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### The Frontier School and Canadian History

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# THE FRONTIER SCHOOL AND CANADIAN HISTORY

BY JOHN L. McDOUGALL

This paper falls naturally into three divisions. In the first I attempt to give a fair statement of Professor Turner's position. In the second I put certain historical facts which, in my opinion, are not consistent with the frontier theory. In the third I attempt to question the basis of the frontier theory itself.

## I

In 1893 Professor Turner read his now famous paper, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" before the American Historical Association, and in so doing opened a new epoch in the study of American history. Since that time the line of approach which he laid down has been so much the accepted method that I know of only one attempt to question it.<sup>1</sup>

May I refresh your memories by quoting some excerpts and summarizing others. "Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explains American development". In the light of that guiding principle he went on to find the explanation for the growth of individualism and democracy, for the shaping of the powers of the national government and the course of political history, for the forming of the American mind. When in 1920 he came to a restatement of his position he held to the same interpretation:—"But the larger part of what has been distinctive and valuable in America's contribution to the history of the human spirit has been due to this nation's peculiar experience in extending its type of frontier into new regions; and in creating peaceful societies with new ideals in the successive vast and differing geographic provinces which together make up the United States. Directly or indirectly these experiences shaped the life of the Eastern as well as the Western States, and even reacted upon the old world and influenced the direction of its thought and its progress. This experience has been fundamental in the economic, political and social characteristics of the American people and in their conceptions of their destiny."<sup>2</sup>

## II

I have to urge that if the frontier, an external force, is to be given this degree of importance as the creator of ways of thought, then by parity of reasoning we ought properly to expect similar frontiers in other sections of the globe to produce corresponding results. I will not attempt to deal with the Spanish and Portuguese settlements of South America, though I would like to suggest that the reason for their divergence from the American type is not solely climatic because a large part of the Argentine has a climate similar to that of a large part of the United States, but will confine myself to Canadian examples.

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<sup>1</sup> Almack C. J. "The Frontier Shibboleth", *Current History Magazine* 1925.

<sup>2</sup> Preface to "The Frontier in American History", Holt N.Y. 1920.

No early settlement in North America was more thoroughly exposed to all the influences of the frontier than that of the French Canadians in the St. Lawrence Valley. All the frontier influences beat upon them with unparallelled force. Their trade routes to the west by way of the St. Lawrence and the Ottawa, to the north by way of the Saint Maurice and the Saguenay, and to the south by the Richelieu, were infinitely better than those open to the English speaking colonists to the south, and they showed very early how ready they were to make use of them. The early explorations of Etienne Brule, Champlain, Jean Nicolet, and others, provide an enviable record, and they were only the first fore-runners of a long line of great discoverers culminating in the great work of La Verendrye who may himself have merely consolidated the achievements of earlier and unknown traders. By the support given to the Huron and Algonquin tribes they won for themselves the enmity of the Iroquois and were periodically under attack for nearly a century. It was not until the treaty of Montreal (1701) that the peak of danger was passed. Until that time the colony was exposed to and suffered cruelly from all the horrors of Indian warfare. Easy communications work both ways and time after time the Iroquois carried war into the very heart of the colony. In defence and in retaliation the French adopted Indian methods of warfare and became highly expert in them. Their capacity for canoe travel is traditional. Under such conditions the more adventurous spirits gravitate to the frontier, so sheltering the more sedentary and peaceful. That tendency was in part counteracted by the *corvée* which acted as a form of conscription. As the great scheme of hemming in the English east of the Ohio and the Mississippi developed, with its incessant need for men, this *corvée* pressed more and more heavily upon Quebec and the chances of escaping its action grew ever slimmer. It can never be said, therefore, that Quebec escaped that baptism into frontier ways which, we are told, so strongly affected America. It was no mere sprinkling but a total and prolonged immersion. Yet despite it all, they created an excessively stable, unadventurous society. All of it, with the exception of three seigneuries, lay below the first rapids. They recreated upon the banks of the St. Lawrence a replica of the French society which they had left. Nor can it be urged that this was solely, or even primarily, the influence of the form of government.<sup>3</sup> It is perfectly true that government from Versailles lay like a dead hand over every activity of the colony. But that ended in 1763 without making any serious change in the social situation of Quebec. After the Cession, the Scots merchants of Montreal built up their great fur trade with the west but in that activity only one or two French merchant families took part, although the whole trade rested upon an adequate supply of French-Canadian voyageurs. Nor were the voyageurs themselves affected very much by their experiences. Those who came back, melted into the general community.

