

Jocelyn Létourneau — *Passer à l'avenir. Histoire, mémoire, identité dans le Québec d'aujourd'hui*, Montréal, Boréal, 2000, 194 p.

Recent historiographical debate in Quebec, such as that aroused by the work of Ron Rudin, Jacques Lacoursière, and Gérard Bouchard, has outshone — in terms of theoretical sophistication and politico-ethical seriousness — similar, if earlier, debates about the “death of Canadian history” in “the other solitude”. With this title, Jocelyn Létourneau impressively adds to this Quebec body of work and suggestively builds bridges to Canadian historiography. This is a very subtle and impressive meditation on the contemporary Quebec historical imagination. It is organized in six chapters, some of which have already appeared in different form in such publications as *French Historical Studies*, the *Canadian Historical Review*, *Les Cahiers d'histoire du Québec au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, and the *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*. It deserves to become the focus of a wide-ranging public discussion, in both English and French, on the future of Canadian history.

Létourneau is in some respects writing a polemic against judging and shaping the past according to the dictates of a distant utopia. Specifically, he argues against the confining and limiting everyday uses of the concepts of “nation” and “people” in the context of Quebec. Such uses tend to impose a totalizing and deterministic unity on the past and to blind scholars to the subtler contradictory and complementary relations that make up Quebec’s “social formation”. In the Canadian context, Létourneau is against the attempt to impose a unilateral reading on the past and to make Canada over into a (semi-fictional) entity which the rigorous study of neither past nor present can really justify. Historians and their followers have tended to take for granted the very boundaries and identities of the “nations” and “societies” about which they write. A revealing instance is the way historians in both Canada and Quebec have tried retrospectively to recruit Amerindians for their nation-building narratives. In Quebec, Bouchard — in a warmhearted but misleading gesture that is a sign of his attempt to free nationalism from ethnicity — is said to have cast them as the “First Québécois” and thereby elided all that was ambiguous, contradictory, and complex about the relations between the European settlers and the people they encountered already in North America. In place of these simplifying narratives, Létourneau wants a history of Quebec that closely studies its “constitutive ambiguities”, founded on a critical acceptance of the “factuality” of the past, but not its “fatality”. Having exited from a nationalist myth-symbol complex grown too confining and too rigid, historians will be able to recover, with more accuracy and respect, the surprising record of Franco-Québécois success in playing a difficult hand — exploiting political possibilities and economic advantages. The compulsive melancholy and overarching sense of failure and frustration of the orthodoxy are left behind; the “ambivalence fondatrice et constitutive” (p. 121) of the Quebec reality remains.

Much of this book is a polemic against a “nationalist other” — at times indistinctly defined, but at other times clearly identified with Gérard Bouchard and his followers. Létourneau acutely analyses the extent to which “the nation” has been naturalized in much recent writing. Quebec is an infant demanding the protection of

intellectuals, or (conversely) an ever-growing, ever-strengthening river rising inevitably and relentlessly to meet the sea (of full independence). He pinpoints the question-begging use of a form of the comparative method — “comparatisme sentencieux” — by which Bouchard is said to assume Quebec is always already a nation, even if one prevented by “false consciousness” and other evils from achieving this potential. What objective criteria, Létourneau wonders, give the historian the certain grasp of when a nation is blocked or when it has succeeded? Or when its “rupture” with the past is consummated and its destiny realized? Good questions.

At the same time, and notwithstanding Létourneau’s appreciative passages about the studies of the Saguenay, one occasionally feels that Bouchard figures more in this text as the target of an attack than as a colleague within a scholarly dialogue. (In one place, Létourneau actually uses the phrase “winning conditions” [p. 62] and thus polemically draws a link between Gérard Bouchard and his brother Lucien, the former premier). Yet Bouchard’s account is not as simplistic as it seems to be here. He is drawing upon a rich international literature on nationalism, and it would have been more convincing had his use of this literature, and the assumptions of much of this literature itself, been questioned. There is something to Létourneau’s critique that savours of precisely the apriorism it targets. Given that both Létourneau and Bouchard share an ambitious, not to say exalted, view of the historian’s role in “redeeming” the past, it seems curious that, to at least some extent and notwithstanding an important proviso (p. 68), a central charge against the Bouchardian history of Quebec as a nation seems to be that it assumes that the historian can act as a redeemer, breathing significance and hope into the discouraged hearts of the present day.

