

(By way of reaction, Quebec's birth rate today is the lowest in the western world, after West Germany.)

Arcadian Myth

The arcadian myth was so strong among the province's artists and social elite that it persisted well into the era when the majority of French-speaking Quebecers had become city dwellers, working in factories or the civil service.

It was not until the 1930s that painters such as Adrien Hébert began depicting urban landscapes instead of the province's bucolic byways. And with the exception of a few writers such as Émile Nelligan, or Gabrielle Roy, whose novel *Bonheur d'occasion* (*The Tin Flute*) describes the life of a proletarian family in Montreal during the Depression, most artists drew their inspiration from rural themes. Even the delicious morality play that is the basis of Roger Lemelin's novel, *Les Plouffe* (*The Plouffe Family*), is infused with traditional rural social values, despite its working-class setting in Quebec City's "Lower Town," at a time when the world was rocked by the horrors of the Second World War.

The novel that best conveys the myths at the root of traditional French-Canadian society — and does so in a clear and sober style that renders it a great work of literature — is *Maria Chapdelaine*, by Louis Hémon. Maria, the daughter of hardscrabble settlers in the Lac St. Jean area, is courted by three men who each represents one of the three currents running through Quebec society at the time: the desire to reconquer lost lands and to escape the confines of the present; the lure of the United States to the south; and the call of duty and devotion, reinforced by the attachment to the land. Maria is charmed by the handsome *coureur des bois* (Quebec's answer to America's mountain men such

as Daniel Boone) who holds out the dream of adventure, but he is killed in a river logging drive. For a moment, she is tempted to follow her second suitor who had emigrated to "The States," to the "big city" (Lowell, Massachusetts) and spins shimmering tales of the comforts and prosperity she would find there. But Maria chooses the hard but blessed life offered by her neighbour, a dirt farmer like her father.



Geneviève Bujold: a leading Quebec actress of international repute.

Each era in Quebec, of course, had its nonconformists. For example, Jean-Charles Harvey's writing reflects a virulent anticlericalism and a hedonistic impulse closer to Henry Miller than to the puritan *petite bourgeoisie* that dominated Montreal during the 1930s and 1940s. But there were many writers, painters and actors who felt they had to go into exile, to Paris.

Upon their return home, those artists remained on the fringes of a society from which they felt more alienated than before; they were, more than ever, victims of the prevailing conformity which considered anything marginal to be unsuitable, even threatening.

The cult of egalitarianism remains to this day one of the defining characteristics of Quebec society. After the British conquest in 1759, the

a first-come, first-served basis, and the hallmark of Montreal's popular International Jazz Festival, held at the beginning of July for the past 10 years, is that it offers numerous first-class, free performances — which, in the best Canadian tradition, are supported largely by government grants.

Transforming Upheavals

All this was to change radically between the 1950s and the mid-1970s, when three great and simultaneous upheavals transformed the French-Canadian mindspace. First, was the accelerated de-clericalization of Quebec society, which abandoned the Church and turned to government — the provincial government, which was rapidly laying the foundation for a modern, social-democratic state. Some dreamed of transforming this new Quebec into a fully sovereign state, separate from Canada.

The second radical change was the modernization of the school system and the accession of French-Canadians to the business bourgeoisie. Finally, there emerged, in the wake of student protests and liberation movements the world over, a strong protest movement that challenged the social and cultural order of the day. This was largely integrated with a potent independence movement, which, though it was never able to rally the majority of the population to its side, nevertheless profoundly affected the thinking of the province's young people, artists and intellectuals for two decades.

From then on, nationalism, and, for a time, Marxism and the revolutionary ethic, inspired many of Quebec's creative minds. From militant works, such as *Nègres blancs d'Amérique* (*White Niggers of America*) by Pierre Vallières to the more subtle satires of Jacques Ferron and Jacques Godbout, many of the era's foremost literary works had a pronounced political or social content, and most of them had a resolutely urban tone.

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