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SOME FRENCH-CANADIAN INTERPRETATIONS
OF THE BRITISH CONQUEST:
UNE QUATRIÈME DOMINANTE
DE LA PENSÉE CANADIENNE-FRANÇAISE

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History ! they shouted. Give us back our History !
The English have stolen our History !

(Leonard Cohen, *The Beautiful Losers.*)

During the autumn of 1965, when Premier Lesage went forth to win the West, he repeatedly told an anecdote that revealed a great deal about himself and his people. The anecdote was historical, it was about the Battle of the Plains of Abraham. "It was a little battle, between two regiments of regular soldiers from overseas," he said. "The French regiment lost the battle and went back to France. The British won, and stayed, and were assimilated."¹

It can be left to a future biographer to explain why Premier Lesage treated "le fait capital de l'histoire du Canada français"² so lightly. For my purposes the story serves only as a reminder that nearly every French Canadian, viewing the place of his community in Canada, almost invariably begins with an interpretation of the meaning of the British Conquest. No question has more consistently occupied the attention of French Canadian historians, intellectuals, politicians, social scientists, priests, novelists and newspapermen than the meaning of 1759. And interpretations of that critical event are almost as numerous as the classes of people who have examined it. For that reason among others, the interpretation of the meaning of the Conquest is one of the most important subjects in the intellectual history of French Canada. Each generation of French Canadians appears to fight, intellectually, the Battle of the Plains of Abraham again.³

¹ Blair Fraser, "How Lesage Unsettled the West," *Maclean's Magazine*, Vol. 78, No. 22, November 15, 1965, 57.

² Michel Brunet, *La Présence Anglaise et les Canadiens* (Montréal, 1958, 117).

³ It is impossible here to survey the whole field of French Canadian writing, and I have ignored the field of fiction. But to choose only two widely separated examples mention may be made of Octave Crémazie's poem, "Le Drapeau de Carillon," where he speaks of a French Canadian after 1763 "exilé dans sa propre patrie." *Œuvres Complètes de Octave Crémazie* (Montréal, 1882), 129, and Jean-Charles Harvey's novel, *Marcel Faure* (Montmagny, 1922), 13, where it is remarked that after the defeat of Montcalm "la race était plongée dans une amertume sans fond..."

Since it is not the Conquest itself, but rather what later generations looking back have thought about it, that forms the substance of intellectual history, it is perhaps sensible to begin with the generation of Garneau and Parent. This choice is not a completely arbitrary one for the failure of the Rebellion of 1837 and the imposition of the Union of 1841 were events which, perhaps for the first time since the Treaty of 1763, caused French Canadian intellectuals to contemplate seriously the fate of a French-speaking community separated from its Motherland. As Canon Groulx and others have shown, of course, the search for the meaning of the Conquest began very soon after 1759.⁴ But it nevertheless remains true that it was with Garneau's generation, a generation which reflected the birth of French Canadian nationalism, that the great, acrimonious and continuing debate about the long-term meaning of the Conquest began its passionate history.

Since the debate appears to have begun in these crisis years, 1837 to 1849, it is not surprising that the graph illustrating its rising and falling intensity runs closely parallel to the graph of political change and crisis in Canada. It has usually been in times of crisis that French Canadians, a most historically-minded people, have turned to the past for the explanation of their plight. And in that past, 1759 has always been the key date. It is the interpretation of the political, cultural, and socio-economic result of that symbolic year, that has formed the core of the continual argument in French Canada about the existing and future state of the nation.

I

The years between the publication of Garneau's *Histoire* and the First World War represent a formative stage in the debate over the meaning of the Conquest. For Garneau the Conquest was an unmitigated tragedy. In his view the French Canadians' heroic and self-sacrificing past was nothing "en comparaison des souffrances et des humiliations qui se préparaient pour eux et pour leur postérité." Moreover, the social consequences of the defeat of France were extremely serious, for New France witnessed the exodus of "Les marchands, les hommes de loi, les anciens fonctionnaires, enfin la plupart des notables qui étaient encore dans le pays." As for the great majority, who remained in Canada, "s'isolant de leurs nouveaux maîtres, ils se livrèrent entièrement à l'agriculture."⁵

By following an earlier and inferior historian, Michel Bibaud,⁶ Garneau thus established one of the great themes in the debate over

⁴ Abbé Lionel Groulx, *Notre Maître, Le Passé* (Montréal, 1944), Troisième série, 125-78.

⁵ F.-X. Garneau, *Histoire du Canada*, Cinquième édition (Paris, 1920), Livre Onzième, 300, 298, 296.

