SHATTERING THE MONOLITH: SHOWCASING THE DIVERSITY OF QUEBEC CITY'S ENGLISH-SPEAKING COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how the Morrin Centre, a new heritage and culture organization in Quebec City, is shattering preconceived ideas about a monolithic English-speaking community. Three forms of diversity within the community are examined, namely inter-regional, ethnic/cultural, and socio-economic. By integrating this exploration of diversity into its programmes, the Morrin Centre is fostering a more complex sense of identity, belonging, and attachment. The article concludes by examining some of the challenges, which are shared by other official-language minority organizations working on a regional scale.

In the past few decades, the English-speaking community in Quebec City has moved from a perspective of mere survival to take on a more proactive role. A poignant example is the transformation of the then struggling 180-year-old Literary and Historical Society of Quebec into the vibrant new Morrin Centre. Before this revitalization, a yellowed sign printed in neat gothic calligraphy over the donation box in the Society's library said "With your help we can survive." Soon, through the leadership of energetic board members and determined staff, the goal was not mere survival but raising five million dollars to restore the building and set up a new cultural centre. Personnel grew from a few underpaid part-time community members aided by dedicated volunteers to nearly a dozen full-time staff.

I joined this new growing team in 2004. At that point, Quebec City's English-speaking community had secured its health, social service, community advocacy, and educational organizations. The Morrin Centre had the potential to become a culture/heritage magnet but the wonderful old building, situated in the heart of the old city, was in desperate need of restoration. Originally built as the city jail, it served this purpose from 1808 to 1868. After this date the building was transformed into Morrin College, a Presbyterian-run educational institution affiliated with McGill University that closed around 1900. One wing housed the library of the aforementioned Literary and Historical Society of Quebec, Canada's oldest learned society. In addition to preserving this history, our new mission involved presenting the culture and heritage of the English-speaking community. Where to start?

"The good thing," I said to then executive director France Cliche, "is that we're independent, not under any pressure to present a vision of French and English working hand-in-hand as 'founding peoples.' We can tell the story of Anglophones like it is, without any controversial political agenda."

"But we want to be controversial," countered France. "We want to challenge prevailing myths."

After several discussions, we found that we were on the same wavelength—challenging prevailing myths, being controversial, and "telling it like it is" were one and the same. But the challenge of presenting the community in the face of so many different visions remained. And what prevailing myths should we challenge? Not the one about "founding peoples" because, let's face it, nobody really buys it, especially not when the First Nations are welcomed into to the discussion. No, the prevailing myth was the idea of Quebec's Anglophones as a self-assured ethnic monolith, "les Anglais," with their heritage of privilege and wealth amassed through exploitation of Francophone "porteurs d'eau." A caricature, to be sure, but one that still holds sway to varying degrees, even among Anglophones themselves who are not always aware of their own history. We needed to show the underlying diversity, the complexity beneath all the simplistic definitions.

THE UNDERLYING DIVERSITY

This myth of a single Anglophone "bloc monolithique" that spans the province is revived at almost each election (or referendum). Commentators point to quasi-monolithic voting behaviours in a few Montreal West End English-speaking enclaves, and then break off into broader generalizations about Anglophones in Quebec. But is it fair to liken Montreal Anglophones garrisoned off in English-speaking municipalities to those thinly spread out in overwhelmingly Francophone Quebec City, along the Gaspé peninsula, etc.? If anything, many Anglophones outside Montreal have tried to affirm their difference, and not just in terms of voting behaviour. The most striking public manifestation of this involved the disassociation of many community organizations from the increasingly sectarian Montreal-based Alliance Quebec before the turn of the millennium. When the Morrin Centre carried out oral history interviews among Quebec City Anglophones in 2008, this idea of a community seeking to emphasize its integration and differentiate itself from the shadow of Montreal recurred frequently. This also came out in Louisa Blair's research for her history of Quebec City's Anglophone population, leading her to conclude that the population was "more likely to be bilingual, more integrated into the French-speaking majority and more likely to see the collective aspirations of French speakers." This integration is seen in the city's English schools, where French is, more often than not, the language spoken in the schoolyard. Is all this solely a result of demographics, or do other factors contribute to these differences? This remains a question to be studied. What matters is the fact that a great regional diversity within English-speaking Quebec exists and is often unacknowl edged.

