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Vive les CANADIENS!

*And of course les
Canadiennes, too,
as we mark Canadian
Francophonie Year.
The francophone
side of our national
character is something
to sing about. For
without its two main
cultures, where would
Canada be today?*

It is a pity that so much of Canadian history is written and taught in terms of politics. By concentrating on the doings of the political class, most serious Canadian historians present a misleading image of a nation forever caught up in factional squabbles and constitutional disputes. It is not all their fault; Canadian society has proved so non-violent that they have been deprived of more dramatic stuff, like civil wars and revolutions, to write about. But since peaceful politicians substitute bombast for bullets, any summary of their heated oratory and melodramatic posturing over the years makes it look as if Canadians have lived amidst more rancour and disunity than they actually have.

The political slant to our historiography has had a particularly distorting effect on the record of French-English relations. History books in either language imply that bad blood has always prevailed between the two language groups. It has not been made sufficiently clear that French-English feuding has rarely involved the population as whole, even if people have viewed each other across the language fence with ill-informed intolerance. It is a Canadian rule of thumb that the less people of either mother tongue see of each other, the less willing they are to tolerate each other. Hence the most fervent supporters of breaking away from English Canada live in parts of Quebec where anglophones are almost as scarce as palm

trees, and the hardest of hard-liners on the Quebec question may be found where there is not a francophone on the horizon, broad as it is.

Apart from occasional incidents in which demagogues have succeeded in rousing the masses to temporary fits of indignation, the linguistic fights over the years have been mainly confined to politicians, pressure groups, journalists and academics. Meanwhile, the great mass of the Canadian people were making a more lasting kind of history simply by pursuing their own best interests, often in bicultural partnerships. Wherever they have mingled personally, the Canadian French and English (to use both terms loosely) have lived and worked together on quite a friendly basis. The extent of this mutual amicability has been all the more remarkable considering the hatred between Catholics and Protestants that has smouldered for centuries in their ancestral homelands.

Because of the exaggerated picture they have of the divisions between the English and French, Canadians are prone to see their nation's bicultural nature as an irritant. Political commentators talk about the "French fact," making it sound like a distasteful dose of reality which anglophone Canadians will just have to swallow. And there are many in both groups who would like to consign that fact to history. How much better, they declare, to have one language for one country, be it an English Canada or a French independent Quebec.

In short, the widespread use of two of the world's major languages is seldom thought of as a positive element in Canada's makeup. It is therefore refreshing that the Government of Canada has proclaimed 1999 Canadian Francophonie Year. The gesture identifies the zesty French flavour of Canadian life as a reason for pride and rejoicing. In the next few months, a nationwide program of events will highlight the contributions French-speaking Canadians have made, and continue to make, to their home and native land.

The "dead ducks" are still very much alive

The "year" is tied in with the XIII summit meeting of La Francophonie, the association of 49 governments having French as a common language, to be held in Moncton, N.B., early in September. The celebrations will augment those held in March during National Francophonie Week, a regular annual series of events dedicated to the French side of Canada's heritage. No doubt the attendant festivals, seminars, and learning projects will emphasize that Canada is, after France, the world's second-largest French-speaking nation. As such it is an economic and cultural force to be reckoned with in a worldwide French-speaking population 180 million strong.

The locale of the summit is apt: New Brunswick is Canada's only officially bilingual province, and its premier, Camille Thériault, is a francophone. Having the leaders of the world's French-speaking governments gather there will draw attention to the fact that French Canada consists of more than Quebec. Nationalists in that province (and those who would dearly love to see it cease to be a province) maintain that French-Canadians outside its boundaries are, in the words of René Lévesque, "dead ducks" when it comes to preserving their language and culture. A quarter of a century after the late Quebec premier made that pronouncement, those ducks are still very much alive, and there is quite a flock of them. Of 6.7 million French-speaking Canadians, more than 1 million live outside of Quebec.