As time went on, Ontario and the Eastern Townships of Quebec were settled by folk of British stock. The French population grew without spreading beyond the original area until the pressure of population created a serious problem on many seigneuries. In 1829 the Special Committee on Roads and Other Internal Communications reported that "The necessity of forming new settlements becomes more and more pressing for there are parishes in which fathers of families live on mere building lots;—this is a most alarming circumstance because it tends to the rapid introduction of poverty among the agricultural classes."<sup>4</sup> In the 1830's a movement of

<sup>3</sup> As does De Tocqueville. See *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*, p. 86 n. Ed. Calmann Lévy, Paris.

<sup>4</sup> Printed by order of the Assembly, Quebec, 1829. p. 923.

casual harvest labour to the New England States began,<sup>5</sup> but no competent observer ever looked upon this redundant population as forming a reserve of colonizing material. Only those of British stock, it was believed, were ready to face the hardships inevitable in the first years of pioneering. Perhaps the best testimony upon this point is that of C. F. Fournier, the Surveyor. Fournier had been engaged on the request of the Post Office authorities to see if a practicable road could be cut from the Rivière Ouelle to the mouth of the Madawaska. The old Temiscouata portage had never been properly maintained because settlers could not be induced to live along it. He reported in favor of the new route "d'autant plus qu'il est probable qu'un certain Nombre d'émigrés s'y établiraient aussi, qui, comme on est forcé de l'avouer, s'entendent mieux que nos cultivateurs dans les commencemens d'un défrichement d'une terre et sont plus industrieux."<sup>6</sup>

The French in the St. Lawrence Valley were compactly settled which gave them the advantage of mutual support. That was not true of the Madawaska settlement. Its nucleus was composed of Acadians who had been caught in the great dispersion of 1755 but who managed to work back and settle at Aupaque on the St. John River a few miles above the present town of Fredericton. At the end of the Revolutionary War it was desired to establish a regular communication between Quebec and Halifax by way of the Temiscouata portage and the St. John River. At the same time the Acadians wished to move further up-stream in order to be nearer the ministers of religion in the parishes on the St. Lawrence and because they feared lest they be swamped by the recent influx of United Empire Loyalists. The two aims coincided and the settlement at the mouth of the Madawaska was made with the assistance of the Governor of Nova Scotia and of Governor Haldimand of Quebec. By 1791 a travelling Scottish gentleman found a large settlement extending along the St. John entirely isolated and self-contained, but with a very high degree of comfort.<sup>7</sup> Having attained to that degree of well-being which seemed fitting, they were content to live happily. There was no poverty. The colony grew naturally, but without the speed of the American settlements. When in 1830, another of the many projects for the improvement of the facilities for through travel was being considered, T. A. Stayner, Assistant Postmaster General for British North America, travelled from Quebec to Fredericton and made a report<sup>8</sup> embodying his observations. He stated that the Madawaska settlement had a population of some 3,000 souls; the land was cleared with fine fields and meadows and good houses "and yet, strange to say, without any road". The fences ran right back to the woods and the people used canoes in the summer and travelled on the ice in the winter.

Up to this point, examples have been drawn from the history of French Canada. Before bringing this section to a close I would like to notice two other instances of importance to the point at issue, namely, the history of British Columbia in the decade after 1858 and that of the Yukon

<sup>5</sup> In 1839, Lord Colborne disturbed by reports of unusually large numbers leaving the seigneuries of the Montreal District, for the United States, asked the Bishop of Montreal to send out a questionnaire on that topic to the parish priests. They reported that the greater part of those who have left had gone in search of work. "Their numbers do not exceed those of preceding years at the season in which the Habitans generally resort to the United States to obtain the higher wages which are given to Labourers." Colborne to Normanby 16 Sept. 1839 Arch. Can. Q 260-1, pp. 172-4.

<sup>6</sup> Fournier to the Hon. C. E. Casgrain, Arch. Can. L. C. Sundries, 20 Aug. 1839.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, W. *History of the Post Office in British North America 1673-1870*, pp. 77 and sources there noted. Cambridge 1920.

