SOME THOUGHTS ON TEACHING THE HISTORY OF ACADIE AND ACADIANS IN ACADIE

PHYLLIS E. LEBLANC, Professor, Department of History and Geography, University of Moncton. Ph.D., History of Canada, University of Ottawa, 1989 Master of Arts, History, University of Moncton, 1978 Bachelor of Arts, History of North America, University of Moncton, 1976.

ABSTRACT

Identity is presented here as a tool with which not only historians, but also the community views the past. The persistence of identity to contemporary issues in Acadie allows historians and teachers of history to connect between events, such as the Charlottetown conference and Confederation with the issues that are defined as essential within the Acadian community.

This conference takes place in a unique context, namely the 150th anniversary of the Charlottetown Conference. The broader objectives of the conference, to discuss how best to communicate history to our students and explain the relevance of the creation of the Canadian federation and the evolution of Canada since then, are not new. Under the auspices of the Association for Canadian Studies, a large number of conferences bringing together professional historians and teachers have already taken place on the teaching of our common past.[1] In my area, Maritime historians met in 1985 on the Fredericton campus of the University of New Brunswick to reflect on how best to teach Maritime studies in public schools;[2] in 2000, the Atlantic Canada Studies Conference offered a retrospective on the evolution of historical practices since the inception of the journal *Acadiensis* in 1970[3] and especially in view of the tensions that still persisted in Canadian historiography between promoting Canadian nationalism and the persistence of regional identities. Moreover, in the Acadian community, each of the five World Congresses, since the first held in Moncton in 1992 to its most recent edition in northwestern New Brunswick in August 2014, have addressed the issues of the content and relevance of education in Acadian history. Which brings us to the topic of "teaching history of Acadie, in Acadie."

Are there specific elements that define the teaching of Acadian history, in Acadie? By what means and why should we register this education in a regional and/or national

historiography? What contribution can the teaching of Acadian history make to the objective of (Re)Creating Confederation and (Re)Imagining Canada? These are legitimate questions. We attempt here to offer some answers to these questions, in the light of our experience as a professor of Acadian history, in Acadie.

For Naomi Griffiths, teaching Acadian history had to go first through the conscious exercise of recognizing that she always treated it as the story of "the other." The historian acknowledged that "The beginning should not be 'here are Acadians: they are not we' but rather, 'here are men and women, teachers, lawyers, doctors, farmers or fishermen. Their lives are based on the demands of these pursuits, as are ours.'"[4] Let's face it, this changes the meaning of our examination of the past in a radical manner. Griffiths therefore advocated a historian's look at the multiple realities of individuals who lived in the past, a more productive exercise for her than to define the Acadian group according to its general characteristics, such as language (French) and faith (Catholic).

The historian's gaze on the object of Acadie and on the topic of Acadians uncovers other findings about the group, beyond language and faith, which are relevant and, in many ways decisive, with regard to the community, such as the minority status wherever Acadians live and, therefore, the absence of a geopolitical territory within which to place their collective future, and the preponderance of the theme of identity in the analysis of the past. The teaching of Acadian history, both in terms of school education and university education should be part of these contexts (and others as well!) that secure what was possible at the time our ancestors lived. This teaching must also recognize and address the aspirations and achievements of contemporary Acadian communities through the discovery – and validation – of the group's historical experience.

Let's take the example of the theme of identity to illustrate more clearly the social function of teaching Acadian history. The theme of identity is not easy to communicate in teaching the Acadian past. Let us recall that in spite of considerable historiography, historians are still in the process of clarifying the meaning and scope of the Acadian identity. They agree to situate the birth of an Acadian identity in colonial times and certainly before the key event of deportation, which is its first and greatest challenge: the survival of the group following the scattering of its population and the disintegration of its family and community networks. There is less consensus among historians when trying to define the characteristics or the social and historical significance of this identity.

Thus, for the American historian Faragher, neutrality is a main defining characteristic of the group in the 18th century; the Acadians' refusal to submit to the will and authority of either French or English empires constitutes for Faragher a tangible sign of their distinct ethnicity.[5] Deportation, according to Faragher, was a first experiment in what he describes as American history, in "ethnic cleansing." Faragher takes the American colonial societies of the time to task for getting involved in this exercise.

Moreover, in a recent study historian Gregory Kennedy analysed the pre-deportation context in Acadian history through a comparison with French society in Loudun. Kennedy noted that for each of these rural societies of French origin, community and family networks were the basis of their collective identity, and neutrality was their best political strategy against intrusions from external authorities.[6] Greg Kennedy does not deny the Acadian identity in the 18th century; rather he seeks to frame it in the wider colonial mentality that draws its roots and ways of seeing from within a French framework: that of *ancien régime*.

Historians' analyses of the identity theme during the post-deportation period also have significant consequences. Historian in training Carolynn McNally seeks to measure the sense of identity in the context of the Acadian diaspora or, as supporters of the Acadian World Congress have said, Acadia in plural. In an analysis framed by her doctoral thesis at McGill University, McNally seeks to capture, even measure, the Acadian identity through the experiences of exogamous marriage. The Acadian identity is captured differently, that is to say, sustained, abandoned or marginalized, according to the experience of the group's endogamous or exogamous marriages and according to the territory inhabited by Acadians: Quebec, Louisiana or Nova Scotia, etc. McNally's proposed study seeks to measure the effect on Acadian identity in a genealogical sense: an Acadian is defined here as someone who can trace his/her ancestors back to colonial Acadie, *before* the deportation.[7]

