

# Report of the Annual Meeting Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

## The Two Races in Canada

George M. Wrong

Volume 4, numéro 1, 1925

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300524ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/300524ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

### ISSN

0317-0594 (imprimé)

1712-9095 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer cet article

Wrong, G. M. (1925). The Two Races in Canada. *Report of the Annual Meeting / Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada*, 4(1), 21–27.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/300524ar>

All rights reserved © The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada, 1925

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

**é**rudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

## THE TWO RACES IN CANADA

By GEORGE M. WRONG,

*Professor of History in the University of Toronto.*

It is the function of the historian to refrain from taking sides and to judge historical problems as if he were a citizen of some other planet. In so far as he fails in this he fails also to be a true interpreter of both the past and of the present. No doubt often he fails, whatever his ideals. The problem of the two races in Canada, the French and the English, has been the sport of controversy and it is not easy to refrain from leaning to one side or the other. It is, however, because of such antagonisms that it becomes all the more important to view it with the exactness of scientific method. Canada is in the peculiar position of being a nation without as yet having a very distinct nationality. A nation is a self governing state; a nationality possesses unity of interests, of outlook and culture and, in most cases, of language. This last, however, is not inevitable. There is a real Scottish nationality, although, while most of the Scots speak English, some speak only Gaelic. The Scots, the English and the Welsh constitute a nation, but the nation embraces a variety of nationalities. There is a distinct Welsh nationality, but there is no Welsh nation. History has thus demonstrated that there may be a variety of nationalities within a single nation. The problem of uniting French and English in Canada in a single nation has numerous precedents.

The origin of race is a baffling mystery. In distinct areas of the earth distinct types of mankind have developed. In Africa we have the negro with a black skin, curly hair, a distinctive facial angle known as prognathous, and even with a peculiar skull. In Asia we have greater variety due to conquest and also to isolation caused by mountain ranges. The Chinese have the characteristic of straight black hair, the eye almond-shaped, and the skin a yellowish brown rather than white. America produced its own distinct racial type, the red man with straight black hair, as yet unlinked with any other race.

Europe is the special home of the masterful white man whom one modern writer describes as "the fiercest of all beasts of prey," and another as "the most dangerous and malignant product of creation." Since we ourselves belong to this race it will do us no harm to hear this judgment of ourselves. In the European we find the white skin, and great variety in the shape of the skull. The hair departs from the uniformity of the curly hair of the African and the straight black hair of the Mongolian type. When we ask how these differences arose we have many answers suggested but no exact explanation. If the burning rays of the sun darkens the skin of the African with a permanent sunburn, the lack of such rays has not left white the normal Eskimo of the Arctic circle. For the most part the physical aspects of race find no explanation in man's recorded history. This begins with distinct division of race.

Men of science are debating whether the factors which shape the life of the individual come from heredity or from environment. That racial characteristics are inherited in some degree we cannot doubt. It is not easy, however, to distinguish between the qualities inherent in a man's blood and those derived from circumstance and education. We are not able to make satisfactory experiments upon the human animal. He matures so slowly and he meets the direct operation of nature by devices so varied and potent that her influence upon him is not easily traced. In any case it is only during the last three hundred years that European man in any considerable number has migrated to other climates and we have slight means of judging the extent to which a changed environment modifies the accumulated qualities of race. Certain it is that man responds

rapidly to environment but we cannot yet judge of the extent of the change. In the conditions of Africa the Englishman may tend to acquire a black skin and curly hair but it would require centuries to give a demonstration.

The problem of the two races in Canada is not, however, really concerned with these questions. If heredity determines racial characteristics the English and the French in Canada having a common ancestry, are in fact of the same race. The chief emigration of the French to Canada came from northern France. In that region in historic times there was a mingling of the original Celts with the later invading Teutons. The regions nearest the Rhine frontier were peopled by those Teutonic Franks from whom France takes its name. Farther south, in Brittany, the Celtic element endures. Later the Teutonic northmen made Normandy their own—and many of the French in Canada are of Norman descent. In England we have the same waves of population. The Celtic population was displaced in varying degree by the later conquerors, the Teutonic Angles and the Teutonic Northmen. In England as in France the racial proportions vary in different localities but the elements are the same in both countries. There is in reality no barrier of race to keep the English and the French apart in Canada; the two peoples are identical in racial origins. Since in Canada they live together in the same scene there are not differences of environment. The differences are those of education and tradition. There is no mysterious gulf of race to be bridged.

