

LOWER CANADA, 1791 - 1840: SOCIAL CHANGE AND NATIONALISM. Fernand Ouellet.  
Translated by Patricia Paxton. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1980.  
pp. xiv, 427, illus., maps.

The writing of Canadian history has changed significantly during the past two decades. This change has involved two distinct elements: the nature of research questions and the type of sources which are brought to bear on those questions. The traditional focus on great men and events has expanded to include all forms of popular experience and even subtle aspects of social change. Similarly, conventional emphasis on literary evidence such as newspapers, government records, and personal correspondence has given way to pursuit of information about the inarticulate. Historians have found this information in sources like the census, land records, and assessment rolls. Fernand Ouellet's Lower Canada, 1791-1840: Social Change & Nationalism offers an example of certain aspects of these current trends in historical thinking and should be of interest to historians of British Columbia.

Ouellet divides the history of Lower Canada between 1791 and 1840 into two periods. The first period endures until 1815 and was the product of structural changes and ideological shifts dating from the time of the conquest. Ouellet argues that economic developments reorganized Lower Canadian society; a merchant bourgeoisie emerged, tradesmen became important, and rural society diversified. These developments engendered an effective challenge to traditional power groups, the aristocracy and the clergy, and thereby led to a new political realignment which lasted until the early nineteenth century. Significantly, however, this realignment was not predominantly characterized by cultural tension although the seeds of such tension are evident as early as 1800.

In Ouellet's analysis, the 1815-40 period must be understood in the context of French Canadian nationalism and the dominance of ethnic struggle. Ouellet emphasizes that at the root of these phenomena was a severe social crisis which tore apart Lower Canada. This crisis was brought on by the demographic pressure of rapid population growth and by economic difficulties associated with soil exhaustion and land shortage. In this context, urban and rural discontent came to be expressed in cultural terms, most significantly in the Rebellion of 1837-1838. Although this "revolutionary adventure" failed, the establishment of cultural tension had lasting importance.

Many of the questions which Ouellet considers in the case of Lower Canada are also appropriate to other times and places including British Columbia. One example concerns the relative importance and interrelationships of cultural conflict and social division. Similarly, Ouellet's research strategy represents fresh avenues of approach. Ouellet supports his analysis by reference to the ideas of major leaders but, more importantly, by also examining population patterns, economic change, and political behaviour including voting results. Evidence from sources such as the census, poll books, and parish account documents form an important dimension of Ouellet's approach to the questions of social change and nationalism. This evidence is not examined in the style of the "New Social History" but is used to establish a general context within which the activities of certain groups and individuals can be properly understood. The Rebellion thus becomes more than the experience of a small number of political and social leaders; rather, it represents decades of social and ideological development involving the entire population of Lower Canada. This perspective has broad application and represents a major strength of recent historical writing.

Finally, Lower Canada, 1791-1840 is important as one of the few English translations of a major work concerning Quebec. The translation itself is smooth and accurate.

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