

## T H E F R E N C H C A N A D I A N S .

FRENCH CANADA is a decided asset to Canada, and the existence of the French Canadians of great political and cultural significance to America. French-speaking Canadians overflow the boundaries of the Province of Quebec, spill down into the New England States, down into the Provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island, and are increasing in ever growing numbers across the broad top of Ontario, and along the vast flat spaces of the Prairie Provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. They are amongst the few peoples in the world who have assimilated western culture and have an increasing birth-rate. From the comparatively small group of French emigrants who established themselves in Lower Canada three hundred years ago, the French Canadians today number over three and a half millions. This phenomenal increase is so extraordinary that it is worth pointing out that at one time the French Canadians had the highest birth-rate in the world. It has fallen much lower in recent years although it is still relatively much higher than that of its English-speaking neighbour Province of Ontario.

Wherever the French Canadians are to be found, they bring with them not only their own language and cultural customs, but their own religion, which is the Catholic Faith. One sees in Quebec, as well as out of it, wherever the French are, the tall soaring spires of imposing Churches, surmounted by the noble symbol of the Cross. For this reason, if for no other, we ought to know more about these fertile and ambitious people, the historical ideals to which they have dedicated themselves, and their probable future within the American federation.

It has often been asked : What is American culture? That is easier to answer than the other question, familiar to most Canadians ; what is Canadian culture? We in Canada are a part of North America, we are also nationals of Canada, and within the federation of the British Commonwealth of Nations. As such we owe to that federation a certain loyalty, but we owe a first loyalty to ourselves as a nation.

The fact is that Canadians have not yet learned what it means to be a nation. They are still in the difficult throes of trying to achieve national unity, and in this process the French Canadians play the most prominent part. While English-speaking Canadians as an entity are somewhat *jejeune* about their nationhood, afraid perhaps

to assert themselves for fear of criticism, still tied in a measure to their mother's apron strings, the French Canadians have a strong sense of being a national entity. Indeed, it should be admitted at once *that Canada has, in fact, two distinct cultures*—the English Canadian and the French Canadian.

What is extraordinary about this fact, is that French and English have lived under a common government in Canada for nearly two hundred years, without any serious trouble occurring between the two races. This is something that the exponents of common government for peoples of disparate cultures might well heed. For the French and English peoples in Canada *have far less of a common tradition between them* than have the German, Italian and French Swiss, in the Swiss Federation, which is usually held up as a model for the world.

The case of the French Canadians in relation to Canada as a whole is almost unique. For French-Canadianism is not only an evolution in fact; it is also dedicated to an historical ideal. In an interesting article, published in the Jesuit French Canadian monthly *Relations* (No. 15, March 1942, issued by the *Ecole Sociale Populaire*) entitled '*Psychologie Historique du Canada Francais*,' by Burton Le Doux, the author ventures an opinion as to the exact nature of this historical ideal. He makes the point that the first colonisers of Canada left France before the effects of the Protestant Revolution and of the Humanistic Renaissance had been fully experienced in their native France. 'They were a people wedded, before everything, to a mediaeval mode of living, a people who had resisted firmly the complicated and equivocal ideas of Protestantism. With rare exceptions they were free men and women, and their emigration was not provoked by any religious oppression—it was the result of their free choice.' This is significant because these people, who have resisted successfully the vicissitudes of three centuries of radical change in the rest of the world, still desire to map out for themselves a way of life suited to themselves and to the new world they have chosen to create for themselves.

It is important to realise the intrinsic independence and freedom which these sturdy people inherit, and have woven into the very fabric of their national culture. And even more important from the point of view of a Catholic is the realisation that the French Canadians have been able, at least until to-day, to perpetuate their ideal of a Christian State. Therein, for us, lies the importance of the French Canadians for America.

An ethnological analysis of the French Canadians discloses the fact that they come from all parts of France except the extreme South.

Names like Savard, Caron, Tremblay, Boivin, and Bouhard, common amongst the French Canadians, are also common in France. Their fertility accounts perhaps for their extraordinary powers of assimilating other emigrant groups, for it is common to find in Quebec communities of people bearing Scotch and Irish names like Blackburn, Fitzpatrick, Harvey and McNichol, while not one of these will speak a word of English. Their culture has proved itself strong enough to assimilate nearly all other groups, including the small number of Alsatians and Rhinelanders, whose grandparents spoke German. There is also a considerable Indian strain in them, for the early settlers intermarried with the aborigines. All this has resulted in a particularly strong feeling of race, not in the sense of belonging to any distinctive nationality as such, but rather in their strong consciousness of nationhood, which looks to Canada as their mother country, and to Canada as the source of their culture.