The whole world is today disturbed by acute racial and national antagonisms. When we seek the cause we discover it as a phase of the march to liberty and equality. The old relations of races were chiefly those of rivals, of conqueror and conquered, of master and servant. We see the most obvious of these in the relation of the African negro to the white man. The negro was property bought and sold by his owner. The growth of liberty has increased the resentment of the negro at his subjection, and today he insists upon freedom and even on equality. In Europe the subjection of conquered peoples, to the Turk, to the Magyar of Hungary, to the Slav Tzar in Russia, to the German master in Austria, has embittered racial feeling into the fiery passions of today. The master race has asserted its superiority and it has tried to assimilate the subject race to its own type.

This attempt at assimilation shows a characteristic of all races, conquering or conquered. Every race seems to believe in its own superiority. When the Europeans first came to Canada the native races considered themselves equal or superior to those of Europe. The Indian chief regarded himself as at least on an equal with the King of France. The savage, while willing to secure the better weapons of Europe, derided the Europeans lack of skill in the ways of the forest. In Asia the Chinese looked upon the incoming European with a scornful sense of superiority and claimed that all the nations of the earth were subjects of his emperor. The conquered Slav in Poland found comfort in his sense of superiority to his stronger neighbours. The Frenchman has long thought his country the light of the world, and the insular Englishman was ever sure that any one of his race was superior to every mortal of any other kind. Crossing the sea to Canada we find the Englishman despising the French-Canadian as an inferior people, and we find the French-Canadian in return consoling himself by the reflection that while he was weaker in the brutal weapons of the flesh, and in the ruthless search for material success, he had gifts which made him the real superior, a culture, a faith, a love of the things of the soul and of the home which gave him the deeper insight into the real value of life. A sense of superiority, a desire to see its own type the master type, is perhaps a universal characteristic of race.

In Canada representatives of the two most advanced nations of Europe found themselves at first in the relation of conqueror and conquered and, following upon this, in that of fellow-citizens, determining by their free votes the policy and the destiny of a far-spreading state. Never before had the Briton been called upon to meet such a crisis. His conquests had hitherto been those over barbarian peoples or over Asiatics with a wholly alien culture. The natural thought of his inexperience was that the few French, numbering perhaps sixty thousand, would in time be assimilated to the British type. In becoming British subjects they had a new liberty well fitted to wean them from attachment to the traditions of a despotic France which had been to them rather a grudging step-mother. Surely in their own interest they would quickly adopt the tongue and the Protestant faith of the English.

The French for their part were also having a new experience. Hitherto they had never been thrown upon their own resources. Latent in the French character is a tenacity of purpose fiercely aroused by adverse pressure. The colony of New France had always looked to the mother land for military and financial aid. The officials found their destiny settled rather in Paris than in Quebec. When, however, the tie with France was broken, the Canadians had to learn to rely upon themselves alone. Then it was that their characteristics showed their enduring strength. If they had little love for France which had neglected them, they had in themselves none the less the enduring French character. Separated from France they would remain French and cling to the language, the social customs, the laws, the religion which made up the French type of culture. At first the English failed to see the strength of this depressed and poverty-stricken people. The commerce, the government, the glamour of social prestige in Canada were all chiefly with the new masters of the country. A long period of conflict ensued. The French showed the tenacity of their character and at last almost exactly a hundred years after Canada became British, the French in Canada became partners in a federation which left them the masters of that part of Canada in which their forefathers had lived under the *fleur-de-lis* of their Bourbon king.

This intense, sometimes only half conscious, clinging to the culture of France has a long tradition. More than three centuries ago Lescarbot, the first historian of New France, thus addresses France, the mother land: "Fair eye of the Universe, nurse from of old of letters and of arms. Resource of the afflicted, strong stay of the Christian religion, dearest Mother." In our own day we find exactly the same note in a living historian of France, M. Hanotaux, who addresses the French as placed by Providence in a commanding position in Europe: "A race, brilliant in genius, generous of heart, which in the course of history no one has withstood. Loyal while still an enemy, the friend of its former enemies; allied with all humane families of mankind, if such exist, creator of the beautiful, passionate for justice, obedient to reason, gallant, industrious and spirited. This race calls two thousand years of history to witness that in war or in peace it has been found always on the side of noble causes." The Englishman believes in himself but one doubts whether even he would address his countrymen in such exalted terms.

