An Analytical Glimpse of What Quebec Was

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Folk Tales of French Canada, Edith Fowke. Illus. by Henri Julien. NC Press, 1979. 144 pp. $5.95 paper. ISBN 0-919601-01-4.

My maternal grandmother, a German from what used to be called the Baltic Provinces where Russian was one of the languages spoken, looked down on anyone who could not read Tolstoï in the original. In a way, the Québécois have the same disdain for those who do not read French. Of course, in five or six years, there will be many English Canadians who, having gone through French Immersion Programs as children, will be able to appreciate the original versions of Quebec literature, Quebec songs, Quebec folktales. In the meantime, however, translations are a necessary evil and Edith Fowke's direct translations of *Folktales of French Canada*, as well as her introductions to the various kinds of tales and legends are most opportune.

Fowke has adopted Stith Thompson's subdivisions of fictional tales into "Animal Tales," "Ordinary Folktales," "Jokes and Anecdotes," and "Formula Tales," as well as his type and motif numbers.[1] Obviously, this will prove more convenient for the student of folktales in particular than would a new system. Her indexes of tale types and motifs consist of five pages which give an excellent systematic overview of the tales included in the volume. Fowke's notes on each tale give the source of her translation, list tale types and motifs, and indicate comparative references. Comparison with stories from other parts of Canada, other countries and other times is important to Edith Fowke. She is happy to discover elements peculiar to Quebec, such as the bisected rooster in "Give Me Back My Purse," and she never fails to point out the specificity of the "French-Canadian locale," as it reflects "more closely the beliefs, traditions, and customs of the rural French Canadians" (p. 78). But she revels in noting, again and again, that with certain modifications Quebec folktales follow familiar patterns, have counterparts in other countries, roots in a pre-Christian era, plots that are known in Europe and Asia.

Fowke's bibliography (pp. 139-143) cites many other North American studies. However, she lists only four European works; a graduate student would find a rewarding topic in comparing her findings with those of European forklorists.

Fowke made the selection for her book largely from the tales published in *The Journal of American Folklore* between 1916 and 1950, a period during which Dr. Marius Barbeau was associate editor of the journal. Here she found the earliest collection of tales which represent most closely what Luc Lacourcière called "the golden age of oral literature" (p. 8), the era from the beginning of Canada to about 1850. In the earliest days it would have been against the law to set up a printing press in Quebec; and after the "Conquest," when English was used as much as possible in public life, publications in French were rare and there were not many francophone schools. Oral literature naturally flourished, sometimes in spite of and even because of the English. Today the attuned reader can in an animal tale such as "The Fable of the Bear and the Fox" sense the underlying meaning: at the end of the short fable, the narrator says to his audience: "And me, they sent me here to tell you that the little fox is indeed smarter than the bear" (p. 16). While this may have general meaning only, it is easily transposed into the political or cultural domain where the small and wiry French Canadian outwits the heavier English Canadian. I for one can see the gleam in the eye of the 19th century story-teller, in this case a certain Edouard Lizotte from Ste. Anne, Kamouraska.

Fowke has attempted to give us direct translations adhering "as closely as possible to the way in which the original narrators told the stories" (p. 7). In most cases she has been successful. "Ti-Jean and the Big White Cat," an Ordinary Folktale, gives a feeling of suspense. The rhythm is fast, the conclusion "And so it goes . . . I was at the wedding. But since then, I haven't seen those people, and I don't know how things go over there" (p. 33) leaves us curious, wishing to go and see, as if the tale were about people from a neighbouring town. "The Devil at the Dance," a famous tale which actually appeared in print in 1837 but continued to be told orally in a slightly different version, is most exciting (p. 83). The fiddler seems to be playing right next to the reader, of whom the narrator asks direct questions; jigs and rigadoons fly by until the old grandmother, making the sign of the cross over the strange dancer, causes him to leap through the stone wall and out into the icy night. Fowke's text is good, lively; even the most addicted child of the present TV generation will listen to it with delight, provided the tale is told orally and with gusto. I would find it less advisable to ask children to read the stories: they are meant to be oral literature and need voice dramatization. Furthermore, the illustrations by Henri Julien, though well drawn in habitant style, are not numerous and are black and white only.