This consciousness of nationhood runs in their politics, and their politicians have exploited it to the full. The English-speaking majority in Ontario and in the Western Provinces make the best of these political tirades by pointing out that the French Canadians are 'un-British.' However, it is not a sin to be un-British, and as a matter of fact the French-Canadians are not un-British in the political sense, being extremely loyal to the British federation, within which they have been able to preserve both their political independence and their racial inheritance. Indeed a majority of their political leaders have been pro-British, because they have appreciated to the full the advantages of living under the British federation. History can record, both before and after the 'Union Act' of 1840, which merged Upper and Lower Canada, (the former then having a population of 450,000 to the latter's 650,000, Westminster not scrupling to act on a new principle of the sovereignty of a minority over a majority) many real political occasions of '*bonne entente*.' The French Canadian found out that union did not necessarily cheat him of anything, and throughout the stormy political years that were to follow, the French speaking minority on more than one occasion proved its loyalty to the British connection.

But here we must make another distinction. For if it is true that many French-Canadian political leaders desired to remain faithful to the British federation, *they also proved themselves anti-English-Canadian* which is not the same thing as being un-British. The Anglo-Canadians, who now constitute about 40 per cent. of Canada's eleven million population (including the foreign-extraction, non-French, non-British, racial population, which numbers over two millions) inherit the historical tradition of Protestantism, well diluted

by the liberalism of the Manchester school of economics, namely the high living standard, the all importance of scientific endeavour in the evolution of progress, and a strong belief in the natural goodness of man.

At the moment, the French-Canadians are passing through a difficult period of transition. They are suffering from the effects of the impact of this modern industrialism upon their own social tradition. We have called this social tradition 'mediaeval,' but we do not mean to imply that the French Canadians are wedded to mediaeval practices. We mean only that they are trying to develop their own economy in the conditions suited to a new country, in conformity with the Catholic social tradition which they have made a part of their national life.

In other words, *they differ both socially and economically from their Anglo-Canadian neighbours.* They are feeling sharply the tendency toward mechanisation that animates modern life, a tendency that threatens to penetrate further and further into their own Province. They react against the efforts of their commercially-minded, often quite sincere although misguided fellow-Canadians, to bring them in line with the industrial tradition of the other Provinces.

Their civilization, until recently, was a highly self-contained peasant and mercantile culture. As in so many cases, the actual living conditions on the farms, in terms of clothing and food, was probably higher than the living standard of industrial workers in the United States and in Canada's largest cities. But this is only in terms of food and clothing. Money, as such, was little regarded, as it is little regarded in other peasant civilizations, such as Portugal. The substitution of a money standard (coincident with the world-wide phenomenon of financial and commercial monopoly) for the more real standards of a peasant culture has done much to demoralise French Canada. The thought of making two or three dollars a week in the industrial mills, proved too much for many French-Canadian girls after the last war, and they migrated into the cities, forgetting that this money would have to provide food and clothing—things for which they were quite unaccustomed to pay at home. Sometimes, finding it impossible to live on their wages, the girls fell into prostitution, a situation which at one time assumed dangerous proportions in cities like Montreal, Three Rivers, and Quebec.

Industrialisation and mechanisation of life have penetrated into a number of centres outside of Montreal, and the sameness that urbanisation brings makes these French Canadian cities indistinguishable from towns of the same sort anywhere on earth. Yet French Canada remains remarkable in many ways. It is a Province of great con-

trasts. One may travel for miles through the northern reaches of the country without seeing more than scattered settlements of hard-working farmers and *habitants*. In these communities an almost feudal Catholicism obtains.

The classical system of education prevails throughout the Province, a system that is rather badly in need of overhauling. Of this the progressive French Canadians are well aware, and some effort is being made now on the part of the Provincial Government, especially in the light of war exigencies, to provide some technical and mechanical engineering courses in their schools. In this, as in all else in Quebec, the old and the new elements in French Canadian society meet in conflict. If the older generation are wedded to the peaceful social tradition of their forefathers, the younger generation are genuinely progressive, and it should be a matter of interest to Catholics that the well-known work of the J.O.C., the J.E.C., and kindred youth organisations, whose efforts formed the spearhead of a genuine Catholic renaissance in France before the collapse, flourishes in Quebec.