When the two races are in direct contact in Canada the problem is simpler than it becomes when they live in separated communities. The American Revolution forced Canada to fight to remain within the British Empire, and also to receive new elements of population. Except at points of vantage, such as Detroit and Michilimackinac, French settlement had hardly spread westward beyond the Ottawa River. After the American Revolution the empty spaces of what is now Ontario were occupied by English-speaking people, many of them from the United States, who treasured and had made great sacrifices for their own traditions of British culture and political life. What is now the city of Toronto became the centre of this new movement. Upper Canada was a com-

munity which barely knew that the French element existed. The day came in 1842 when the new province and the older French province were united under a single legislature and then, for the first time, the English community and the French came into close contact. At the present time, Toronto is a city of perhaps six hundred thousand inhabitants, and it is probably a safe conjecture that five-sixths of its people have never to their knowledge seen a French Canadian or heard French as a spoken language. Except for reports in newspapers, they are hardly aware that the texture of Canadian political life is related to the existence of a French-speaking people.

Inevitably the people of Ontario accept the conventional traditions of their origin. They speak English, what literature they read is English, they feel themselves as an important part of a great British Empire, and they have a reverence, sometimes passionate, for that symbol of their patriotism, the British flag. They have pride in the power of the British Empire and in the freedom guaranteed by British institutions. If Great Britain seems to be in danger, their emotions are deeply stirred and they are ready to make the last sacrifice in standing by her side. Their prevailing conviction in religion is that of the Protestant faith, although most of those who do not accept this faith feel the same devotion to British ideals. Usually it is only the cultivated few who develop the imagination needed to understand the point of view of others whom they have never seen, whose language they do not understand, and from whose faith they differ. The point of view of Ontario naturally exists also in the West. British Columbia has only an English-speaking population and it is intensely British in outlook. In the Prairie Provinces there is greater diversity, but the prevailing element uses only the English tongue and has the British point of view.

The most serious aspect of the problem of the two races in Canada is that of leading the English-speaking people to understand the outlook of the French race occupying the valley of the St. Lawrence. The immigration of French to Canada since its cession to Britain is too slight to require more than mention. The French in Canada are descended from pioneers who reached Canada long before the Bourbon monarchy fell, and they have developed a nationality more developed and more insistent on its ideals than have the more diverse elements in other parts of Canada. Mr. Benjamin Sulte thought that as few as four thousand came from France though probably the number was considerably greater. At any rate, the French Canadian of today has an ancestry linked with Canada during, in many cases, three hundred years. Naturally he regards himself as the first and the true Canadian. In the cities of the province of Quebec the English element is important and the two races meet, even though, alas, they but slightly mingle. In the rural districts, however, few English are to be seen, except in the Eastern Townships. Probably two-thirds of the people of the province of Quebec are unable to speak English. All are, however, inevitably aware of the existence of the English as a factor in the population. The French speaking Canadian lives under a federal parliament in which English is usually spoken; the head of the state represents the British monarch; the great industries, the railways and other public utilities of his province, are largely under the control of English-speaking people. Thus we have the two states of mind, a numerous English-speaking element barely conscious that the French exist; a French element devoted to its own traditions but daily made aware that it constitutes a minority in the national life.

The mental outlook in the province of Quebec is what we should expect. The French Canadian clings to the fine tradition of French culture with passionate tenacity. He is aware that his use of the French language condemns him, for the time at least, to isolation, in America, but he prefers even at this cost what seems to him the pure gold of French culture. The Church has been his

most potent friend in preserving his identity, and he counts her influence as one of his chief supports. If this separates him from France, he grieves that the France of his traditions should have turned from them to secularism. He distrusts modern French influence and has no more desire for a political tie with France than has the American for a political tie with England. His language shuts him off from mental contact with the United States. He does not read the literature, such as the *Saturday Evening Post*, which has so pervading an influence in teaching American ideals, and he consoles himself by remembering that the material greatness of the republic may have a less stable foundation than that of his own life based upon the Christian conception of sacrifice. For English-speaking Canada he has a kindly feeling. He has no thought of trying to convert it to his own mode of life. What he asks for himself is to be left alone. His isolation has made him all the more sensitive to criticism or interference. When, often quite unconsciously, the English-speaking element seem to assume an air of superiority, this causes a proud people to withdraw within themselves and to avoid contact.