⁶ Michel Bibaud, *Histoire du Canada et des Canadiens sous la Domination Anglaise* (Montréal, 1844), 5, 11-12.

the consequences of the Conquest: the fate of the leading classes of New France. If the leading classes had, in fact, disappeared after 1763 then the weakness of French Canada's lay leadership and the predominant role of the clergy, could be explained. The Garneau view prevailed throughout most of the nineteenth century.⁷ The general tendency was to argue that while the lay directing classes had departed, it was in reality good riddance, for they had not been true *Canadiens* anyway. This latter view became especially popular after Juge Baby showed, on the basis of meticulous research, that the number of those who had departed had been greatly exaggerated.⁸ For Benjamin Sulte, Baby's work made it plain that "les vrais Canadiens restaient chez eux."⁹ Indeed Sulte, who, due perhaps to the influence of the loyalist William Kirby,¹⁰ was something of a British Imperialist, even argued that the directing class, a noblesse of *canadien* origin, had remained in Canada and become "plus tête que jamais grâce au régime anglais."¹¹ For Sulte, of course, the Conquest was not a tragedy at all, but represented rather a long-run benefit for French Canadians. As the only French Canadian contributor to a fat Imperialist tract published in 1905, Sulte wrote that, "None of the humiliations and annoyances which usually accompany a Conquest were imposed upon them (the French Canadians). They passed from a reign of absolute subjection under the Bourbons to the free and untrammelled life of a constitutional government."¹²

By and large, Baby's interpretation, though not necessarily Sulte's loyalist modification of it, became the conventional wisdom in the decade before the First World War.¹³ The view implied that the Conquest had exercised very little effect upon the social structure and the way of life of French Canadians. By the end of the nineteenth century, a growing number of French Canadians tended to discount the importance of the changed political allegiance.

One writer at least, at the end of the nineteenth century, did not accept the view that the Conquest had left the *Canadiens'* way of life unchanged. That writer was the learned and respected sociologist, Léon Gérin. Gérin, deeply influenced by the French Catholic thinkers of

⁷ J.-B.-A. Ferland, *Cours d'histoire du Canada* (Québec, 1865), II, 606.

⁸ Le Juge Baby, "L'Exode des Classes Dirigeantes à la Cession du Canada," *The Canadian Antiquarian and Numismatic Journal*, 3rd Series, Vol. II, Nos. 3 and 4, 1899, 97-141.

⁹ Benjamin Sulte, "L'Exode de 1760-63," *Mélanges Historiques*, Tome 5 (Montréal, 1919), 82.

¹⁰ Victor Morin, "Benjamin Sulte Intime," *Les Cahiers des Dix*, No. 27, Montreal, 1962.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Sulte, "L'Exode de 1760-63," 85. See also abbé A. Couillard Desprès, *Noblesse de France et du Canada* (Montréal, 1916).

¹² Benjamin Sulte, "The French Canadians and the Empire," in C.S. Goldman, *The Empire and the Century* (London, 1905), 420-21.

¹³ The final word on this subject has probably been said by Robert de Roquebrune, "L'Exode des Canadiens après 1760," *La Nouvelle Revue Canadienne*, III, 1, sept.-oct. 1953.

the school of Frédéric Le Play, believed firmly in the virtues of liberal individualism and free enterprise.¹⁴ He was thoroughly convinced that his compatriots, if they wished to survive in the modern world, would have to acquire the values of modern, liberal, industrial civilization. And to do so, they needed to reform their educational system.¹⁵ The superiority of the English, had been demonstrated in their victory over the French in North America, and this he attributed to their self-reliant individualism. In short, the British represented the vanguard of social progress. He was therefore prepared to argue that, from a sociological viewpoint, the British Conquest of Canada was a progressive step since it began the destruction of the old, backward, communitarian order that had been inherited from France. To replace these reactionary values, the Conquest brought the progressive, individualistic values of Britain.¹⁶

Gérin had both his supporters and his critics. Errol Bouchette, the apostle of industrialization, agreed substantially with his friend's admiration for the virtues of British individualism.¹⁷ On the other hand, writers like abbé Brosseau, who feared that the implications of Gerin's views threatened French Canada's spiritual mission, rejected the sociologist's claims.¹⁸

Abbé Brosseau's response to Gérin is indicative of an attitude toward the Conquest that was prevalent in the years before the Great War. That attitude stemmed from a belief that French Canada, both before and after the Conquest, was primarily a missionary colony whose goal was to bring the civilizing influence of France and Catholicism to a barbarian North America. If anything, the Conquest had reaffirmed this mission, by strengthening the Church. Accompanying this contention, was the further claim that the Church had saved the nation. Garneau, though not especially friendly toward the Church, had noted that "le corps religieux" had remained after 1763.¹⁹ His successors carried the claim a step further. A cleric, J.S. Raymond, in a speech in 1870 in which he explained the recent defeat of France by German as a proper chastisement, concluded with what was a standard refrain. "C'est la

¹⁴ See Hervé Carrier, *Le Sociologue Canadien — Léon Gérin, 1866-1951* (Montréal, 1960), and Jean-Charles Falardeau, "Léon Gérin: Une Introduction à la lecture de son œuvre," *Recherches Sociographiques*, I, 2, avril-juin 1960.

