

Labour

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

Le Travail

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



Louise Dechêne, People, State, and War Under the French Regime in Canada, translated by Peter Feldstein (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021)

Joseph Gagné

Volume 89, printemps 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1090034ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2022v89.0013>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Gagné, J. (2022). Compte rendu de [Louise Dechêne, *People, State, and War Under the French Regime in Canada*, translated by Peter Feldstein (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 89, 287–289. <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2022v89.0013>

Louise Dechêne, *People, State, and War Under the French Regime in Canada*, translated by Peter Feldstein (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021)

THIS ENGLISH EDITION of *Le Peuple, l'État et la Guerre au Canada sous le Régime français* (Montréal: Boréal, 2008) is not the first translation of any of Louise Dechêne's works, but it is certainly the most awaited. This anticipation repeats the one felt after Dechêne passed away in 2000 before completing the manuscript of this book. Eventual publication first had to wait for Hélène Paré, Sylvie Dépatie, Catherine Desbarats, and Thomas Wien to polish the text and finish the final chapter, relying on the author's notes. This collective effort invested in completing this final work demonstrates once again that the importance of Dechêne's contribution to the study of the French Regime in North America cannot be understated. From creating atlases to archival finding aids, her biggest impact came from her works challenging near-sacred beliefs regarding the history of New France. Once finally printed, this book proves to be no exception: her magnum opus caps her reassessment of this colonial society under the light of the Annales school of thought.

With a constant eye on their American neighbours' ascendancy from colonial to national statehood, French Canadian historians have traditionally sought to ascribe a similar arc to French Canada. The main caveat, however, was that French Canada's own statehood, by eventual and inevitable rejection of France, was thwarted by the *Conquête*, an idea further accentuated by rising sovereigntist sentiments in Québec. Ironically, by her profound distrust of this "fated" view of history (xxxvi), Dechêne knowingly or unknowingly reflected the new wave of American historians re-evaluating the proto-national bent of the American

Revolution (the short of it being American colonists didn't initially revolt because they no longer felt British, but precisely because they felt *as* British as the rest of Great Britain). By placing the complexity of colonial history front and center in this work, Dechêne shatters many such notions of proto-national sentiment at the fall of New France, opposing the daily realities of the average colonial *habitant* to the self-interested writings of the administration. Dechêne's mistrust of any first degree reading of sources is a lesson that needs to be reminded and applied to any reductive historical theory based on national mythmaking. Furthermore, by focussing on the "military logic" (x) of French colonial society in Canada, this work strikes another major blow, this time to the historiographical tradition of a bellicose colonial militia. As the traditional view had it, not only were the British to blame for the loss of Canada, but the French as well, for not relying more heavily on local *petite guerre* tactics, rather than European-styled warfare. By challenging the nationalist angle – again, the opposition between a *Canadien* identity to a French (metropolitan) one, this book throws shade on the supposed importance of French colonial military power in North America. Dechêne demonstrates that Indigenous allies were the bulk of the colony's fighting force throughout most of its history. Colonial regulators, rather than the overhyped militiamen, were therefore the real force of the colony, perpetually renegotiating military alliances with various surrounding Indigenous nations.

Considering the original French edition of *Le Peuple, l'État et la Guerre* has existed for nearly a decade and a half, retreading its content any further seems redundant in light of the numerous reviews since published in both English and French. What matters here is highlighting the quality of the translation, as well

as why someone who owns the original edition will want to obtain this version as well.

Translating such a voluminous tome is no mean feat. Though I can't say I am familiar with how much leeway translators are expected to have, I couldn't help noticing that original formulations are not always respected. For example, single sentences in the original text may be divided into two. Other translations might not precisely reflect the author's intentions. One frustrating choice is the constant use of "Historians" to replace the ambiguous "on," which implies wider popular belief. Therefore, "On croit généralement" more accurately translates as "it is generally believed," rather than "Historians generally believe..."(10). Many French idioms are translated verbatim, such as "Turk's Head" for "tête de Turc," instead of "scapegoat" or "whipping boy" (xxvi). There are other strange choices, such as "peur au quotidien" translated as "workaday fear" instead of the more straightforward "daily fear" or "everyday fear" (xxvii). These may all be forgiven and largely depend on the bilingual reader's taste. However, a glaring problem which can not be ignored is the mistranslation of many period terms, such as "shed" for "hangar," instead of the clearly appropriate term, "warehouse" (455). To name only one more example amongst many, "flabbiness" for "mollesse," should be "effeminacy" or "softness," as period French to English dictionaries indicate (xxiv). Furthermore, commentary on translations should have been included. For example, though "petite guerre" can certainly be translated as "petty warfare" for modern readers, the context of its introduction (96) certainly warranted a translator's note indicating that period English dictionaries had no equivalent term (Miège's 1677 and Chambaud & Robinet's 1785 French-English dictionaries translate the term

as "to make Incursions into the Enemies Country" or "To go upon a party, to go a pillaging, plundering or a privaterring [sic]"). Ironically, Dechéne herself warns against substituting anachronistic vocabulary, all the while highlighting the challenge Anglophones have in translating these terms (435 n46).

