

## Quebec My Country Mon Pays

John Walker's film on his home province, aside from being a model of personal narration and emotional exorcism, raises an interesting set of political problems yet to be resolved by Quebecers and Canadians. Ostensibly, the politics in the film address the past. He recounts the years from the late fifties of his childhood wherein, as a guileless child of a privileged minority, he lived in an anglophone quarter of Montreal, through the death of Duplessis, the triumph of the Quiet Revolution, the tumultuous years of the FLQ followed by the victory of René Lévesque's Parti Québécois, the language charter and two referenda. This leads, as is not commonly noted, to a population shift, the exodus of anywhere up to 500,000 anglophone Quebecers to other provinces, principally it would seem from the commentary, to Ontario and Toronto. This exodus has two features that make it noteworthy. It was more profound in the balance of things than the move of a few businesses and headquarters refusing to contemplate the possibility of political separation, touching regions all along the Saint Lawrence valley and a variety of classes, not just the business elite. And it took place without much protest. It went by as if there were a mute collective recognition that the francophone majority had the right to set the rules in the place and that the anglophones, regardless of ethnic origin or history within the province, just had to put up with the decisions, adapt to them, or leave.

And there was also the economic push, and something Walker doesn't talk about – a media scare campaign. Traditional employers left, jobs for freelance artisans like Walker's father dried up and the means of continued prosperity with them. The descendants of Scots, the Irish, anglophone minorities of one sort or another are all reputed to be pragmatic people. Access to prosperity is the reason most people are in Canada. Anglophones talk little about a gut attachment to the land or to a heritage. Leaving was the most reasonable and cost-effective response. That there was an emotional cost to this upheaval is undeniable and the power of Walker's film is that he gives voice to this in a way anglophone culture in general does rarely. But as Christina Clark, an anglophone Montrealer, and her father agree, nobody was going to fight.

This was not the case on the French speaking side of course. As the centre of gravity moved from the modernising Liberals of Jean Lesage to the more culturally radical PQ, there was a sense of a struggle for survival of a nation that became the key, defining issue of Quebec politics. This is where the film carefully probes a sore point in the politics of language, and where the problem of feeling threatened becomes apparent. Depending on the type of threat you are speaking about, the response can be considered justified, reasonable and legitimate self defence. But it can also turn paranoid. It can also be destructive of one's own sanity and of others' well being. It can also provoke irrational exclusion.

Quebeckers had, as they moved from a traditional society dominated by a fusion of religion and nationalism to a modern state, a legitimate and justified sense that their status as a French speaking society was threatened. Threatened by the overwhelming majority of anglophones who populate the continent. Threatened by the prevalence of English as the language of power, business and economics. Threatened by a continuous influx of settlers who preferred English to French as the language to educate their children. These threats were and are real and based on measurable phenomena within the society. Hence the radicalism of the PQ's language controls – French as the *only* official language within the province – and the requirement that immigrants send their children to French language schools. None of this has been undone by the governments that followed them. Political self-defence has allowed the safeguard of Quebec as a francophone society. Its effect on the continued possibility of bilingualism within Canada is more open to debate, and the whole “Trudeau-Lévesque” discussion about which of these two goals was the most vital has become irrelevant simply because Lévesque won, Trudeau lost. Perhaps a clearly francophone Quebec could have existed in support of a truly bilingual Canada. Perhaps, if others had been willing to participate in the venture. But if we understand by “bilingual” the idea that everyone in a country should be able to participate in a conversation in two languages, then clearly bilingualism in Canada is dead, and the idea never really got off the ground. If only Ontario had plunged into the adventure with gusto and political will, but retrospective daydreaming is cheap. It didn't happen. The idea is carried by none of the other provincial governments except New Brunswick, whose small population carry the distinction of being the country's only official bilingual province. And for most students in education systems from sea to shining sea, learning French is considered as superfluous as studying Latin or Greek. So the Quebeckers' sense of threat and its effects on legislation and regulation have been recognised as justified and reasonable but, one might argue, at the cost of simply abandoning the battlefield of bilingualism elsewhere.