¹⁵ Léon Gérin au *Monde illustré*, 17^e année, n° 881, 23 mars 1901, 780.

¹⁶ Léon Gérin, "L'intérêt sociologique de l'œuvre de Garneau," *La Science sociale, Bulletin*, janvier 1914, 62; and also Léon Gérin, "L'influence des Traditions des Quatre Principales Populations Canadiennes dans la Vie Privée," *La Science Sociale*, novembre 1897, 365-78.

¹⁷ Errol Bouchette, "French Canada and Canada," *The Canadian Magazine*, XIV, 4, February 1900, 314-16 and Errol Bouchette, *L'Indépendance Economique du Canada Français* (Montréal, 1913), 64 ff.

¹⁸ Abbé J.-A.-M. Brosseau, "Etude Critique du Livre d'Edmond Demolins, *A quoi tient la supériorité des Anglo-Saxons*," *La Revue Canadienne*, XLVI, mars 1904; and Léon Gérin, "M. Demolins et la Science Sociale," *ibid*, avril 1904.

¹⁹ Garneau, *Histoire*, 298.

religion qui a maintenu en nous une loyauté, qui en nous rendant fidèles à nos nouveaux maîtres, a empêché l'absorption de notre foi, de notre langue, de nos mœurs, de notre nom, dans l'union américaine."²⁰

But this clerical interpretation of the survival of French Canada went well beyond the simple claim concerning the leading role of the Church. Much more important was the view that the Conquest, itself, was divinely inspired, for it saved the *Canadiens* from the horrors of the corruption, secularism and revolution that had overtaken France almost immediately after 1763. It was for this reason that abbé Lafèche, in his defence of the plan for Confederation, rejected the view that the Conquest was "un malheur national." Indeed, Lafèche insisted that in the light of 1789, "on se convaincra que la conquête n'a pas été pour nous un malheur, mais qu'elle a été le moyen providentiel dont Dieu s'est servi pour nous sauver comme peuple." Abbé Lafèche then went a step further in his exposition of his people's history. The Conquest had not only cut New France off from the decaying society of France, but it had also grafted it to the healthy British plant. And why was British society so admirable? Abbé Lafèche's response suggests that he learned his British history from rather different books than those volumes of Macaulay that the young Laurier was pouring over. The cleric wrote that the British constitution was founded by "le pieux et fervent catholique Alfred-le-Grand. Cet homme de génie avait compris et admiré la beauté et la force de la constitution du gouvernement de l'Eglise catholique. Il essaya de l'appliquer au gouvernement de la nation que la divine Providence l'avait chargé de gouverner. C'est là l'origine et le modèle de la constitution anglaise."²¹ Thus, at last, had been revealed the object of Alfred's contemplations while the cakes burned!

Abbé Lafèche's view of France and Britain, and therefore of the Conquest, was widely held in French Canada before the First World War. It was not, however, unchallenged. There were even those who argued that the role of the Church after the Conquest had been one of collaboration with the British. Curiously, one of the first writers to suggest this interpretation was a French cleric who had briefly taught at the Quebec seminary in the 1840's before moving on to Boston. Abbé Brasseur de Bourbourg's explosive exposé made its appearance in 1852.²²

²⁰ J.-S. Raymond, "Enseignements des Evénements contemporains," *Revue Canadienne*, VIII, janvier 1871, 55; see also Juge A.-B. Routhier, "La Religion Catholique et la Nationalité Canadienne Française," *Conférences et Discours* (Montréal, 1889), 27-29.

²¹ Abbé L. Lafèche, *Quelques Considérations sur les Rapports de la Société Civile avec la Religion et la Famille* (Montréal, 1866), 73, 74; see also Philippe Masson, *Le Canada Français et La Providence* (Québec, 1875).

²² Abbé Brasseur de Bourbourg, *Histoire du Canada, de Son Eglise et ses Missions* (Paris, 1852), 2 vols.

