

WILLIAM F. RYAN. — *The Clergy and Economic Growth in Quebec (1896-1914)*. Québec, Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1966. vii-348 p.

This work by William F. Ryan is to be welcomed. Not only is it a scholarly study of the economic development of Quebec in the years just preceding World War I — the period of “take-off” according to Rostow, but it is also an interesting review of the role played by the Catholic clergy in this development.

The role of religion in economic development has long been a subject which has awakened keen interest. Already in the sixteenth century English writers hinted that Catholics lacked the “capitalist spirit”. In 1761, it was clearly stated that “there is a kind of natural unaptness” among Catholics for business, “whereas on the contrary among the Reformed, the greater their zeal the greater their inclination to trade and industry, as holding idleness unlawful”. More recently, Max Weber suggested that effective entrepreneurship presumed the existence of a way of thinking that led men to behave in a particularly energetic way. Thus the radical Protestant groups, such as the Calvinists, Methodists, and Quakers, had a value system which contained the “mental virus”, to use McClelland’s felicitous phrase, which made successful entrepreneurship possible. This way of thinking was, however, at odds with the “permanent intrinsic character” of Catholicism. R. H. Tawney, though inspired by Weber, was too impeccable a scholar not to acknowledge that there was plenty of “capitalist spirit” in fifteenth-century Venice, Florence, South Germany, and Flanders. This led him to place more emphasis on the causative role of the whole Protestant movement as well as general political, social and economic conditions during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Those who knew Tawney in his World War I sergeant’s tunic covered with tobacco ash and the long hairs of his Persian cat and sat down with him in his junk-filled house, felt uncomfortable in disagreeing with him. It is not surprising that his ideas, supported by his Miltonic prose, gained such wide currency on both sides of the Atlantic. It was but one, though an important, step to draw a parallel between developments during a special stage of European economic history with developments in other regions. Thus a relationship was drawn between what was felt to be the “backwardness” of Quebec and Catholicism. Even in Quebec itself the clergy became something of a scape-goat. The debate became, at times, acrimonious.

The task which Ryan has set himself is no less than to show that the Catholic Church did not impede the economic development of Quebec between 1896 and 1914.

The work begins with a brief description of the general situation, at the time, in Quebec. Economic developments are particularly underlined. Ryan feels that Quebec shared with the rest of Canada a rapid economic expansion between 1896 and 1914. Taking issue with Prof. Albert Faucher, who maintains that only the growth of the export market in the United States overcame the

initial difficulties encountered by Quebec due to a dearth of economical supplies of coal and iron, Ryan asserts that the hydro-electric and pulp industries largely made up for the lack of a metallurgical industry. And not to be forgotten were such other industrial activities as the production of textiles, shoes, flour, wood, leather, gloves, confectioneries, cigars, and cigarettes. Since the phenomena of interaction and industrialization and Church influence are considered to be too complex for specific analysis of Montreal, the author prefers to make a detailed study of the St. Maurice River valley and the Chicoutimi-Lake St. John region. These two regions, with marked contrasts, were selected to observe how the Church reacted when confronted, as in the St. Maurice region, with the abrupt changes caused by industrialization. The core of the study is a series of chapters which attempt to evaluate how typical are the findings in these two regions in the light of more general changes taking place in the rest of the province, including Montreal. — This discussion is grouped under the major headings of settlement, communications, agriculture, industry, and education. The conclusion attempts to summarize the key attitudes and initiatives adopted by the Church during the development and to note how they changed or were modified during this period; to evaluate very roughly their significance for the actual economic development that occurred; to relate the study to the general discussion on the relationship between religion and economic development; and finally to suggest certain lines of future research.

Ryan has succeeded splendidly in his primary aim. He has established his case with a great deal of interesting and convincing evidence. Thus the clergy favoured new settlements, the expansion of agricultural production, the growth of population, the general development of the economic infrastructure, and labour peace. But he goes beyond this. He asserts that the Church had a positive, if marginal, role in industry. While Ryan agrees that the role of the Catholic Church in economic development was not decisive or determining he does feel that, on balance, it was positive and was more deeply involved in the promotion of such development than most Churches in Anglo-Saxon countries. Here we feel that Ryan has let his special pleading lead him on to rather dangerous ground.

Ryan has not, we feel, completely refuted the view that the Catholic clergy tended to favour the development of the agricultural over other sectors of the economy. We would suggest that even such evidence as has been presented leaves open the interpretation that the clergy accepted manufacturing only as the more palatable of a number of disagreeable choices. It was preferable to having parishoners remaining unemployed in Quebec and it was better than having them leave for a predominantly Protestant United States. However, since the concentration of the population in lumber, mining and other centers tended to weaken traditions, moral fiber, and religious convictions, the ultimate objective must remain life in small rural parishes where such manufactured goods as were needed could be produced by handicraft methods. Already in

1879 Mgr. Lafèche, as cited by Ryan, underlined that the Ottawa valley and the Lake St. John region must be given priority in plans for settlement. On the other hand the St. Maurice valley, considered to have a poor soil and therefore unable to permit "prosperous parishes", should be allowed to develop its resources in minerals and wood, using water power. At the same time handicraft manufacturing was to be encouraged in the villages. Later, in 1902, Mgr. Labrecque, speaking at the inauguration of the Val-Jalbert pulp mill, stated that the local settlers needed an income while the land, which was very fertile, was being cleared and crops planted. Providing this income, he evidently thought, would be the role of the pulp mill. In brief the clergy did little but echo the views of an essentially rural population still strongly wedded to the land of their forefathers.

If the Catholic Church had a negligible influence in the economic development of Quebec and, as Ryan adds, "French-Canadians themselves seem to have played . . . a minor role in initiating industrialization", who did? Here we are given some interesting information.

Drawing on relatively obscure sources, he gives a clear picture of the importance of English and American entrepreneurs and financiers. For instance he deals with the Price family — the "lumber kings" par excellence, who were to leave distinguished descendants not only in the lumber business but also in politics and the armed forces. Ryan suggests that it is possible that the greatest single impact of religious influence is really to be found in the great initiatives elicited in the province by these Anglo-Saxon entrepreneurs and financiers. We might suggest that while it may be relevant that for instance the Price family was Anglican, that it was more important that they came from one of the most technologically advanced nations of the world and were proficient in the language and ways of those who dominated the political, financial and commercial scene at the time. They could thus readily fit into the growing British and American "establishment". However, if French-Canadians played a minor role as "initiators" of industrialization, one should not lose sight of the fact that it was the hundreds of thousands of simple French-Canadian workers, frequently reared in rural surroundings and deprived of all save a rudimentary education, who actually reshaped nature itself and brought a new civilization to the shores of their province and, in return, had to endure desperately bad working conditions and a miserable pittance of a salary.

This work, which is a valuable contribution to the economic history of Canada and an aid in understanding the position of Quebec to-day, is a must on the shelves of all who take an active interest in both past and current problems of Canada.

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