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Sad chapter in the story of French in America

by Yves Laberge

Students of Canadian studies and history have learned about the restrictions against speaking French in Ontario after the infamous Bill 17 passed in 1912, and have read the true stories of Acadian writer Antonine Maillet who, as a child living in New Brunswick in the mid-20th century, was regularly punished and humiliated for speaking French at school. As it turns out, the state of Maine had similar, though less well-known, stories related to the discrimination and assimilation of thousands of French-Canadians in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Voyages: A Maine Franco-American Reader is an immense anthology of texts about the French and Canadian presence in Maine by U.S. scholars, with a few notable contributions from four Canadian academics. It was published in the Franco-American Collection series, linked to a research centre at the University of Southern Maine at Lewiston-Auburn, not far from the neighbourhood that used to be called Little Canada because of the presence of French-Canadians in previous centuries.

In the introduction (co-written with Dean Louder from Université Laval), editor Barry Rodrigue acknowledges that even “in 2000, almost 23 percent of the Maine population claimed French, French-Canadian, or Acadian origins.” Drs. Rodrigue and Louder argue that the “older English-language studies of Franco-Americans in Maine, as elsewhere in New England and Canada, were influenced by two major trends – either the French were ignored or they were caged in a web of stereotypes.” Moreover, reflecting on their numerous visits to various Canadian universities, they observe that in the field of Franco-American Studies, “Canadian scholars tended to ignore scholarly developments across the border in the United States.”

In his moving foreword, co-editor Nelson Madore recalls the day in 1957 when, on the school bus that led him to Fort Kent High School just one kilometre from the Canadian border, he was told about the new rule – “French was banned.” Dr. Rodrigue, born in Lewiston, Maine, includes in the anthology the intimate, unpublished testimonies of his grandparents who had changed their names from Marie-Eve Asselin and Henri Rodrigue to Eva Ashland and Henry Roderick Sr. to avoid discrimination.

There were many waves of emigration from Quebec to Maine and New England. Although the French presence in Maine had begun in the 16th century, followed by the expedition of Samuel de Champlain to Ste. Croix Island in 1604, the most important migration of French Canadians in Maine began in 1880.

The director of the Centre for Research on French Canadian Culture at the University of Ottawa, historian Yves Frenette, who has published several articles on the everyday life of Franco-Americans, examines in this volume the case of one of the most important cities in Maine – Lewiston, where 10,000 French-Canadians represented 42 percent of the population in 1900.

A doctoral candidate from University of Ottawa, Rebecca Dirnfeld, contributed a short piece about an obscure constitutional amendment from 1891 that restricted the right to vote in the Maine State elections to citizens who were “able to read the constitution in the English language.” Acknowledging that this amendment targeted the French-Canadian communities in Maine, Ms. Dirnfeld connects this issue (which passed with 60 percent of the votes in the 1891 state referendum) to the infamous Jim Crow laws being adopted in the South to prevent African-Americans taking part in political life.

Some chapters retell frightening stories related to the Ku Klux Klan strategies, targeting the French-Canadian communities living in Maine in 1924. One of the book’s best essays is by professor emeritus C. Stewart Doty of the University of Maine at Orono, with its detailed account of the demonstrations by the Klansmen in Biddeford, not far from Old Orchard Beach, and elsewhere in New England. The Klan rallies usually attacked the Catholics and also groups that didn’t speak English; the French-Canadians were both. Klansmen also tried to stop francophones from becoming candidates in local elections. The residue lasted a long time. As Dr. Doty writes, “Only in 1991 did Bates College, in the heart of French-speaking Lewiston, Maine, restore the right of its Franco-American clerical and maintenance staff to speak French in the workplace.”

Voyages: A Maine Franco-American Reader is a unique and belated contribution to the study of the prejudice felt by generations of Franco-Americans, who were seen as second-class citizens. To my mind, this was the most important book published in American Studies in 2007.

[Voyages: A Maine Franco-American Reader](#), edited by Nelson Madore and Barry Rodrigue, published by Tilbury

House and the University of Southern Maine at Lewiston-Auburn, 2007, 606 pages.

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