AMERICANS INTO CANADIANS: NATIONAL IDENTITY NORTH OF THE 45TH PARALLEL, 1792-1850

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ABSTRACT

This essay briefly examines how the largely American-settled borderland region known as the Eastern Townships became increasingly conservative and 'Canadian' during the first half of the nineteenth century. It argues that British missionaries, the War of 1812, the Rebellions of 1837 and 1838, and the drive for economic integration and development were all important factors in this cultural transition.

Canadians, if not Americans, are accustomed to referring to the border between the United States and Canada as the 49th parallel. In 2001, for example, James Laxer published a book titled *The Border: Canada, The U.S. and Dispatches from the 49th Parallel*. The fact is, however, that if the 49th parallel actually did define all of the border Canada—US border, most of the people of Ontario, Quebec, and the Maritimes would be citizens of the United States. But Laxer's title is somewhat fitting inasmuch as his travel account depicts him to be rather disoriented when he reaches the border area between Quebec and Vermont, passing through it with little comment. That disorientation reflects the vacuum left by historians who have largely ignored the closely interknit communities of the forty-fifth parallel. For example, we know almost nothing about the historical cross-border interaction between towns such as Rock Island, Quebec and Derby Line, Vermont, even though some of their shops, factories, and community buildings once straddled the border, or the ties between the manufacturing centres of Newport, Vermont and Magog, Quebec, lying at opposite ends of the same lake. The fact that Newport had a long history as a lumbering centre processing logs that mostly came from Canada, while Magog was once a textile town processing cotton from the United States, surely suggests a lot about the importance of national policies in shaping distinctive economic development within the same geographic region.

Laxer might have pointed out that the border between Vermont and Quebec is actually quite sharply defined because most of the inhabitants on the Canadian side are now Francophones. Despite their recent interest in *Américanité*, however, Quebec historians and social scientists have failed to examine the American influence on French Canadians living in the province's border townships. And, while historians of the United States have written excellent studies on their southwestern borderland, they have shown little interest in the influence of Canada on communities in northern New England and New York where a considerable proportion of the population is of Canadian (including Quebec) origin.

Aside from several micro-historical studies, my own research on the border townships of south-central Quebec has focused largely on the first half of the 19th century when their population was largely English-speaking. In contrast to most borderland studies, my focus has neither been on the cultural blending of two distinctive peoples, or on how a common people tran-

scended an externally imposed boundary. Rather, I have explored why and how the 45th parallel came to distinguish the people who identified themselves as Canadians from their American relatives and neighbours. In short, while Canadians have long been preoccupied with the 'threat' of Americanization, my focus has been on the unfamiliar theme of Canadianization.

A relatively small number of Loyalist refugees remained in the Missisquoi Bay area of Lake Champlain after the American Revolution, but the non-seigneurial territory that would become known as the Eastern Townships was not officially opened to settlement until 1792. Families then arrived from southern New England in search of inexpensive land, relief from taxation, and, in some cases, freedom from the restrictive forces of religion and the law. The old Puritan religious establishment was obviously not recognized in the British colonies, and town meetings were proscribed because they were assumed to have been a cause of the War of Independence. The result was that there were no taxes and no local governing bodies in this isolated region until municipal government was introduced in the 1840s, by which time the largely American-descended population had reached approximately 40,000 people.[1]

During the early nineteenth century this was a true American frontier in the Turnerian sense, with potato whiskey being one of the only commodities that could bring a profit after being transported to outside markets. A supplementary activity was the counterfeiting of American bank notes, which were exchanged for stolen American livestock. One of the counterfeiters was the notorious American exile, Stephen Burroughs, defined by literary scholars as the quintessential new American man because of the rebellious self-fashioning identity described in his famous memoirs. Once he crossed the border permanently in his early twenties, however, he fashioned himself as a respectable colonist willing to spy for the British during the War of 1812, and eventually opening a school in Trois-Rivières. There he fell under the influence of an aristocratic French émigré priest and became a fervent convert to Catholicism.[2] While Burroughs is an extreme example, his story reflects how Americans tended to adopt more conservative values after they migrated across the international border into the Eastern Townships. In doing so, they were adapting to the political and religious influences and pressures they felt as mistrusted aliens in a largely French-speaking British colony.

The Yankee settlers faced a major crisis only two decades after they began to cross the 45th parallel. With the outbreak of the War of 1812, they were called upon to join local militia units and repel the American invaders, if necessary. This is exactly what they did, though it was cross-border raiders that they fought against rather than the full-scale invasion experienced by the Upper Canadians. But why did they not instead welcome the opportunity to once again be part of the country they had recently come from, particularly when they were isolated culturally and politically from the rest of the colony? To understand their motivation, it is necessary to appreciate how limited the social boundaries of these isolated settlements were. The settlers' sense of belonging and their loyalty was to their local communities—new though they were—and, most importantly, to their families. Outside invaders represented a threat to the hard work they had invested in this difficult land, especially if those American invaders in turn attracted British soldiers and the border became a battle zone. Thus, when each militia unit in the Eastern Townships was required to draft two men to join the British forces on the Richelieu, the draftees simply refused to go, fleeing across the border instead. Northern New Englanders themselves had little loyalty to their country at this time, supplying the British army with the livestock they smuggled across the 45th parallel. But they, too, were quick to defend their homeland when the war shifted to Lake Champlain.[3]

