

FRENCH CANADIAN INSTITUTIONS



Fernand Gallant with his crew fishing for herring at Escuminac.
Photo: Roméo Cormier from Images de l'Acadie.

Language was an obstacle to penetration of French Canadian society by the new English-speaking Canadians, but it was not the major obstacle. Rather, it was the institutions that French Canadians had long lived by, institutions that were to continue to exist for some time to come. One was the Roman Catholic Church; another was the seigneurial system.

The Church

After the Conquest of 1760, the Church became the ideological base of French Canadian nationality. It also became, for obvious reasons, ultramontane, looking not to Rome for confirmation of its asceticism, its high-mindedness, and its religious principles, but finding its own native resources for its priests and bishops. The great bishops of the mid and late 19th century, Laflèche, Taché, Bourget, were all born and raised in Quebec. They looked not to France, which they generally distrusted, but to Rome. They were a unique combination of nationalist and ultramontane. Little basic conflict was perceived between French Canadian nationalism and French Canadian Catholicism though there were hints of it in 1877 and again in 1898 at the time of the visits of papal emissaries. Abbé Lionel Groulx, the nationalist historian of the 20th century was to learn in 1928 that Rome found his *Action française* movement had pressed French Canadian nationalism too far.

Thus the Church's role must not be underestimated in delivering into the last half of the 20th century a Quebec fully conscious of itself; vigorous, bold, and ingenious. At the same time, however, it is undeniable that the Church delayed the technical and commercial development of Quebec. There was a price to be paid. The Church had feared, perhaps rightly, the pernicious influence of the 19th century Anglo-American civilization: its crass materialism, often disguised in the sober church-going clothes of Methodists and Presbyterians; its growing urban

society and the commercial ambiance that went with it; its preoccupation with technical improvements at the expense of the a more human scale of values. The Catholic Church feared the loss of the old, largely rural simplicities of Quebec life; it fought "progress" as long as it could. The ordinary parish priest as a rule distrusted French books, and English books still more, in the hands of his parishioners. At *l'Assomption*, the parish priest of the 1880s, Abbé Dorval, preached a special sermon every year against books. Ostensibly, it was against bad books. "This thirst for reading," he thundered from the pulpit, "is an idle form of curiosity and a dangerous one. Be on your guard, my brethren; a bad book is often the doorway to Hell."⁸

The Church dominated not only the schools, but the *collèges classiques* and the universities. All three levels of education reflected a strong sense of the old classical culture, Greek and Latin languages, French literature with a special emphasis on the 17th century, and a special carefulness about what was chosen from the 19th; they had confessed to Aristotelian philosophy, Thomist theology, the strong sense of deductive logic, and, with all of that, dedication, toughness, and it is right to add, blindness. The Quebec universities were backward in engineering, medicine, and in the development of modern accounting and business techniques. So bad was the situation with the last, that the Quebec government was forced to establish on its own, in 1909 at Montreal "L'Ecole des Hautes Études Commerciales". Nevertheless, the graduates of this old tradition were well educated, civilized, and sophisticated intellectually rather beyond the realm of the ordinary graduate from an English Canadian university. The church deliberately set out to educate its own clergy and its own civil leaders, and it largely succeeded. It did much to give Quebec society its strong sense of cohesion.