to the south. An excellent example of making the best use of existing data, the censuses of 1910, 1940 and 1970, the population estimates of Le Guide Franco-Américain and of Odile Laplante, official Catholic directories, the annual reports of the Diocese of Portland, as well as other existing literature and private communication is found in James P. Allen's *Franco-Americans in Maine: A Geographical Perspective* which covers the movement of the French population into and in Maine in the twentieth century. As far as I know there is nothing comparable for the other New England states, could the Guide Franco-Américain be used as a base? Has there been an evaluation study made of Le Guide Franco-Américain?

The great usefulness of governmental documents in reconstructing history is found in Iris Saunders Podea's article on the Canadian immigration and their living conditions in the
Tomora F. Harasen in a recent article in Labor History demonstrates that the French were not the docile and passive employees that they were most often pictured to be. Not only was hiring and placement done along kinship and ethnic lines, but also kinship and ethnic solidarity strengthened the worker's ability to control and slow down the work process during periods of increased pressure for efficiency and maximalization of production. The article emphasizes the resourcefulness and initiative of the ethnic groups in responding to the pressures of industrial life. Would that we had more articles of the quality of this one; the product of original research in the files of the company, and interviews with the former employees, it is informed by a sure grasp of industrial history and sociology.

"The Franco-American Working Class Family" by Laurence French is difficult to evaluate. We are told that it is a product of ethno-methodological research but no description of the method is given and the only two references to published research in Franco-Americans are quoted from secondary sources. Yet as a description of the author's own milieu, shaped as it is, by his sociological perspective, and set in the context of sociological studies of Quebec, the article is a substantial contribution to the sparse literature on the major institutions of Franco-American life. Peter Woolfson's studies of the Franco Vermont family complements the French article. Written from the point of view of the observer rather than the actor, it is securely anchored in data for interviews, questionnaires, and obser-
'Little Canada's' of Massachusetts in the late 19th century. Does the situation of the Franco-American in Massachusetts in the late 19th century mirror the situation of the Franco's in all of New England? Podea assumes so, but we really don't know.

There is some evidence for similar living conditions in Maine found in William N. Locke's The French Colony at Brunswick, Maine: A Historical Sketch. Done by a professor of French, this study combines a social science empirical tradition with the humanistic tradition of value orientation. Struggle against handicaps is the theme. Success is the perceived outcome. Local data such as naturalization records, parish membership and marriage records, voter rolls and tax rolls have never been more effectively used in the study of Franco-Americans.

Social science empirical research is the base of "An Ethnic Survey of Woonsocket, Rhode Island" by Bessie Bloom Wessel. Appendix A, technically a bibliography with an introduction, thoughtfully summarizes the findings of the survey with regard to the largest ethnic group in Woonsocket—the Franco's. In retrospect, the outcome of the Sentinelle question can be read in the pattern of intermarriage reported on here. But even more important is the formulation of the Franco-American position of biculturalism and bilingualism. In these few pages in Wessel we find intertwined the issues of rising 'fusion' of the Franco-American with other ethnic groups including the old Americans and a most explicit ex-
position of the dual culture position of the French leadership. Furthermore in the process of describing the Franco-American phenomena, the contribution of the Huguenots to the history of Rhode Island is acknowledged as is also that of the more recent "France French," an approach not used often enough in the study of the French fact in New England. The study of a Franco-American community as a whole is found in George F. Theriault's study "The Franco-Americans of New England" using Nashua, New Hampshire as a case study. The social and institutional framework within which "la survivance" was achieved are duly examined as the erosion of values and traditions making for assimilation into the general American culture. Focused on the parish, a whole host of institutions were developed: schools, convents, hospitals and orphanages, cemeteries, newspapers, and voluntary associations of all kinds. The common heritage of Catholic faith, the French language, the wave-like pattern of immigration and the proximity to the mother country were the elements of the effective cultural and structural pluralism of the Franco-Americans. That pluralism adapted to the unfolding economic differentiation within the French community, the increasing generational remoteness from the Canadian experience, and the draft, along with the increasing rates of inter-marriage. Twenty years ago Professor Theriault said "the central institutional structure of la Franco-Americanie even in comparatively large centers such as Nashua is shown increasing signs of weakening."
But he added "ways of life, deeply cherished institutions, religion and language, are too centrally in the grain of a people to change rapidly." His judgement has stood the test of almost a generation.

One of the factors which Theriault cites as having been a potent factor in shaping of an ethnic subcommunity was the fact that the Franco-American population was in the 19th century undifferentiated in economic and social status, they were for the most part unskilled wage workers. That this early state of affairs colored and is coloring the self-definitions and the definitions of others even in the face of economic and social differentiation is seen in the two selections on stratification. One, an essay from the New Yorker by Calvin Trillin, accurately portrays the status differences perceived by the Franco-American in a New England mill town in the nineteen-seventies. The second article by Rosen on "Race Ethnicity and Achievement Syndrome" finds the Franco-Americans along the lower end of rankings of six New England ethnic groups in achievement motivation, achievement value orientation and in vocational aspirations. As Michael Guignard told me the first time we met, "Rosen has a sampling problem," we are not told how he chose his sample but he then uses the data as if he had a representative sample of the Franco's as well as the other ethnic groups. But it is difficult to criticize Rosen when we have little other material on achievement orientation on Franco's.