Minorities have their special mental dangers and these the French Canadians have not escaped. They are on the defensive; they tend to be suspicious as to the use of the power of the majority against them, and to become self-centred. It is easier for a minority than it is for a majority to accept discipline under recognized leaders. Alert as to their rights, the French Canadians stand together as one man if their nationality seems to be menaced. Being on the defensive, they naturally are watching the designs against them of their possible enemy and give little thought to understanding his difficulties or his fears. It is a fact that while, in English-speaking Canada, a considerable number of writers have studied carefully and expressed sympathy with the outlook of the French Canadians, almost none of the French have written similar books in the endeavour to find points of sympathy with the outlook of the English-speaking elements. If this is regrettable, it is also entirely natural. The people in a beleaguered fortress are not likely to send out friendly enquiries to justify the point of view of their assailants. None the less is the failure a defect for it leads to bitter charges of tyranny or fanaticism against many who are really kind and sympathetic.

Enough has been said perhaps to show that the two chief causes of antagonism are the lack of the friendly intercourse which leads to mutual understanding and, following upon this, the dread of absorption which is natural to a minority conscious of its own achievements and rights. The difficulty requires only to be stated in order to see that no easy solution is possible. France and England were enemies during centuries and in each country a patriotic tradition has grown up which is largely centred in victories over the other. Even today, the two nations now allied, are a long way from understanding each other. Reflecting people can rejoice in friendships of today which have followed long antagonism in the past. A British ambassador may say with sincerity that he rejoices in the defeat of British arms at Yorktown because it led to the creation of a great democratic republic. Democracies, however, are not easily magnanimous and during an election an American would not venture to say what he might really think, that the Declaration of Independence is a florid document, inaccurate both in thought and in its statements of fact. The masses link their patriotism with historical incidents which come to have an almost sacred character. The English element in Canada rejoices in the victory of Wolfe on the Plains of Abraham and honours Lord Durham as the most enlightened interpreter in the nineteenth century of Colonial needs. The French element sees otherwise. Sir Wilfrid Laurier has told us with what anguish he read in youth of the defeat of Montcalm. The name of Lord Durham, he said, has always been held in execration among French Canadians because he hoped for the extinction of their separate nationality.

Now it is no easy task to reach agreement and co-operation among people whose traditions are so essentially different. Yet the task is not impossible and the solution will be found in emphasis upon things which they share in common. Some popular conceptions require to be re-examined. I suppose that no one in French Canada now talks of loyalty to France. There may indeed be eccentric French Canadians who like to fancy themselves more French than Canadian, as there are eccentric Anglo-Canadians who in a similar way would like to seem English. Each type tends to disappear as the folly of youth gives way to riper wisdom. In Canada "Loyalty to France" is an empty phrase and "Loyalty to England" is, I fancy, going rapidly the same way. England is now only one of a number of states in a great Commonwealth. No Scot would speak of "Loyalty to England," and the phrase is equally inappropriate in the lips of a Canadian. No Englishmen would speak of "Loyalty to Canada." All the peoples of the Commonwealth owe loyalty to each other so long as they remain in the same union and under the same sovereign. English-speaking Canadians admire and love England as French Canadians admire and love France. English-speaking Canadians share the emotions of other British subjects when the mother land of their culture faces days of trial and conflict. The French-Canadian, however, can hardly give this emotional response to the tie with England. It is reason, not family tradition, which makes him a loyal citizen of a British state. But he is a loyal citizen. He fears, more perhaps than does his English-speaking fellow Canadian, that to cease to be British would mean ultimate political union with the United States and he knows that, should this come, the type of culture which he loves would face a greater menace than it will ever face while he has his assured position in a British Canada.