This definition of the Acadian identity anchored by McNally in the discourse of Acadian elites of the second

half of the 19th century still has some legitimacy within the Acadian community. For example, in the context of the most recent World Acadian Congress (2014), the daily *L'Acadie nouvelle* presented a survey to its readers. The paper proposed four categories to define who is an Acadian: someone whose ancestors dates back to the Deportation; someone who considers himself/herself Acadian; someone born in Acadie; or someone who has lived in Acadie for years. The result: half (134 or 50%) of the 268 respondents opted for a genealogical definition of Acadian identity: someone whose ancestor can be traced back to the deportation.[8]

In 1986, historian Leon Theriault was already challenging this "ethnic" definition of the Acadian identity. According to Theriault, the test of French roots to measure the Acadian identity was both too restrictive and too ambiguous. Being able to trace one's roots to France at the time of colonization did not define what it is to be Acadian, according Thériault, because this way of defining oneself could not include immigrants to the community since the return of the original group nor consider the integration of families of anglophone and/or Protestant origins in the Acadian community (through mixed marriages, one could assume).[9]

What should we conclude from this inevitably short presentation on the complexity of the concept and the persistence of the Acadian identity problematic in the context of history education in Acadian history/Acadie? I will respond by taking up the theme of this conference: (Re) Creating Confederation: (Re) Imagining Canada. The Charlottetown Conference is presented here as the beginning of the Canadian federal project. It certainly represents an important junction for many of the changes that have occurred in the mid-19th century to build our country. Viewed from the perspective of Acadian history, however, the Charlottetown Conference – and the union of 1867 – are not seen as positively nor as progressive events. Catholics, including the Acadians, were afraid of their fate in1864, because the draft project then referred more specifically to the birth of a nation defined by an anglophone Protestant majority. The two votes that took place on the project in 1865 and in 1866 in New Brunswick, where a majority of Acadians of the Maritimes lived already, are interpreted by political scientists and historians as an Acadian voice against the federal project. Important events that took place in this new federation in the 1870s probably confirmed, in the eyes of the Acadians and especially their elite, the vulnerable state in which the Acadians lived as a minority group in an overwhelming majority and, by extension, the need to articulate a coherent collective project to support the minority group.

One of the events that pushed the Acadian elites to act in this way was the adoption of the Education Act of 1871 in New Brunswick. This law was attacking the privileges, otherwise the rights to Catholic education and, by extension, to education in French. The calls from Catholic politicians in New Brunswick asking the new federal authorities to disapprove the provincial law ended in failure. More importantly, perhaps, was the impact of this failure to act on the part of the federal government which, in the eyes of Catholic politicians, opened the door to question the ability or, worse yet, the will of the federal authority to interfere in provincial affairs on issues related to cultural minorities. Given the significance of faith, at the time, in defining identity among Canadian cultural communities, both for Francophones and Anglophones and among Catholics and Protestants, one should not be surprised by the political position of both sides on this issue.

This illustration of an Acadian perspective on the historical links that connect the Charlottetown Conference, the achievement of Confederation in 1867 and its immediate aftermath is important because it sets the logic, content and scope of the Acadian institutional organization that took place at that time and which was called in the historiography, in turn, the Acadian renaissance, the period of national consciousness or the first Acadian quiet revolution.[10] Indeed, it may seem simple to say that the establishment of the Canadian federation has meant that Acadians needed to adjust to new political as well as cultural and social realities. We still underestimate the impact of these events today: they set an important context that quickly led to the reaffirmation of Acadian identity, through the choice of collective and unifying symbols and the establishment of a collective strategy vis-à-vis cultural groups with whom Acadians had some affinity: the French Canadians (and

especially Quebecers) as Catholic and francophones or vis-à-vis the English and Protestants maritime provinces with whom they shared the territory, a common economy and political life. Through institutional organization, in the formulation of a collective discourse and in the choice of symbols used to represent the Acadian people's separate identity, one can see the impact that new realities and contexts, imposed by geo-political changes, has had on the group of Acadian elite who led, on behalf of all they said, the exercise of redefining the bases for identity and the tools to ensure the collective future of the Acadian group.

The contribution of Acadian history in Canadian history (and, hopefully, to its future) is therefore in the recognition of the importance and persistence of multiple identities, determined by the contexts and events of our past, but always subject to changes and adjustments due to new realities and power relationships.

NOTES

1 An example of which is the Biennial Conference on the teaching of history, held in Toronto in November 2010 on "Canada's Diverse Histories."

2 See more on this reflection in P.A. Buckner (editor), *Teaching Maritime Studies*, Fredericton, Acadiensis Press, 1986, 299 p.

3 See *Acadiensis*, volume XXX, no 1, 2000.

4 Naomi Griffiths, Teaching Acadian History » in P.A. Buckner, *Teaching Maritime Studies*, op. cit.: 55-57.

5 John Mack Faragher, A Great and Noble Scheme. *The Tragic Story of the Expulsion of the French Acadians From Their American Homeland*, New York and London, W.W. Norton & Company, 2005: xviii.

6 Gregory M.W. Kennedy, *Something of a Peasant Paradise? Comparing Rural Societies in Acadie and the Loudunais, 1604-1755*, Montréal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014.

7 Carolynn McNally, « Les mariages exogames chez les Acadiennes et les Acadiens lors de la Renaissance acadienne », presentation made during the colloquium *L'Acadie dans tous ses défis*, World Acadian Congress, Edmundston, New-Brunswick, August 18,2014.

8 Launched on August 10, 2014 during CMA 2014, the survey is available on *l'Acadie nouvelle* website.

9 Léon Thériault, "Some Important Features of Contemporary Acadia" in P.A. Buckner, *Teaching Maritime Studies*, op. cit.: 58-59.

10 See Phyllis E. LeBlanc, "Acadian renaissance" in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History*, edited by Gerald Hallowell, Don Mills, Ontario, Oxford University Press, 2004: 21-22.