His charge that the French Canadian hierarchy had assisted the British conquerors, as well as his no less unflattering prediction that the *Canadiens* would ultimately be assimilated into the North American melting-pot, brought a furious and defensive reply of "humbug" from the respected abbé Ferland.²³

The French abbé's book doubtless died a painless death under the heavy blows of the French Canadian abbé, but the ideas themselves died harder, if at all. Indeed the charge of clerical collaboration was expressed by a variety of young intellectual *rouges* in the 1890's. It was a favorite theme of the young men who wrote, unfortunately under pseudonyms, for the lively, but short-lived, *Canada-Revue*, published in Montreal. In one of several excursions into Canadian history, "Duroc" wrote in 1893, "Le clergé catholique s'est fait l'esclave du vainqueur, il a été l'arme puissante grâce à laquelle s'est assurée la soumission entière, absolue." Yet "Duroc" and his anticlerical friends appear to have agreed with abbé Laffèche's estimate of the value of British institutions. Because the Conquest had brought liberal institutions, French Canadians had survived despite the tyranny of the Church.²⁴ It was views like these, and some rather more scandalous ones, that brought the condemnation of the Archbishop of Montreal down upon the *Canada-Revue*. A similar fate, at the hands of Rome, befell L.-O. David's *Le Clergé canadien*, in 1896. Somewhat more moderate in his views than the contributors to the *Canada-Revue*, David nevertheless viewed the clergy as the chief beneficiaries of the Conquest. He argued further that they had misused their predominant position by failing to support the national cause in 1837 and 1867, and by contributing to the economic inferiority of French Canadians through their control over education.²⁵

French Canadian liberals or *rouges* of the nineteenth century were by no means unanimous in their belief that the Conquest and the consequent establishment of British institutions were beneficial to French Canada. There were some who believed that the Conquest had been such a calamity as to demand the most radical steps to erase it. Hector Fabre, a profound admirer of France, proclaimed in 1871 that "le plus grand malheur qui puisse frapper un peuple naissant, c'est d'être séparé de la nationalité dont il sort . . ." ²⁶ Twenty years later, in the

²³ J.-B.-A. Ferland, *Observations sur un Ouvrage intitulé Histoire du Canada etc. par M. l'abbé Brasseur de Bourbourg* (Québec, 1953). See also Robert Sylvain, "Un Singulier Historien du Canada," *Revue de l'Université Laval*, III, 1, septembre 1948.

²⁴ "Duroc", "Pages d'histoire," *Canada-Revue*, IV, 3, 21 janvier 1893, 35 and "Duroc", "Le Terrorisme," *ibid.*, 7 janvier 1893, 5. I am indebted to Professor Joseph Levitt of the University of Ottawa for this reference.

²⁵ L.-O. David, *Le Clergé canadien, Sa Mission et Son Oeuvre* (Montréal, 1896), 106-107.

²⁶ Hector Fabre, *Confédération, Indépendance, Annexation* (Québec, 1871), 5.

midst of economic depression, Louis Fréchette argued that French Canadians had never accepted the Conquest. "This feeling," he wrote in an American magazine, "is the quiet, unavowed and unconscious but instinctive expectation of some reaction ever cherished, ever dreamed of, and secretly nourished by some undefined hope of future emancipation."²⁷ Both Fabre and Fréchette saw the solution to the tragedy of the Conquest in annexation to the United States.

Perhaps the most interesting views of the meaning of the Conquest, interesting because of the men who held them, were those of the three most prominent Quebec political figures at the turn of the century — Mercier, Laurier and Bourassa. Despite his *nationalisme*, Mercier's view of the Conquest was remarkably conventional. For him the important result of the Conquest was that it brought those parliamentary institutions which had allowed French Canadians to regain their full freedom. "Voyez ce qui est arrivé à nos pères," he told the Quebec Société-Saint-Jean-Baptiste in 1862. "Vaincus sur les Plaines d'Abraham, ils sont restés libres et français..."²⁸

Laurier, despite the *rougisme* in his background, held a similar view. In his famous speech on "Political Liberalism" in 1877, he argued that while French Canadians were a "conquered race," they had also "made a conquest: the conquest of liberty."²⁹ He returned to these thoughts in the dark days of November 1899 when he had reluctantly acceded to pressure from English Canada to send a Canadian contingent to South Africa. His close friend and confidant, Senator Raoul Dandurand, wrote to him, in a state of depression, arguing that recent events had again proven that "nous ne sommes pas maîtres de nos destinées." Laurier's reply was to insist that the Conquest had been erased. "Mais quels sont les vaincus dans l'histoire qui, un siècle après leur défaite, ont pu montrer au monde, non seulement qu'ils auront conservé leur religion, leur langue, tout ce qui constitue les attributs distinctifs de la nationalité, mais qu'ils étaient en toutes choses sur un pied d'égalité avec ceux qu'en suivant votre idée, vous êtes obligés d'appeler leurs conquérants?" Laurier argued.³⁰

Though divided from Laurier on many issues, Henri Bourassa differed very little from the Liberal Prime Minister in his interpretation of the events of 1759. Bourassa, a loyal son of the Church and a temperamental conservative, expressed completely what might be called the traditional interpretation of the Conquest. In his view New France had been primarily a missionary venture, and its people had followed

²⁷ Louis-H. Fréchette, "The United States for French Canadians," *The Forum*, November 1893, 338.