Maps are simply reproduced without translation from the original edition, errors and all. Fort St. Joseph wasn't on the shore of Lake Michigan, but rather where the town of Niles, MI, now stands. Ironically, Dechéne herself correctly situates the fort [224]. Fort St. Louis along the Illinois River is also a glaring omission.

Sources are often abridged or extended according to what was viewed as being clearer or more convenient for space, and minor mistakes in the main text are sometimes reproduced (e.g. "Pointe de Lévis" instead of "Pointe de Levy"). Finally, petty an observation as it may be, tables in the appendices are harder to consult than the originals which included inside borders to guide the eye. In any case, these are minor flaws that readers can easily overlook.

In a nutshell, though the translation would have benefited from a more careful revision, it is nonetheless serviceable and fills its purpose. Beyond being finally available in English, the real strength of this translated edition of *People, State, and War* is the inclusion of a new forward by Thomas Wien. This text focuses on the book's influence since its initial publication a decade earlier, highlighting the praise and criticism it received, and discusses the work's relevancy to this day. Wien also includes an overview of the evolution of the field in that same decade, including thirty-some footnotes expanding on the material. Furthermore, the bibliography, frustratingly absent in the original French edition, is a welcomed addition. It not only includes works cited throughout the original text, but is

updated with those discussed in Wien's forward (though without divisions between primary and secondary sources, etc.). Together, these elements make acquiring this new edition worthwhile, even when already owning the original French one.

JOSEPH GAGNÉ

University of Windsor

Donica Belisle, *Purchasing Power: Women and the Rise of Canadian Consumer Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020)

IN *PURCHASING POWER*, Donica Belisle makes a significant contribution to the growing literature on the history of consumption in Canada. Drawing on theories of intersectionality, Belisle demonstrates how debates about consumption are also essentially about power. Consuming allowed some groups – in particular, white Anglophone women – to assert their central role in the nation and to sideline those with less direct claims to citizenship. Belisle situates her study within international debates about consumer citizenship and modernity. She explores how participation in organizations like the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), campaigns for conservation during World War I, home economics education, and the co-operative movement helped white Canadian women assert their rights and exert influence over debates about national issues. Belisle argues that these women viewed consumption as a route to personal and collective liberation and celebrated their skills in conservation, thrift, and comparison shopping. They drew upon maternalist rhetoric, as Belisle demonstrates, to push for change within the existing system but not to challenge capitalism itself.

The women who participated in consumer organizations were typically

those in positions of privilege, and it is only occasionally that we get a glimpse of women from other class positions or racialized groups. Belisle is careful to note that her study focuses mainly on the experiences of white, middle-class, and English-speaking women. It would be intriguing to know more about how French Canada participated in efforts to build nationhood through consuming habits. The chapter on mobilization and conservation during World War I, in particular, raises questions about whether Anglophone organizations like the Montréal Women's Club, that vowed to cut unnecessary expenditures, were truly representative of sentiments in Québec. Belisle makes an effort to draw on sources from coast to coast, particularly in the chapter studying home economics curricula across the country. Post-secondary domestic science programs provided lessons in shopping, interior decorating, and household budgeting, further solidifying the notion that homemaking involved purchasing household goods and "being knowledgeable about, and possibly receptive towards, the domestic offerings of industrial capitalism." (83) Field trips to agricultural fairs or department stores allowed students to practice their skills. Classrooms outfitted with Canadian-made appliances like a Canuck bread mixer or McClary stove encouraged them to think of labour-saving devices as "natural and desirable components of Canadian homes." (85) A chapter highlighting the experiences of rural women and the Women's Institute movement further helps to broaden the study's examination of consumption beyond the generally well-documented experiences of those in cities like Toronto or Vancouver.

Belisle argues that consumption had many meanings for Canadian women, offering "liberation, morality, solidarity, pleasure, civic influence,