How do the tales and legends of Fowke's choice portray the French-Canadian? Where does he live and how? What does he do? Essentially he appears to be a villager or an isolated farmer. The poor live in little log houses, the richer live in fine two-storey stone houses. The church is an important building in each village, to the point where the *curé* in the legend

"The Devil Builds a Church" has to accept Satan's help in building one (p 88). (Luckily, the help is provided in the form of a horse and only through the good offices of the Virgin Mary.) The roads are generally bad. Winter is the dominating season. In the delightful story "The Winter of the Crows' (p. 99), Canadian winters are explained through the presence in our country of these birds which, cursed by Noah, are condemned to permanent travel. When in the spring they arrive in Northern Canada, the forest and the north winds must almost immediately rise in wintry fashion to refuse them asylum.

The crows hate to have to travel and so does the French Canadian. No habitant wants to "fly away" permanently. Run-away husbands quickly return to their wives. One unfaithful lord is condemned "to walk to the ends of the earth . . . and he's walking still" (p. 42). When "Dalbec Flies Through the Air," carried by about a dozen ducks fastened to his belt, he hears the bells of Sunday mass and realizes that something needs to be done; he twists the neck of one duck after the other, until he safely lands "on the ground in front of the church at Sorel, and hear[s] the second bell . . . He had been carried seventy-five miles up the river in just half an hour" (p. 55). Obviously a most uncomfortable occurrence for a Quebec farmer attached to the soil!

On this soil, he lives well. "The Carefree Miller" and his wife "lived happily in ease and contentment" (p. 43); "Fearless Pierre" likes smoking and drinking. In fact, quite a bit of drinking takes place, some people drinking up all their wealth. But generally speaking, the habitant is both too practical to waste his life and too God-fearing. God's severity is evident: the crows must travel; the toad created by Satan must bear his ugliness. It is as if people walked a thin line between the good life and the temptations of an overly enjoyable one, with too much dancing and too much laughing leading to frightful encounters with the Devil. If there are marks of God's goodness – the fruit of the land, the honey-bees – as well as of his sternness, there are also mementoes of the Devil: a split rock from which he plunged into hell, a hole in a house through which he passed and which the practical family has blocked, on the inside with a chest of drawers, on the outside with a woodpile. In fear of God, the habitant has acquired great respect for authority. The French-Canadian seems a type that needs God's strict surveillance. He is very stubborn, indeed this is the adjective most often used to describe his character. More so are the women, the crassest example being the woman who calls her husband "Lousy-Head." When he drowns her in his somewhat justified anger and her head is already covered by the river, she raises "her arm in the air pretending to kill lice to show that he still [is] a lousy-head" (p. 58). The habitant is cunning, too, and sometimes a bit dishonest, especially when he hopes to outwit the devil. He is cruel (cf. "Poucet and Marie," p. 39), temperamental, capable of "shaking with rage" (p. 17). Ti-Jean needs many years to outgrow his wickedness and hot-temper (p. 43).

The sexual feelings of the French-Canadian seem more lively than those of his English counterparts. Ti-Jean "falls on his back with admiration" for the beautiful princess (p. 32); the cobbler's wife lets a stranger "squeeze her in the corner" until her husband calls out in jealousy "Let her go" (p. 60). For an undefined reason, fearless Pierre travels "well equipped with underclothes" (p. 34), something that might not have deserved mention in other folktales.

The women are again and again shown as stubborn, cunning, and domineering. The little mouse, a "she," is happy to see the fire-coal, whom she has tempted to cross the river on a straw, drown. She laughs so hard that she splits her belly. Just punishment for woman the temptress! Indeed before she can get the thread the cobbler needs to mend her, she has to go and pick up manure for the field, the grain, the miller, the bran, the sow who will give her some hair for her stitches. Women are also brave, often stronger than men, both in honesty and dishonesty. It is not surprising then that they were put in charge of maintaining the fear of God in Quebec society, as we can see in novels such as Roch Carrier's *La Guerre, Yes Sir,* and Marie-Claire Blais's *A Season in the Life of Emmanuel.*

Fowke's volume of *French Canadian Folktales* gives a rather traditional, unsurprising view of the habitant. This is not a negative criticism: folktales which are part of an old tradition cannot show modern realities. However, used in an unenlightened way, the volume could reinforce the folkloric image many anglophones have of French-Canadians. In this critique I myself have used such words as "habitants" or "French-Canadian," terms I would not normally employ, especially when describing the modern Québécois. Knowledge of modern literature would of course rectify that image, but it is my fear that the pipe-smoking old man in his *ceinture fléchée* may still depict for many the stereotype of the Québécois.