²⁸ Honoré Mercier, *Le Patriotisme* (Québec, 1882), 14.

²⁹ Ulric Barthe, *Wilfrid Laurier on the Platform* (Québec, 1890), 55.

³⁰ Public Archives of Canada, Laurier Papers, Dandurand à Laurier, le 2 novembre 1899 and Laurier à Dandurand, le 4 novembre 1899.

an agricultural calling. The Conquest caused little social dislocation, though there was a small but far from disastrous exodus. "It may fairly be considered," he wrote in 1902, "that the partial exodus of the aristocratic element was an actual loss to Canada, the country being deprived of a large number of its most prosperous and influential inhabitants. But the absence of any other privileged class than the clergy made for a better understanding between the victor and the vanquished, and for the safer protection of the latter."³¹ Moreover, Bourassa's young friends, Asselin, Lavergne and Fournier, who established *La Ligue Nationaliste Canadienne*, offered a further commentary on the Conquest in the very first sentences of their *Programme*. They declared: "Qu'il est raisonnable de croire que la Providence, en donnant le Canada à l'Angleterre, a voulu le familiariser, par la conquête, puis par l'usage des institutions parlementaires, avec la jouissance de la liberté . . ." ³²

Thus by the time of the First World War French Canadian interpretations of the Conquest had come full circle. What Garneau had seen as a dark and foreboding tragedy had come to be accepted, even by those who suspected Laurier's opportunism, as an event providentially inspired which had brought as many, if not more, benefits than disadvantages. Yet, in 1919, when the first volume of Thomas Chapais' magisterial *Histoire*³³ appeared, giving the historian's imprimatur to the providential interpretation of the Conquest, a new mood was already present in French Canadian intellectual circles. That mood was to lead to a profound revision of the revisionists.

II

After the tensions of World War I, which culminated in the bitter election of December 1917, it is not surprising that some French Canadian intellectuals began to look at the Conquest from a new perspective. The leader of the revisionists was the recently appointed professor of history at the University of Montreal, abbé Lionel Groulx. While he was by no means the first writer to contend that eighteenth-century New France had exhibited all the characteristics of a nation, his emphasis was both stronger and different. For one thing he insisted on the essential "Frenchness" of French Canada. It is true that he suspected the secularism of modern France, but that merely strengthened his view that New France was the true heir of Catholic France. "Tout ce qui est français nous vient de France," he wrote in 1912, "mais tout ce qui nous vient de France n'est pas toujours français."³⁴

³¹ Henri Bourassa, "The French Canadian in the Empire," *The Monthly Review*, VII, September 1902, 61.

³² *Ligue Nationaliste Canadienne, Programme* (Montréal, 1903), 1.

³³ Thomas Chapais, *Cours d'histoire du Canada* (Québec, 1919), I, 21.

³⁴ Abbé Lionel Groulx, *Dix Ans d'Action française* (Montréal, 1926), 11.

Since not everything that came from France was desirable, Groulx admitted that the Conquest had prevented the insidious doctrines of Revolutionary France from undermining French Canadian values. But that was "la seule compensation."³⁵ His chief concern was with the impact of the Conquest on the society of French Canada. In 1921 he stated his view without any equivocation: "Ce germe de peuple fut un jour profondément atteint dans sa vie; il fut gêné, paralysé dans son développement. Les conséquences de la conquête ont durement pesé sur lui: ses lois, sa langue ont été entamées; sa culture intellectuelle fut longtemps entravée; son système d'éducation a dévié en quelques-unes de ses parties, sacrifié plus qu'il ne convenait à la culture anglaise; son domaine naturel a été envahi, ne le laissant que partiellement maître de ses forces économiques; par l'atmosphère protestante et saxonne ses mœurs privées et publiques ont été contaminées. Un maquillage désolant a recouvert graduellement la physionomie de nos villes et de nos villages, signe implacable de la sujétion des âmes à la loi du conquérant." The most significant step in Groulx's argument was his explicit identification of Confederation with the Conquest. Where earlier writers and politicians, like Chapais and Laurier, viewed Confederation as a giant step in the reconquest of French Canadian liberty, Groulx's conclusion was quite the contrary. "Ce mal de la conquête," he wrote, "s'est aggravé, depuis 1867, du mal du fédéralisme."³⁶

Groulx perceived, apparently, that the declining power of the British Empire meant that Bourassa's old battles were largely won. Yet, in his view, French Canada was scarcely any nearer to its own freedom, and the achievement of that freedom was, in Groulx's mind, the guiding motive of the French Canadian nation. "Pour formule inspiratrice de sa vie," he declared in 1937, "de sa politique, il n'en veut qu'une: se dégager de l'étreinte du conquérant, se dégager un peu plus chaque jour, accroître, d'étape en étape, son autonomie, tendre de toute la tension de son âme, vers la fierté d'un destin français."³⁷

Holding views such as these, it was natural that Groulx should question one of the most venerable traditions about the Conquest: its providential character. Despite his clerical calling, and perhaps therefore more authoritatively, he denied firmly that an historian could discern the ways of providence in "la catastrophe de 1760." He even hinted that the spokesmen for the Church who, after 1759, had praised the liberality of the British and called upon the people to give their loyal support to the new regime, were something very near to betrayers.³⁸

³⁵ Abbé Lionel Groulx, *Lendemain de Conquête* (Montréal, 1920), 233.