And then there is social or ethnic paranoia, and that's where things become more troubling. Anglophone Quebecers who recognise the dominance of French and who adapt to it but who then continue to have difficulty accessing vital needs – jobs essentially – based on their family names or on the fact that they also speak English are victims of discrimination. And this discrimination is not linguistic, it is ethnic. The film underlines this ambiguity, and when Walker says that he understood the slogan “Quebec to Quebecers” as not including him, born and raised in the province, and having voted for the PQ, it becomes clear that we are awash in some sort of ethnic revenge whereby the descendants of the Bretons and the Normans who arrived before the 19<sup>th</sup> century claim a proprietary relationship to “their” land and society that goes beyond simply communicating in a language. Denys Arcand admits as much when he openly explains that the exodus of English speakers was, from the Quebeckers' point of view, unimportant except for the effect

of bringing down property prices on Westmount and opening job opportunities in fields that had been closed to them. Otherwise, they just didn't care.

Why didn't the anglophones resist more? Part of the reason is expressed in the film by the importance of culture. Considerable attention is given to Pierre Perrault's films and heritage, to the importance of local new wave cinema as exemplified by Gilles Groulx' "Le Chat dans le Sac". Culture, creative expression of a society's concerns, was extremely important for Quebecers in the sixties and seventies and is given a prominent place in the film. In part, because Quebec's new found national sentiment expressed itself through the film, music, poetry and drama of the time. In part because Walker himself as a young artist was extremely drawn to this vibrancy, this creativity, wanted very much to be part of it, included in it, but never felt himself accepted.

But what about the culture of the anglophones? Walker talks about some aspects of his Celtic origins, the bagpipes played at his father's funeral, the country home and life of much of his family around the town of Lachute, Quebec, an intriguing photo of his Scottish grandmother smoking a pipe while reading a book in bed from the period preceding the first war. But there was not, as Paul Warren a teacher and writer on film, puts it so persuasively when describing Perrault's films, a culture born of a language rooted in a specific territory. The subtext of the film is that the Anglo-Quebeckers partook of the kind of deterritorialised consumer-producer culture that capitalism prefers to be free-floating and unattached. Christina Clark is an anglophone Quebecker who is part of the research team and a character in the film. In an exchange between her and her father filmed at the Empire Club he accuses her of not accepting "change". She retorts immediately that she does accept "change" but that the society she is willing to change for still doesn't want to embrace her. What he means by change is the capacity to move elsewhere if your future prosperity makes that necessary. What she means by change is the capacity to function in French and accept the francophone nature of the place that she loves and in which she wants to stay. So we are left with the conclusion that a population move that displaced a significant number of people was simply the voluntary and assumed result of a capitalist ethos which dictates that you go where the money is and you don't stay where the majority don't want you. Explicitly and consciously, attachment to that particular chunk of land was not of vital importance for 20<sup>th</sup> century anglophones in Quebec because, and the francophones were probably correct about this, the main aspects of their culture exist throughout the continent.

It could be added that this raises a question mark about the existence or pertinence of English language Canadian culture as a whole. I've often been struck, in conversations with friends of my generation and with their now grown-up children (people fixated by their "lifestyle"), by what they seem to perceive as the transparency of the border with the US. They have no trouble imagining their future down south. My brother made the move willingly, and the only brake on the whole process seems to be the administrative hassle involved in getting a little green card. I've always thought of the US as an entirely foreign mindscape and one incoherent with my idea of correct human values or an acceptable way of organising a society. But I feel sometimes that I'm a romantic, self-deluded adherent to the quaint notion that there is a common culture in Canada, placing more emphasis on social cohesion, higher expectations on government intervention – without which the country could never have survived – that alter the common mindset and the range of political possibilities from those of the US. It at least means that subsidised cultural activity is possible. These conversations show me that for much of the population, I am wrong. Culture for many people equals the possibility to access prosperity coupled with what private mass media has to offer and whatever folk traditions have been handed down as decorative trappings from each sub-group's religious or ethnic heritage. These are effectively extremely portable. Practically every metropolis on the continent has a Little Italy or a Jewish quarter. Even though it's curious to note that it is precisely the Jewish population amongst Montreal's anglophones who best resisted the siren calls of exile.

We know that John Walker is a close reader of Harold Innis who wrote extensively in the forties and early fifties against the dehumanisation and acculturation brought about by the mass media. The film works as a meditation on the alternative – that culture is attached to a place and to a group experience, specific and rooted.

The finely wrought texture of this film weaves together several threads: personal memory and reflection, conversation with thinkers and actors of the period, questioning that transcends the generations and opens onto a fragile conversation between two young Quebeckers, francophone and anglophone. It recounts an important story and suggests or asks important questions. And it carries considerable emotional impact. It is a solid contribution to the cultural identity whose very frailty is one of the prime movers of the film's story.

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