Towns and villages with French as their primary language may be found in all the Atlantic provinces, and in Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. Surprisingly, the number of people having French as their mother tongue in Ontario, at 480,000, is not much less than the number having English as their mother tongue in Quebec. The fact that French-speaking communities are scattered about the country is not exactly common knowledge. During the Red River floods of 1997, television viewers in Quebec reported they were surprised to hear victims in Manitoba describing their plight in fluent French.

No doubt there are those who will argue that a celebration of French in Canada is obsolete, given the rise of so many other ethnic groups over this century. Why should one group be raised above the rest? The most obvious reason is weight of numbers: at 26.6 per cent of the population, people of French extraction massively outnumber those of any other origin except British. And indeed, if the 40.5 per cent of British origin is broken down into its English, Irish, Scottish and

Welsh components, then "the French" form the largest minority group in this nation of minorities.

All else aside, French-speaking Canadians have earned a preeminent place in the nation simply by having done so much to create it. Only the aboriginal peoples, after all, have dwelt longer on these shores. New France endured for 259 years, during which the original settlers took every opportunity to form a distinctive Gallic culture adapted to conditions in the northern half of North America. They left an indelible stamp on the Canadian way of doing things in architecture, furniture, cooking, clothing, and music. Not only did they survive in a forbidding terrain and climate, but they boldly struck out to map the continent as far south as the Gulf of Mexico.

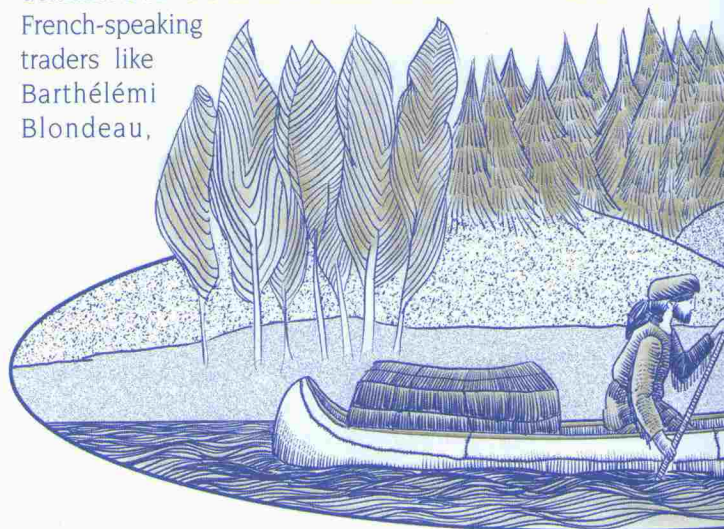
Conquering the frontier in partnership

The great names ring down through the ages: Champlain, LaSalle, Marquette, La Vérendrye, Radisson and des Groseilliers. The latter pair of fur traders were the founding fathers of the bicultural Canadian tradition of doing business together and, in the process, accomplishing great things. Having been swindled out of a cargo of furs by the French colonial administration, they repaired to England with the news that they had discovered a new route to the fur-producing hinterland via James Bay. Their revelation led to the founding of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1670. The HBC subsequently spread throughout the northland, laying the foundations of much of Western and Northern Canada today.

In due course a combination of the trading connections and business skills of the Scottish merchants of the North West Company and the hardihood and woodcraft of the French-Canadian voyageurs opened up routes that ultimately led to the settlement of vast domains from the United States border to the Arctic. French-speaking traders like Barthélemi Blondeau,

When Canadians are asked what is the difference between their country and the United States, they should answer in French.

Lester B. Pearson



Nicolas Montour and Jean-Baptiste Cadot were prominent in the company's founding partnerships. In 1763 Cadot saved his anglophone partner, Alexander Henry, from being murdered. Many anglophones would owe their lives to francophones, and vice-versa, in peace and war over the ensuing years.