³⁶ Groulx, *Dix Ans*, 126.

³⁷ Abbé Lionel Groulx, *Directives* (Saint-Hyacinthe, 1959), 198.

³⁸ Abbé Lionel Groulx, *Notre Maître, Le Passé*, 162 ff.

In one sense, at least, abbé Groulx remained a traditionalist. He continued to insist as most of his predecessors had done, that the Conquest had not altered the most important characteristics of the French Canadian "race." For him, New France had exhibited two primary characteristics; it had an apostolic vocation and a "vocation paysanne." He did not deny that there had also been exploration and commerce, but they were secondary. And for French Canadians, the virtues of the past were the virtues for the present. "A tous égards," he wrote in 1937, "sa politique agraire reste, pour le Canada français, sa politique vitale."³⁹

The Second World War, like its predecessor, again stimulated the search for the meaning of the Conquest. For this, the political crises of the period were doubtless partially responsible. But no less important was the accelerated industrialization and urbanization of Quebec. During the war the famous debate over "why we are divided" was, in essence, a debate over conflicting interpretation of the Conquest. The debate was interspersed with references to Nazi-occupied Europe. Abbé Maheux, rejecting abbé Groulx's catastrophic interpretation of the Conquest, contended that "la conduite monstrueuse d'un Hitler, d'un Mussolini, la sauvagerie de leur guerre, l'oppression qu'ils font peser sur les peuples conquis, envahis, occupés, menacés nous font voir le tableau de l'époque 1758-60 comme une idylle."⁴⁰ Some of this phraseology — "occupation," "collaboration," and so on — was to become commonplace in the post-war years. But more important was a striking new concept that was being incorporated into the interpretation of the Conquest. That concept, the concept of the social decapitation of the bourgeoisie, bore a significant relationship to the problems of an increasingly urban and industrial French Canada.

This new interpretation⁴¹ asserted that New France, far from having been an agrarian, missionary colony, was one in which commerce and therefore a bourgeoisie predominated. The most critical result of the Conquest was the destruction of this class and the consequent transform-

³⁹ Groulx, *Directives*, 194, 212.

⁴⁰ Abbé Arthur Maheux, *Ton histoire est une Épopée* (Québec, 1941), 28. See also abbé Arthur Maheux, *Pourquoi Sommes-Nous Divisés* (Québec, 1943) and abbé Lionel Groulx, *Pourquoi Nous Sommes Divisés* (Montréal, 1943). On this dispute, see Archange Godbout, "Les préoccupations en histoire et les thèses de M. l'abbé Maheux," *Culture*, 1943.

⁴¹ The first appearance of this thesis appears to have been in the writings of Professor Maurice Séguin in 1946 and 1947. It soon became the central thesis of the so-called Montreal school. It is interesting, however, that no major study of the history of New France has incorporated and fully substantiated the thesis. In *La Civilisation de la Nouvelle France, 1713-44* (Montréal, 1944), Guy Frégault was still a proponent of the traditional view of New France for he wrote, "le pays, c'est le sol" (118). By 1954, however, in his pamphlet, *La Société canadienne sous le régime français* (Ottawa, 1954), he had adopted the Séguin view. Professor Séguin, himself, has noted that Frégault was his "étudiant le plus difficile," in contrast to Michel Brunet "le plus facilement convaincu." See Michel Lapalme, "Le nouveau Groulx s'appelle Séguin," *Le Magazine Maclean*, avril 1966, 48.

ation of the *Canadiens* into an agrarian people dominated by an alien government and an alien commercial class. The survival of French Canada after the Conquest had little, if anything, to do with providence or the clergy. That phenomenon could be explained by a secular socio-economic institution: the seigneurial system.⁴²