Another way to shatter the monolith is to look at ethnic and cultural diversity within the community. This is perhaps more obvious in Montreal than in Quebec City. According to the 2006 Census, 16.5% of the population of Montreal is made up of visible minorities compared to only 2.3% in Quebec City. However, a closer look at Quebec City's English-speaking population still reveals that "les anglais" is a wholly inaccurate label. For one, the English-speaking population has historically been largely Irish, more so than elsewhere in the province—69% of Quebec City's English-speaking population was Irish in 1871, representing a little over a quarter of the total city population. Most were Irish Catholic, forming their own Churches, schools, and community institutions. In light of the struggles for Home Rule and independence for Ireland back in Europe, they would probably have resented the idea of being confounded with the English. Never mind the fact that "les anglais" leaves out the Scottish, Welsh, Jewish, Greek, Chinese and American populations that spoke English in Quebec City who, until the revision of educational laws in the 1970s, were forced into the English-language Protestant school system because Catholic French-language schools excluded them. More recently, this diversity has increased through immigration from former British or American colonies such as India and the Philippines, where English is commonly taught. However, the cultural ancestry that most Quebec City Anglophones have in common today is probably French Canadian, a result of centuries of intercultural marriages with the Francophone majority. On the one hand, older cultural identities live on in varying degrees, some people still affirming their Irishness after four generations in Quebec. On the other, integration fosters affinity with Francophone culture, leading to an Anglophone community far too complex and diverse to be reduced to a monolith.

The third form of diversity worth mentioning is socio-economic diversity. Raising this issue strikes at the heart of one of the most enduring myths, namely that Anglophones have a heritage steeped in wealth. Some people have a more subtle view, aware of the thousands of underpaid Irish famine migrants who worked as longshoremen in Quebec City's port in the mid-nineteenth century. However, even this view often has the English and Scottish playing the role of wealthy bosses surveying workers from their country estates atop the heights of Sillery. In fact, 80.7% of Anglo-Protestants in the province in 1871 were farmers, artisans, servants, or common labourers compared to 89.6% of French Canadians and 82% of Irish Catholics. Sure, these statistics show that

Anglophones were more likely to earn more and be in positions of power, but those positions were few and far between. It makes little sense to imagine the Scots and English as wealthy bosses when over 80% were quite far removed from the upper echelons of power.

What we're left with after this brief exploration is a diverse community: socio-economically diverse, culturally diverse, and with great regional diversities as well. The fact that the English-speaking community eludes easy definition is seen as a liability to some. Why not see this diversity as an asset? Now that we know the myth-breaking message, let's get back to the Morrin Centre and see how we have tried to break through the stereotypes through concrete actions.

GETTING THE MESSAGE ACROSS

Being located in the heart of Old Quebec in a unique heritage building has certainly allowed the Morrin Centre to draw in visitors and get our message across. One of the main ways this is achieved is through heritage tours and educational programmes, drawing in thousands of visitors and students in the last year alone. There is so much history between the old jail cells, library and old classrooms that talking about the community as well could easily overwhelm the 45-minute attention span of most visitors to historic sites. So, instead of addressing all this separately, we work the message of diversity into the tour. Some of the English names engraved on the walls of the former jail allow people to see that Anglophones were not always "the bosses." This is also where Anglophone and Francophone political prisoners were imprisoned during the anti-colonial Patriote Rebellions of 1837-38, showing that Anglophones are not always on the side of the English. Then it's up to the College hall, where visitors learn about the religious divide that once separated the educational system into a culturally diverse range of English-speaking communities. And so on...

The message of diversity also finds its way into our other initiatives. It is an underlying concern when planning our programme of cultural activities, notably the two-day "Roots" and "Shalom Quebec" conferences on cultural diversity in 2008 and the projected one-day conference on socio-economic diversity in 2011, not to mention our regular calendar of historical, cultural, literary, and political talks. Annual events like the Celtic Festival, which drew in 6,500 participants last September, stress the common threads running through this diversity. This festival cuts across perceived divisions by showing the shared Celtic heritage of Anglophones in the British Isles and Francophones across the channel in Brittany. Furthermore, online exhibitions, oral history projects, our Society Pages (quarterly review), and all other outreach activities are geared toward shattering simplistic monolithic visions of Anglophones to show the underlying diversity.

CHALLENGES

Heritage and culture organizations like the Morrin Centre play an essential role in reaching out to the broader population through tangible initiatives like the ones mentioned above. This is crucial in fostering a sense of identity, belonging, and attachment. In fact, studies by Marie-Odile Magnan in Quebec City have shown that a lack of Anglophone cultural institutions and activities is one of the reasons mentioned by youth who leave the region.

Unfortunately, the primary challenge for many of these organizations is funding. The Morrin has done better than most because of strong municipal support and the help of well-endowed local foundations. However, it still faces a high staff turnover because it cannot measure up to the wages offered elsewhere in the region. In the past few decades, the English-speaking community in the province has developed strong umbrella organizations that are well-funded and supported by the government. However, federal funding programs do not provide operational funds for the local groups working under these umbrellas. Funds for non-umbrella groups can only be obtained through project grants, which require new innovative projects every year and do not allow for the repetition of a successful project. There is a solution: greater state support for culture and heritage organizations, ensuring sustainable organizations both at the umbrella level and below.

For more information about the Morrin Centre's programmes and rental venues, see www.morrin.org.

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