If we don't have adequate coverage in the realm of stratification perhaps we have better documentation in the realm of the major institutions of Franco-American life?
vation with an emphasis on basic value orientations of family members in rural Vermont. One can only wish that we had the same kind of in-depth and reflective studies from all parts of New England and of all classes of Franco-Americans.

The French-Canadians arrived in New England to work, arriving in family groupings to a much greater extent than other immigrant groups. After securing a job or simultaneously with securing a job they sought to combine together to face their new urban industrial environment. One of the shelters sought were the arms of the Church which turned out not to be very welcoming.

An analysis of the problems of the development of French parishes in the nineteenth-century is found in Wade’s article on the 19th century parish and survivance. This most adequately portrays the difficulties in the way of the 19th century French person in the U.S. in the fulfillment of his religious duties when faced with an English speaking clergy and the initial reluctance of the Canadian hierarchy to support the immigration in any way. It is extremely unfortunate that we do not have in English or in French for that matter, a scholarly analysis of the difficulties of the Franco-Americans with the Irish hierarchy in the twentieth century.

What we do have is the excellent journalism of Jacques Ducharme’s chapter on religion in "The Shadows of the Trees" which gives the flavor of parish life of the Franco-American community in the first half of this century. It also deals with the most important Sentinelle affair in Rhode Island involving the issue of language and religion. The resolution of the issue foreshadows the widespread divorcement of language with religious identification for Franco-Americans of
this day and age. Ducharme writes well and he is well-informed and judicious but as far as I know these journalistic sketches cannot lead to balanced scholarly accounts of the religious incidents because that research has not been done and published.

Certainly, ethnic parishes and the work place played a major role in their lives but so did politics. Politics, is one of the phases of Franco-American history touched upon in each of the overview articles. In "The Presidential Politics of the Franco-Americans" David B. Walker surveys the political leanings of the Franco's in the presidential elections of 1880 through 1960 using histories and election returns for thirty representative Franco-American communities from 1892 through 1960. But in the later year he also used a pre-campaign poll of two Franco-American towns. Outside of the comparative material on styles of political participation in Greeley's Ethnicity in the United States, we have no serious studies of the politics of Franco-Americans.

Franco-Americans are indebted to Edward Billings Ham for writing English language histories of two of their major institutions, the national societies and the press. He allots praise and criticism to the various societies with a seemingly even hand. How even handed he was is difficult to ascertain in the absence of other scholarly assessments. The history of the past forty years of the national societies is still waiting to be written. But we know that Ham was correct in assessing the opportunities for development open to La sociétè de l'assumption. Ham's article on the Franco-American press is more difficult to evaluate to the sociological
He seems too caught up on the correctness of the French used to properly assess the social function of the newspapers. It is another benchmark article demanding to be evaluated and up-dated.

Language is also the focus of Hervé B. Lemaire's article in the volume on *Language Loyalty in the United States* edited by Joshua A. Fishman. This is an excellent scholarly article, well-documented and balanced in judgement and written by a Franco-American. The role of the national parishes, the parochial and private schools, the national societies, religious and fraternal, the press, the struggle in the church and the impact of state educational regulations on the maintenance of the French language in the Franco-Americans centers are all set forth. Mr. Lemaire sees the World War I patriotism, the depression, the resurgence of prosperity as well as the fact that migration from Canada all but ceased in the 1930's as crucial factors diminishing the use of the French language. Another well documented and scholarly synthesis is the article on New England French culture by Gerald J. Brault. Major values for the French says Brault are the desire to be left alone and the conviction that the French were called upon to preserve the Catholic faith on this continent. Recent field research in the realm of values of Franco-Americans has been the unique contribution of Peter Woolfson. His dual model of our heritage, the coureur de bois and the habitant resolve some of the difficulties noted by Brault.

The reality of language loss is documented in the Bureau of the Census Language Usage in the United States. Faced with
change in language usage what are we to make of the survival of French-Canadian influence in the United States? If culture adopts to social realities and the social reality which forced the immigrants from French-Canada was industrialization; to what extent does the industrialization of Quebec direct the evolution of the French-Canadian culture in the same channels that the Franco-American culture took earlier. To what extent is the Franco-American phenomena the leading edge of social and cultural change among the French-Canadians? Some evidence in this direction is found in the article by Léon Bouvier on changes in French-Canadian fertility in Canada and the U.S. Bouvier found not only declining fertility from 1850 on but an accelerated decline in the United States branch of the kinship group studied as compared to the Canadian branch.

Differing in size and institutional strength we cannot expect the Quebecois to recapitulate the evolution of the 19th century Quebec culture among the Franco-Americans. But it is important to remember that both the Quebecois and the Franco-Americans evolved from the same social reality. Explaining the differences in evolution requires much more knowledge of the Franco-Americans than we presently possess; but I believe that the studies reviewed here do present a solid foundation on which to begin such as explanation.
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