The implications of the "social decapitation" thesis are manifold. Most important, in Professor Séguin's words, "... parce qu'au lendemain de 1760, le commerce et les sources du capital sont presque monopolisés par l'Occupant, les Canadiens ne pourront, pour leur propre compte et dans la proportion qu'aurait exigée leur nombre, entreprendre la transformation industrielle du pays du Québec quand en viendra le temps, à partir de la seconde moitié du XIX^e siècle."⁴³ Secondly, the disappearance of the directing bourgeoisie explains the role of the Church after 1759 and, in turn, "les trois dominantes de la pensée canadienne-française: l'agriculturalisme, l'anti-étatisme et le messianisme."⁴⁴ Finally, there is the contention that because of the economic inferiority caused by the Conquest, French Canadians have occupied an inferior "colonial" status in economic life, education, and politics.⁴⁵ It is worth noting, also, that this reinterpretation of the Conquest has been accompanied by a revision of the traditional view of the attitude of French Canadians toward France. The new view rejects the suggestion that the *Canadiens* easily accepted their new British rulers; instead, they passively resisted them. Nor were the conquered people of Canada as hostile to Revolutionary and Napoleonic France as has been traditionally held.⁴⁶

The validity of this new interpretation has not, of course, gone unchallenged. Some scholars doubt the existence of a pre-Conquest bourgeoisie and the question is obviously one which deserves detailed research.⁴⁷ Others have questioned the very assumptions upon which the thesis is based.⁴⁸ But the view has its supporters, some of whom have used

⁴² Maurice Séguin, "Le Régime Seigneurial au Pays du Québec," *Revue d'Histoire de l'Amérique Française*, I, 3, décembre 1947, and *ibid.*, I, 4, mars 1948.

⁴³ Maurice Séguin, *La Nation et l'Agriculture*, thèse de doctorat présentée à la Faculté des Lettres de l'Université de Montréal, 1947, 246.

⁴⁴ Michel Brunet, *La Présence*, 113-66.

⁴⁵ Maurice Séguin, "La Conquête et la vie économique des Canadiens," *l'Action nationale*, XXVIII, décembre 1964.

⁴⁶ Michel Brunet, "Les Canadiens après la Conquête — les débuts de la résistance passive," *Revue d'Histoire de l'Amérique Française*, XII, 2, septembre 1958 and Michel Brunet, "La Révolution Française sur les Rives du Saint-Laurent," *ibid.*, XI, 2, septembre 1957.

⁴⁷ Jean Hamelin, *Economie et Société en Nouvelle-France* (Québec, 1960); Fernand Ouellet, "Michel Brunet et le problème de la Conquête," *Bulletin des Recherches Historiques*, vol. 62, n° 2, 1956; Cameron Nish, "Une bourgeoisie coloniale en Nouvelle-France," *L'Actualité Économique*, juillet et septembre 1963.

⁴⁸ Fernand Ouellet, "L'Étude du XIX^e Siècle Canadien-Français," *Recherches Sociographiques*, III, 1-2, 1962; Léon Dion, "Le Nationalisme pessimiste, sa source, sa signification, sa validité," *Cité libre*, huitième année, n° 20, novembre 1957.

it to develop full scale sociological interpretations of French Canadian society.⁴⁹ For others it has become the historical underpinning for quasi-radical, radical and even revolutionary responses to contemporary discontents.⁵⁰ Nor should the radically anti-clerical implications of this secular interpretation of the Conquest be left unremarked.⁵¹ Perhaps all that can be said with certainty at this stage is that the continuing controversy about the meaning of the Conquest indicates that it remains a dominant concern of French Canadian intellectual history.

III

There remains, now, the problem of attempting an explanation of this dominance. There is, of course, a simple reason. The Conquest happened, and few would deny its significance in the history of French Canada. Yet that simple explanation is hardly sufficient. Other critical events have taken place in the past — the 1837 Rebellion, Confederation, the Riel affairs, conscription and so on. Each raises emotions, each has its conflicting interpretations. None has attracted the attention or the emotion of 1759. Indeed one is repeatedly struck by the frequency with which the later events are discussed in terms of the Conquest and linked with it.⁵²

The reason for this obsessive concern with the meaning of the Conquest may be found by looking at the more general question of attitudes toward history itself.

It is often remarked that such slogans as "Je me souviens" and "notre maître, le passé" illustrate the French Canadian's consciousness of his past. Would it not be just as true to say that these slogans illustrate the French Canadian's consciousness of the present? For many French Canadians, the past, and especially the Conquest, has always been part of the present. It is for this reason that one finds, repeatedly, statements by French Canadians, historians and others, about the "presentness" of the past, and the usefulness of history to the present. This attitude is well summed up in Canon Groulx's statement: "L'Histoire, oserais-je dire, et sans aucune intention de paradoxe, c'est ce qu'il y a de plus vivant; le passé, c'est ce qu'il y a de plus présent."⁵³ Or in Esdras Minville's revealing remark that "nous qui continuons l'histoire, qui sommes l'histoire elle-même."⁵⁴ This attitude toward history which

⁴⁹ Philippe Garigue, *L'Option Politique du Canada Français* (Montréal, 1963).

