

C'EST LA DIFFERENCE



The Olympic Stadium was built to host the XX1st Olympiad in 1976 and is now home to Montreal's professional football, baseball and soccer teams.

Photo: Mia and Klaus.

That French Canadians are different from English Canadians one can perceive simply by watching them; the way they live, work or amuse themselves. They do the same things, live in the same climate, but nearly everything they do, they do in different ways. If there were ever an argument against geographic determinism, the different ways that French and English live and work in an environment they have inhabited together for 200 years should refute it.

This story omits many things which Canadians, French and English, have achieved in common, as well as the things that have separated them. There are always antipathies between people of different languages, beginning with the jokes. A favourite old Montreal joke is the contest in which the first prize was a week's trip to Toronto, the second prize was a two-week trip to Toronto. That badly underestimates the Toronto of the 1980's, but Montrealers have long memories. The motto of Quebec is "*Je me souviens*", "I remember". French Canadian history is not neglected in Quebec. French Canadian historians are public figures. Enshrined in these memories are the shared antipathies that have helped to keep Quebec society together: the devastations of 1837, the Riel crisis of 1885, the Manitoba School question of the 1890s, the conscription crisis of 1917-18, and of 1944. It is a curious story of Anglo-Saxon blindness to other languages and other peoples and other ways, as well as, on the part of French Canadians, the defensive paranoia of a people who see themselves threatened at every turn, and who feel they must assert their rights, whether in fact these

rights are being threatened or not. French Canadian attitudes, though understandable, are decidedly inward looking. There is a tendency to confuse all things in English, failing to distinguish between ideas and attitudes that are English, American English, or Canadian English. Of course, it is not easy, even given a familiarity with the English language, to discern the nuances between three different forms of English institutions and traditions.

Thus there are profound differences in the way English Canadians and French Canadians feel about the political entity, Canada. The English Canadian attachment to Canada is almost emotional; but for French Canadians it is more apt to be rational, like a *mariage de convenance*, not without its creature comforts, even its pleasures, perhaps its loyalties; but their real heart is not there. The French Canadians reserve their love for Quebec. The ambiguity shows up all the time. It shows up in "O Canada", the Canadian national anthem. ("Canada" was the old French name for what is now Quebec. English Canadians have appropriated it, and the anthem, as they have so much else.) At the hockey games in the Montreal Forum, before they settle down to the serious business of cheering for Les Canadiens hockey team, the French Canadian audience cheerfully stand and sing "O Canada, terre de nos aïeux", in the full consciousness that the Canada they are thinking of is the land of Quebec, and which will, as the closing lines of the anthem suggest, "*protègera nos foyers et nos droits*", protect our hearths and our rights.