A second observation relates to Létourneau’s concept of “Canadianité”, to evoke a “Canadian historical adventure” that was and remains “the expression of incessant tensions and frictions between centripetal and centrifugal forces”, sometimes complementary and sometimes contradictory (p. 82). In the 35-year moment of the constitutional crisis, this idea of Canada as the land of “structuring dissonances” and “fecund ambiguities” (p. 80) has attained a large popularity. Core to the notion of “Canadianité” is the sense that leading Canadians, rooted in nothing more elevating than political realism, have found a kind of melody in the country’s dissonances, have forsworn the use of force as a way of simplifying the national narrative, and have thereby come to create the most remarkable characteristic of the country — its celebration of heterogeneity and its tolerance of difference. “Canadianité” has generally happy and positive consequences. Without arriving at an unlimited enthusiasm for “limited identities” or a sense of cultural relativism, Létourneau argues that it remains one of the historian’s obligations to bring this ambiguity into the open, rather than trying to camouflage it. There is a creativity in ambiguity. The “non-resolution of the Canadian equation” has its virtuous outcome in a Canadian adventure that allows expressive and political freedom to its inhabitants and communities.

The attractions — political, cultural, humanistic — of Létourneau’s subtly expressed view of “Canadianité” are obvious and suggest parallels with Gerald Friesen’s work. Yet, just as Bouchard’s nation — similarly inclusive and open to difference — could be critiqued by Létourneau as an *a priori* that diminishes the

complexity of the actual past, so too might one discern in “Canadianité” a transcendental ideal of tolerance and reconciliation that can also pre-empt critique and turn history into a comfortable discourse of consolation. Projected onto the past, this pacific notion of a Canada founded upon the mediation of structural conflicts and the transmogrification of dissonance into melody imposes its own kind of “fatality” upon the past. It is the fatality of liberal order, whose definitions of reality, algebra of passive counter-revolution, and hegemonic “handling” of contradiction are here naturalized and removed from any conceivable critique. This, too, is a myth-symbol complex, part of the new, post-1970, Toronto-centred liberal nationalism, with its tell-tale “terms of endearment” and its by now very familiar rallying cries (fluidity! ambiguity! difference!).

This is a thought-provoking book, from one of the subtlest minds to explore the possibility of writing history under conditions of postmodernity. Beyond “Canadianité” and “post-nationalism” one finds in its pages many highly suggestive comments about the possibility of historical knowledge, even under conditions of postmodernity.

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Cormac O'Grada — *Black '47 and Beyond: The Great Irish Famine in History, Economy, and Memory*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000. Pp. 302.

Cormac O'Grada is widely reckoned as the ranking economic historian of Ireland, and rightly so. In addition to technical virtuosity, he does something few economic historians are capable of: he writes well and with passion. This is the best book to come out of the recent “Commemoration” of the Great Irish Famine, and it should be understood in historiographic perspective.

Given the horrific magnitude of the Famine, it has until recently had a very thin literature. Professional historians avoided it because of its immense scale and because it had become yet another bead in the rosary of Irish nationalist hate-rhetoric. It is much too important for that. In the immediate aftermath of the Famine, the reaction, both of its survivors and its observers, was one of silence. It was too big to comprehend. The break in the wall of silence was John Mitchel's *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)* (1860), which turned Ireland's greatest tragedy into a conspiracy: England starved Ireland. Everything written since then exists in the shadow of this massively successful novel. “The Almighty sent the potato blight, but the English created the Famine” (p. 219). It is a clear story, in black and white. It is well to remember, however, that John Mitchel spent a good portion of his life as a propaganda master of the American Confederacy. Having spent time as a very privileged “rebel” prisoner in Tasmania, he escaped to the United States in 1853. In New York he published a newspaper, *The Irish Citizen*, and then, as a strong supporter of slavery, he moved to the South. “I consider Negro slavery the best state of existence for the Negro” was his view. That mind-set produced his work on the Famine: he saw everything in black and white.