Achieving democracy together

Canada itself might just owe its life to the *Canadien* militiamen under Colonel Charles de Salaberry who drove back American forces during the war of 1812 in the battles of Lacolle and Chateauguay. That will forever remain a matter of speculation, but there can be little doubt that if the French population of Canada had chosen to join forces with the Americans when they invaded the country in 1775, its future history would have been markedly different – if it was to have a future history at all.

Even when the colonists rose in revolt against British imperial rule, it was in an atmosphere of French-English cooperation. The rebellion in Lower Canada in 1837-38 was not a straightforward French-English conflict, as people in Quebec have been led to believe. It was fundamentally a struggle for democracy against the self-serving upper class clique that controlled the colony. English-speaking Quebecers like Wolfred Nelson, Robert Nelson, and James Storrow Brown were among the *patriote* leader Louis-Joseph Papineau's top lieutenants. Papineau maintained close contact with his fellow rebel leader in Upper Canada, William Lyon Mackenzie. The end result of their twin revolts was self-government for Canada within the British Empire, followed at length by the complete independence it enjoys today.

Later, francophones were to play a leading part in the development of Western Canada. In his own rebellious way, Louis Riel brought democratic government

and provincial status to Manitoba, which Ottawa would have been content to govern indefinitely as a colony. The founding of Manitoba in 1870 was followed by the dispatch of the North West Mounted Police to bring law and order to the untamed territories farther west and

make peace with and among the native population. Many of the original Mounted Policemen who struck out over the empty plains on the Great March West 125 years ago were French-speaking. The act establishing the force specified the ability to read and write in either English or French.

French-Canadians were also prominent in opening up the Far North in epic expeditions led by Mounted Police officers like J.B. Bégin and A.E. Pelletier at around the turn of the 20th century. Their incredibly arduous journeys had the effect of asserting Canadian jurisdiction over a large portion of the continent. In 1909 the great northern navigator Captain Joseph-Elzéar Bernier, originally of L'Islet, Quebec, erected a tablet on Melville Island declaring Canadian sovereignty over the entire Arctic Archipelago at a time when other nations were casting a covetous eye on that territory.

Business, science, arts and sports en français

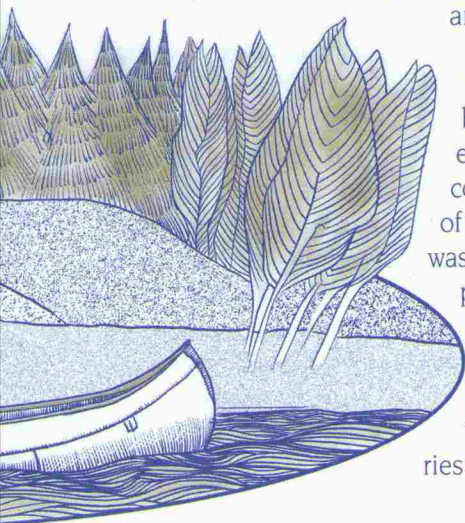
The record of these hardy adventurers should help to dispel the misconception among anglophones that the *Québécois* have never cared much about the rest of Canada. So should the fact that, in the boom years around the turn of the century, Quebec capitalists like Louis Beaubien, Georges H. Simard and Joseph Forget marshalled capital in their home province to finance Pan-Canadian expansion. Forget was elected president of the Montreal Stock Exchange, then the chief capital market in the country, in 1902.

In the main, English-Canadians have long subscribed to the myth that the *Québécois* have traditionally shunned big business. This hardly accords with the fact that Bombardier Ltd. has become one of Canada's leading multinational corporations. The company grew out of Armand Bombardier's invention of the snowmobile in the 1930s, giving the lie to the further myth that older generations of French-Canadians had no interest in science and technology. As early as 1869, Georges-Édouard Desbarats invented the first half-tone reproduction of photographs, giving rise to the modern illustrated publication. In applied science, Roger Gaudry and Roger Lemieux made signal breakthroughs in chemistry, and Armand Frappier in microbiology.