The themes of the tales and legends presented by Fowke imply some social criticism: poverty leads to family quarrels in a number of them. It is a poverty which seemingly can be overcome by courage ("Fearless Pierre"), perseverance ("The Calf with the Golden Horns"), intelligence ("The Devil and the Candle"); often, however, these qualities are not sufficient and magic must assist the worthy one, for it is difficult to trick oneself into good fortune. Tricks are usually considered somewhat dishonest, and are rewarded only when they are directed against Satan. It is better to obey God and the law and to respect both priest and lawyer as their representatives.

Magic and Satan play important rôles and are often connected. In the very early and beautiful legend of the Flying Canoe, "La Chasse-Galerie" (p. 116), the occupants must fear at any time an interruption of their voyage. Swearing, drinking, and touching a cross will enable the Devil to halt the magic bark canoe. While travelling through the air – what an

unnatural thing – the travellers are at the mercy of Satan and only by grea luck can they indeed return home. It seems that God and the Devil ar omnipresent in these stories, and are themselves superstitious.

"The Three Drops of Blood" is an interesting story, as it deals wit Canadian emigration to the United States. This unhappy move brings illnes and death to the emigrants (p. 106). Jerôme, the hero, who has been unabl to live in the States, returns to his birthplace, Saint-Anne, leaving wife an children down South. He seems to get better, at home, even though he i low in spirit; but one of his daughters will die in the foreign country. It is th theme of *dépaysement* which we will find later in Ringuet's *Thirty Acres*

The split rock, a gate to purgatory and hell, is well-known in Europea folklore. So of course is Master Fox, *Reineke Fuchs* in German, *Maîtr Renard* in French, all leading back to the Reynard cycle. Fowke quotes Stit Thompson who has discovered this figure in Asia and Africa, as well as i North American Indian tales. The medieval French play of *Maître Patheli* has also left its mark: "The Calf Sold Three Times" very closely follows it pattern (p. 61).

Fowke notes that as far as formula tales or "cumulative, endless circular, unfinished and catch tales" are concerned, "the French-Canadia form is more ingenious than most, incorporating more details and a secon circular pattern" (p. 68). This is of particular interest, as the moder Quebec novel still retains this fascination with the circular and therefor endless structure, in most cases seen as a *cercle vicieux*. Hubert Aquin i *Prochain Episode* makes particular use of the circular movement, ofte seeing it as a downward spiral. Gabrielle Roy has Rose-Anna in *The Ti Flute* almost attached to her sewing machine whose wheel drowns with it noise and endless turning all possibilities of closeness and intimacy. It i literally a wheel of fortune, in that it does bring money for the sewing tha Rose-Anna takes in; it turns however without moving forward. In the sam way, the formula tales do not lead anywhere, or lead only to tota frustration.

In spite of my grandmother's principles, I haven't been able to find an real fault with Fowke's translations. I was somewhat hampered in m analysis by the fact that not all pages are numbered, which made it hard t quote from the book. That is a very minor matter, though. I was surprise to see that Edith Fowke can state " 'La Chasse-Galerie' has *almos* [emphasis mine] become a symbol of French-Canadian culture" (p. 81) Doesn't she know that the Toronto "Chasse-Galerie" has for years bee precisely that? Again, the point must be made that contemporary realit ought not to be ignored.

Edith Fowke has published in the field of folksong and folktale since 1957. The present collection of tales and legends is an important contribution to the study of folklore and will enhance the knowledge that all Canadians have of the francophone part of our heritage.

NOTES

[1]Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale.* Helsinki. Folklore Fellows Communications 184, 1961. Stith Thompson: *Motif Index of Folk Literature*, 6 vols. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1955-1959.

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Joe Mufferaw: Ottawa Valley Legend

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Tall tales of Joe Mufferaw, Bernie Bedore. Illus. by Yüksel Hassan. Toronto, Consolidated Amethyst Communications Inc., 1963. Illus. c. 1979. 61 pp. $6.95 paper. ISBN 0-920474-12-8.

I first heard of Joe Mufferaw several years ago when Stompin' Tom Connors sang his version of the feats of the Ottawa Valley strong man.