The status of at least theoretical equality with Great Britain consummated as a result of the great war makes it easier for the two peoples to feel a common loyalty based upon national self-respect. Other influences, even other defects, might well aid union. The English and the French elements in Canada have not as yet matured the creative faculty. The literature of each is in its childhood. Both are far too much swayed by the precedents of Europe and when both advance in the tasks of creative art and letters they will inevitably draw closer together. Writers in English-speaking Canada now find a charm and romance in the life of French Canada which stimulates imagination. It is true that not by anyone from Ontario was *Maria Chapdelaine* discovered, but it was a man of letters in Toronto who gave to English readers that fascinating romance. We may hope that some day a French-Canadian writer will discover romance on an Ontario farm all unnoticed by those familiar with the apparent commonplace of its daily life. This would make for unity. The same climate linked with similar occupations and interests also makes for unity. The same political institutions makes for unity. What Tocqueville called equality of conditions makes for unity. It is no longer true that in Canada the English alone have wealth with its possible attitude of superiority. There are French-Canadian millionaires.

The world in which we live honours liberty much less than it imagines. Intolerance is a natural human frailty. The first instinct for checking an apparent evil is to stop it by compulsion. Theorists, whose thought really belongs to another age, sometimes remark that Canada would have been spared its racial dualism if, after the session, the Roman Catholic Church had been denied its former privileges and if no liberty had been conceded to use officially the French language. Do they not forget that religions thrive upon attempts at repression; that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church. A depressed and discouraged people would have clung all the more to their spiritual leaders had these added the fascination of persecution to their spiritual authority. Do they not forget too that nothing stirs more deeply the resolve of a people to cling to their traditions than to try to check the use of their language? Russia

and Prussia might well have learned that lesson in Poland, with results less tragic to them to-day than is found in the attitude of a revived Poland, embittered by memories of brutal persecution because the Polish people were bent on retaining their native tongue. The magic of liberty unites the variant elements of the people of the United States. The magic of liberty holds together to-day the British Commonwealth. The magic of liberty gives to Canada what unity it possesses. The more we learn to honour liberty the more shall we learn to respect the opinions of those from whom we differ.

I should not wish, however, to end by appealing merely to a phrase. Let us touch realities. The French element in Canada is as enduring as, and probably even more tenacious than, any other in the country. Whether by design or by the influence of historic causes it is largely concentrated in the oldest and the largest, if not the most fertile in resources of the Canadian provinces. In its resolve to maintain its French type of culture it is united and even aggressive. Relatively to the other elements in Canada it is not increasing in numbers and influence. Here again we must confront facts and even statistics. In 1901 the French element constituted 30.70 per cent of the total population, in 1911 28.52 per cent, and in 1921, 27.91 per cent. When we realize that the total population is nearly nine million the number of descendants of perhaps only four thousand people is sufficiently staggering and there are nearly a million more of their descendants in the United States. (The numbers are taken from the Canadian Census of 1921.) The French in Canada have shown capacity to multiply which illustrates remarkably the estimate that from a single pair living 1,782 years ago the whole present seventeen hundred million people in the world might be descended. We need not go so far back as to the Garden of Eden to account for the descent of the present population of the world from a single pair!

Liberty needs a twin-sister, Education, to make her influence effective. The English element in Canada and in Ontario in particular has much to learn about the French in Canada. Let me say again that the task of learning will not be easy. The contact in daily life is slight and only a sturdy imagination will secure the learning not only of what is just, but of what is necessary to create for Canada a united patriotism. This patriotism cannot be based on a single language; it cannot be based upon outward unity in religion, but it can be based on something deeper than even these—on the liberty which is man's natural right; and on its children which are toleration and magnanimity. Canada has the germs of a new type of society combining in a common patriotism the culture which England and France have produced in Europe. Neither element can alter the unchangeable past. Their traditions and their culture are unlike. Neither element should be asked to abandon anything which it values in respect of its outlook upon life. To develop such a new type is a hard task. Nature tends to run in the grooves which have been made by past activity. America has been in contact with Europe for more than four hundred years, yet the breeds of horses and of cattle which we chiefly cultivate are those produced by a long evolution in Europe. The breeds of men change even less easily. Yet nature herself has creative vigour and she is working to produce a united Canadian nation from the two elements which reflect the richest culture of Europe.

May 21, 1925.