In 1910 Édouard Montpetit founded *L'École des Hautes Études Commerciales* in Montreal in an effort to encourage more francophone participation in business. The school has since come into its own, but *Québécois* society remained geared to turning out professional rather than commercial graduates for a long

...A body of people who have done great things together in the past, moved by dreams of the great things they may yet do together in the future.

Frank Underhill





Canada is a
supreme act of
faith.

A.R.M. Lower

time to come. For Canada as a whole, that was not a bad thing, because the humanities-oriented higher educational system in Quebec produced more than its share of distinguished churchmen, physicians, diplomats and judges who worked for the betterment of the nation. The system also produced outstanding scholars such as Marius Barbeau, the father of Canadian ethnology.

No mention can be made of "Canada and the arts" without listing French-Canadian names in large numbers.

The following are only some of the most prominent: in painting, Alfred Pellon, Paul-Émile Borduas, Jean-Paul Riopelle and Jean-Paul Lemieux; in sculpture, Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Coté; in literature, Gabrielle Roy and Anne Hébert; in music, Wilfrid Pelletier and Calixa Lavallée, who, of course, composed *O Canada*. In the performing arts, *Les Grands Ballets Canadiens* and *Le Cirque du Soleil* have won worldwide accolades. And Céline Dion has become the most popular Canadian-born entertainer ever to occupy the international stage.

From the weight-lifting exploits of Louis Cyr in the 1890s on, French-speaking athletes have been in the spotlight in sports in Canada. The first superstar in hockey was Aurèle Joliet of the Ottawa Senators. Maurice "The Rocket" Richard stands as the prototypical French-Canadian athlete in spirit and style, but English-speaking fans of the Montreal Canadiens have found a host of other truly *Canadien* heroes to cheer for. They have also cheered themselves hoarse at the performances of Olympic athletes like Gaetan Boucher, Jean-Luc Brassard, and Myriam Bédard.

Building the platform for a multicultural society

But spectacular accomplishments in any field are only easily-comprehended symbols of what can be done by the application of basic human qualities. The real story of the building of a nation is one of ordinary people striving to improve their own lives and those of the people around them day by day. And our nation could not have been built into what it has become without what author Stephen Leacock in 1942 called "the mutual tolerance and cooperation of the French and British." The spirit of cooperation was later to affect other ethnic groups, for the accommodation between the two historically hostile language groups established the platform, so to speak, of Canada's present multicultural society.

The achievements of francophone Canadians have not gone unappreciated among the English section of the population. In a recent poll conducted by Angus Reid for the federal Heritage Department, 88 per cent of the respondents, anglophones all, agreed that French-Canadians have made a significant contribution to the country, and 80 per cent said it was a good idea to celebrate the francophone side of Canadian life.

The survey uncovered great good will towards the French language. Seventy-seven per cent of the anglophone respondents wanted their children to be taught French. Sixty-one per cent said that having two official languages was important to being Canadian, even though a mere 18 per cent in this cross-country survey reported hearing French spoken no more often than once a day.

Notwithstanding that it might result from a lack of contact with the other language group, that 61 per cent result may be a little disappointing to people who care about the Canadian identity. One might have thought it would be higher, given that the French part of our national heritage is a big factor in making Canadians different from the rest of the 260 million English-speaking people on this continent.

It's the people that count

Perhaps if the question had been put in another way, more anglophones would feel that French was a defining element of their nationality. The term "official languages" has a political connotation, and, as noted above, politics have always exerted a disturbing effect on relations between the language groups. If the question had run: "Do you think that the presence of French-speaking *people* is important to being Canadian?" many more might have answered in the affirmative. For it is people, not laws, that make our peculiar bicultural partnership work.

As a matter of fact, an even more cogent question might be asked of both language groups – simply: "Where would you be without them?" Where would the Canadian English be without the French, and the other way around? The historical record suggests that without the two going forward side by side, we might not be Canadians at all, because there would be no such country as Canada. Or at least not the Canada that now stands, on the basis of international objective assessments, as the best place to live in the world.

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