During and after the war, the American missionary societies redirected their efforts to their own western frontier, leaving a religious vacuum for the Church of England's Society for the Propagation of the Gospel as well as the Wesleyan Missionary Society. These two bodies, both based in London, England, sent conservative British clergy to the region with the declared aim of transforming the Yankee settlers into good British citizens. As a result, the vast majority of the settlers soon became either Anglicans or Wesleyan Methodists. They certainly did not shed their independent religious outlook or behaviour overnight, for they were often church adherents in name only, but the Eastern Townships was spared the full intensity of the radical religious revivals that repeatedly swept the 'burnt-over country' of northern New York and New England. And the British missionaries realized that time was on their side, for their Sunday schools would have a significant impact on the younger Canadian-born generations. English-Canadian historians have generally steered away from the study of religion, but it is impossible to understand how political and national identity evolved in this country without examining the influence of religion and religious identity in this country, as in the United States.[4]

The 45th parallel defined two distinct political outlooks as early as the 1830s, for that was the decade that Vermonters elected the candidate of the anti-Masonic party as state governor,[5] yet there was little echo of this paranoia-driven movement north of the border where Masonic lodges had taken root with the first American

settlers. In fact, the people of the Eastern Townships were abandoning their flirtation with the radical *Parti patriote* as the colony moved towards rebellion in 1837. Eastern Townships residents resented the government's obsession with St Lawrence canals at the expensive of transportation links to the region, and the fact that all significant local offices were filled by British outsiders, but they also feared the prospect of a nationalistic French-speaking republic. Through the Hunters' Lodges, the French-Canadian rebels enjoyed strong support in the northern states, being provided with refuge as well weapons to launch the second phase of the rebellion in 1838. But the militia of the Eastern Townships prevented incursion from south of the border, and the terrorizing night raids from Vermont during the following two years only intensified anti-American sentiment in the region. There would be a brief wave of annexationist support at mid-century, but this would quickly evaporate when the United States lowered its trade barriers.[6]

The Eastern Townships was once a rather unique Canadian region insofar as it was cut off culturally from the rest of Lower Canada, and it was largely bypassed by the large-scale British influx experienced by Upper Canada and the Maritimes in the early nineteenth century. But political and religious developments that were common, in many respects, to all the British North American colonies go far toward explaining the emergence of a more conservative identity north of the 45th parallel. And, with the arrival of the railway and state forming institutions such as municipal and school councils, the still highly localized outlook of the largely rural population at mid-century would gradually become reconciled with a broader sense of British North American loyalty. The border, nevertheless, remained porous with localized socializing and trading networks followed by large numbers of Americans arriving as summer tourists on the steamboats of Lake Memphremagog,[7] and Canadians seeking better economic opportunities in the rapidly industrializing United States.[8] In fact, the border has been a greater barrier to historians than to the people who live on either side of it, serving as a zone of interpenetration between the two countries but also as a political, economic, and cultural divide that cannot be ignored.

REFERENCES

[1] See J.I. Little, *Ethno-Cultural Transition and Regional Identity in the Eastern Townships of Quebec* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1989). For a brief history of the region, see Guy Laperrière, *Les Cantons-de-l'Est* (Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2009).

[2] See J.I. Little, 'American Sinner / Canadian Saint? The Further Adventures of the Notorious Stephen Burroughs, 1799-1840,' *Journal of the Early Republic*, 27, no. 2 (2007): 203-31.

[3] J.I. Little, *Loyalties in Conflict: A Canadian Borderland in War and Rebellion, 1812-1840* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 11-56.

[4] See J.I. Little, *Borderland Religion: The Emergence of an English-Canadian Identity, 1792-1852* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

[5] See John J. Duffy and H. Nicholas Muller, III, *Anxious Democracy: Aspects of the 1830s* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982).

[6] Little, *Loyalties in Conflict*, 57-106; J.I. Little, 'The Short Life of a Local Protestant Movement: The Annexation Crisis of 1849-50 in the Eastern Townships,' *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, 1993, 45-67.

[7] See J.I. Little, 'Scenic Tourism on the Northeastern Borderland: Lake Memphremagog's Steamboat Excursions and Resort Hotels, 1850-1900,' *Journal of Historical Geography*, 35 (2009): 716-42. Hundreds of Americans also participated each year in the raucous revivals held on Beebe Plain's Adventist campground. See J.I. Little, 'Railways, Revivals, and Rowdyism: The Beebe Adventist Camp Meeting, 1875-1900,' in J.I. Little, *The Other Quebec: Microhistorical Essays on Religion and Society* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

[8] See, for example, J.I. Little, 'The Mental World of Ralph Merry: A Case Study of Popular Religion in the Eastern Townships, 1798-1863,' *Canadian Historical Review*, 83 (2002): 338-63; J.I. Little, 'A Canadian in Lowell: Labour, Manhood, and Independence in the Early Industrial Era,' *Labour/Le Travail*, 48 (2001): 197-263; and J.I. Little, 'Popular voices in Print: the Local Newspaper Correspondents of an Extended Scots-Canadian community, 1894,' *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 30, 3 (1995): 134-55.