An interesting indication of the spiritual maturity of Quebec, is to be found in the publication of a new edition of the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas, the editing of which has been done by the Dominican Fathers. The whole text, which is excellent, was edited with notes by the French Canadian Province of the Order and will remain for some time a standard work in this country, replacing the older and unobtainable Italian editions. Quebec has also undertaken with Pontifical approval the publication of a new edition of the Roman Breviary under the editorship of Dom Jaimet, O.S.B., of Solesmes, who is now Chaplain to a small convent of Benedictine nuns established a short distance from Montreal. In accordance with the Province's traditional dedication to the ideals of a Christian State an Institute of Mediaeval Studies and an Institute of Psychology have been instituted in the University of Montreal, and the Faculty of Philosophy there has been reorganised. All this under the direction of Professors steeped in the Thomist tradition.

The French Canadians are suspicious of what they call 'Americanism.' By this they mean Anglo-American economic *laissez-faire* and power politics. The genius of the English for trading and commerce, in addition to a very real monopoly of these material advantages, and the overwhelming stores of capital available to both English and Americans, to some extent excluded the French Canadians from business, and kept their young men on the farms, or led them into the professions or into the priesthood. Many French Canadians emigrated to New England during the middle and end of

the last century, where they could obtain employment in the newly developed industrial enterprises in the New England States.

Their view on world questions is conditioned by their environment, by their cultural traditions, and by their historical psychology. A French Canadian Air Force Chaplain once said to me, in reply to my question about his people's attitude towards the war, 'They are naive, and simply do not realise they are a part of the international world.' This, I think, is the true answer to their isolationism. But this isolationism is not a policy of being willing to surrender to the highwaymen. On the contrary, it comes of the suspicions I have mentioned above. Yet their co-operation in Canada's war effort has been on a par, proportionately, with that of any of the other seven Provinces of the Dominion.

Their isolationism is composed of two apparently contradictory trends, which may be found in the evolution of all the political and social relations of the British Dominions with the Mother country. The trends are complementary rather than contradictory, for side by side with a growing political autonomy on the part of the Dominions there has also grown up an increasing spirit of voluntary co-operation. Canada's war effort has been geared to the tempo of this voluntary effort, as befits a true democracy. Prime Minister McKenzie King will probably go down to history as a much wiser man than many of the noisy jingoists of Tory and Orange Toronto can at present imagine. And when we consider the utterly inept way in which attempts were made to enlist the support of French Canadians in the last war, it is clear that the policy of voluntary co-operation is much more likely to produce national unity than coercion.

I put this question to a prominent French Canadian priest: 'What do you people fear from us English speaking Canadians? Not the loss of your religion or language, surely?' 'Well,' he replied, 'I think that some of our politicians are too anxious to keep the language question alive. But what we fear most, from our Catholic point of view, is what you call your "living standard."'

That enlightening remark needs some elaboration. For he did not mean that the French Canadian living standard was low, but rather that it was different from that of Americans and English Canadians. The standard differs in that, for example, the Catholic doctrine of a sufficiency of physical necessities to support nature differs from the modern materialistic standard of a levelling-up of everyone to all the other things we have come to look upon as necessary—automobiles, fancy schools, elaborate public health programs, and so forth. It is not that the French Canadian opposes social and economic progress. It is rather that he views with suspicion, as in

a peasant nation he must, things which do not seem to him productive. Some may have read in *The Commonwealth* the story of the old country French Canadian pastor, who lamented the appearance of motor-cars and tractors in his parish, remarking that the trouble with a motor-car is that it eats something you have to buy, and doesn't produce any manure.

Indeed, the ceaseless efforts to raise the living standard, in itself a perfectly necessary and just thing, are largely responsible for the present world crisis. Our liberalism, differing sharply from the European variety which is anti-clerical and atheistic, is a subtle faceless thing, the ideal of a naturally good society progressing inevitably through the medium of science and industry, a mask that covers much of the greed, the dishonesty, the corruption of modern life. It is that subtle internationalism at which we are, alas, so adept, that genius for reaching out to absorb and to exploit, *to turn into gold and money* the resources of a fundamentally peasant people. It is because of this greed that we have forgotten the nobility of those living close to the soil, to the hard wholesome realities of forest, stream, and mountain, of little people who have always given, in their own way, saints to the Universal Church.

The French Canadians are a people dedicated to a Catholic ideal. Whether they will be able to adapt the social and economic advantage of modern life to their own Christian ideal, without taking upon themselves the errors of modern life, remains to be seen. What is certain is that they are a vigorous people who love life, love Canada and the New World. They have the wish to perpetuate themselves and to count in our scheme of things.

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