⁵⁰ The following may be taken as examples of these not very distinct categories: *le fédéralisme, l'Acte de l'Amérique du Nord britannique et les Canadiens français* (Montréal, 1964); André d'Allemagne, "L'Etat Laurentien, Rêve ou Réalité?" *Laurentie*, 104, septembre 1958; Jean-Marc Ptiotte, "de l'humiliation à la révolution," *Essai philosophique*, A.G.E.U.M., n° 9.

⁵¹ Robert Aubin, "Pourquoi les clercs ne permettront pas la libération du Québec," *Liberté* (nouvelle série), quatrième année, n° 23, mai 1962.

⁵² See, for example, Michel Brunet, *Canadiens et Canadiens* (Montréal, 1955), or, in a more violent tone, Joseph Costisella, *Le Peuple de la Nuit* (Montréal, 1965).

⁵³ Groulx, *Directives*, 190.

⁵⁴ Esdras Minville, *Invitation à l'Etude* (Montréal, 1959), 62.

makes the past part of the present is not, of course, uniquely French Canadian. It bears a marked similarity to the comment of a distinguished Mexican philosopher concerning Hispanic America. "The past, if it is not completely assimilated, always makes itself felt in the present," Leopoldo Zea has written. "Hispanic America continued to be a continent without a history because the past was always present. And if it had a history, it was not a conscious history. Hispanic America refused to consider as part of its history a past which it had not made."⁵⁵ Is it not the failure to "assimilate" the Conquest, to make it part of French Canadian history, that explains the endless attempt to interpret it?

There is another element in this explanation. If the past is part of the present, then arguments about the past are, in reality, disputes about the present. As one judges the problems and achievements of the present and the goals of the future, so one interprets the past. If parliamentary government is valuable, then the event which brought it may be admired, or at least accepted. If the leadership of the Church is to be preserved, then the event which allowed it may very well have been providential. If an urban bourgeoisie is necessary, the event which destroyed it must be viewed darkly. If national political independence is the desired goal, then the event which seems to have prevented it is the source of all evil. Professor Brunet, in his usual forthright fashion, has made the point explicitly: "In every society the interpretation of the past changes frequently," he has written. "It is because men have more freedom in building their past than in shaping their future? On the contrary, it seems that men change the interpretation of their past when they realize that they can give a new orientation to their collective action."⁵⁶

If Professor Brunet is right then the explanation for the heated debate among French Canadian intellectuals about the meaning of the Conquest is plain.⁵⁷ Since history is looked upon as a tool for the shaping

⁵⁵ Leopoldo Zea, *The Latin-American Mind* (Norman, 1963), 10.

⁵⁶ Michel Brunet, "French Canadian Interpretations of Canadian History," *Canadian Forum*, XLIV, 519, April 1964, 5. Guy Frégault makes the same point somewhat more cautiously. He writes, "C'est justement une des fonctions de l'histoire — la principale à mon sens — que de corriger systématiquement la tradition selon laquelle un groupe humain ordonne sa vie." Guy Frégault, *La Guerre de la Conquête* (Montréal et Paris, 1955), 459.

⁵⁷ No better example of this debate can be found than the recent discussion of the recommendations of the Parent Commission concerning the teaching of history in Quebec schools. The Commission recommended that history should be viewed primarily as an intellectual discipline. "Il faut dissocier histoire et prédiction patriotique; le but de l'enseignement de l'histoire n'est pas en premier lieu la formation civique, patriotique ou religieuse." *Rapport de la Commission Royale d'Enquête sur l'Enseignement dans la Province de Québec* (Québec, 1964), Tome II, 150. The Report's numerous critics have responded that the goal of objectivity is both illusory and dangerous for it fails to recognize the function of history in shaping the present. See Michel Brunet, "Le Rapport Parent, Notre Evolution Historique et l'Enseignement de l'Histoire au Québec," *Bulletin de Liaison de la Société des Professeurs d'Histoire*, n° 3, février 1966; le chanoine Lionel Groulx, "Urgence d'un enseignement fervent de l'histoire du Canada français," *Le Devoir*, 11 mai 1966.

of the present, the quarrel over the interpretation of the past is a struggle for control over the meaning of the present and the goals of the future. As an American historian has written, in a similar context, "history becomes a key to ideology, a key to the world view that shapes programs and actions in the present and future."⁵⁸ It is this attitude toward the past that ultimately explains the central place of the Conquest in French Canadian intellectual history, that makes the Conquest "une quatrième dominante de la pensée canadienne-française."

⁵⁸ Warren I. Susman, "History and the American Intellectual: Uses of a Usable Past," *The American Quarterly*, XVI, No. 2, Pt. 2, Summer 1964, 255-6.