<sup>8</sup> Statement of the Condition of the Post Road, Quebec to Fredericton, 26 Aug. 1830, Arch. Can. Series C. 286, pp. 21-5.

after 1898. The great majority of the miners who came in the Fraser River and Cariboo gold rushes were either Americans by birth or had worked in California or in the Inland Empire. The lawlessness in the two latter areas is as much a matter of common knowledge as the relative peace of British Columbia, yet all three areas were raw frontiers, and as if to make the lesson clearer most of the miners who were successful in British Columbia went back to California each winter.<sup>9</sup> The same comparison holds between Alaska and the Yukon after 1898. In view of these facts is it not proper to ask whether the external environment, the frontier, really was the dominant creative force which moulded American life? Would it not be more proper to describe it as a catalyst which set free elements in the American character not present in the same degree in other civilizations?

### III

That is the line of attack which gives the best returns. The distinguishing mark of French Canada is the degree of social cohesion which it possesses. The fur-trader with his word of good lands farther on was dynamite to the American society of his time, he was an alien curiosity in Quebec. To the French-Canadian, living well meant living in community. The *Coueurs des Bois* were men who had surrendered that right and were more to be pitied for spiritual blindness than to be envied for their greater economic opportunities. The present colonizing activities in Northern Ontario and Quebec, so markedly at variance with the record of the first seventy years of the last century, merely witness to that cohesion. The whole movement was begun by the Church and is carried on by it. It began as a relief to the older areas and as a counter-attraction to the mill-towns of New England. Nothing could be farther from the American experience—what is aimed at is not a haphazard response to the call of free land, but a carefully pre-arranged building of new communities. The raw frontier is not something whose passing is regretted as it has been in the United States. It is to be wiped out as soon as possible. Success is attained when the village spire is within the view of every settler and the angelus marks the beginning and the ending of his day.

Certain criticisms of a wider nature must also be urged. What is a frontier? What are natural resources? A moving frontier is in its essence the reverse side of a developing technique of production and of transportation. Before one can understand the frontier one must have a working knowledge of the industrial order which created it, its trend and its rate of growth. Natural resources are the creation of this advancing technique and for their development call for enormous supplies of capital. It is immaterial whether that capital is supplied in the form of long-term commercial credits to the early planters and fur-traders or, as in the later period, through loans to the individual states for the building of canals and railways. To draw upon current history, the whole of the gold mining industry in Canada rests on the cyanide process, a product of the last fifty years, while the present activity in prospecting for base metals is the fruit of developments of the last two decades in metallurgical extraction methods and in the aeroplane. And incidentally is not a great deal of the prospecting for copper now going on inside the Arctic circle a reflex of the rise

<sup>9</sup> G. Douglas to Newcastle April 15, 1862, (*Arch. Can. Series G. 355, p. 168*) reporting the arrival of three passenger steamers and a sailing from California within the past two days. He labelled it the beginning of the spring migration.

of copper to 18 cents per pound. If, as now seems probable, that metal is to remain above 16 cents for the next five years the frontier is automatically advanced hundreds of miles.<sup>10</sup> It is impossible to take one particular aspect of a broad movement of this kind to the neglect of all others and still hope to give an adequate picture of its causation or of its results.

It may have been fortunate that Professor Turner dismissed French Canada in his original essay in some thirteen lines by saying that it was dominated by its trading frontier while the English colonies were dominated by their farming frontier. One might even go farther and say that it is one of the most fortunate of errors for all concerned. Had he grasped the full significance of the facts which he dismissed so lightly, his essay might have gained in insight but it would have lost that priceless certainty which has given to all the workers in the field freedom to devote their whole energies to working up the factual detail without a glimpse of that paralyzing doubt which comes when the adequacy of the basis thesis upon which the whole effort rests is in question. But such a wholesale disregard of pertinent facts cannot be fruitful of sound opinion. And whatever justification there may be for Professor Turner's thesis as an explanation of American history it could be little short of a calamity if Canadian historians were to attempt to deform the story of our own development to fit the Procrustes bed of the frontier theory. One has heard England described as a land where bad German philosophies go when they die. One may at least hope that Canada will not stand in a similar relation to the United States.

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<sup>10</sup> And, conversely, if the present attempt to stabilize prices is not successful and we return to that condition which ruled before 1914 of rather wide price fluctuations following the general trend of the business cycle, is it not likely that the frontier will alternately advance and recede in response to that movement, now up to the Arctic Ocean with high prices, now back to 20 miles from the nearest railroad as prices fall? But these movements will be deviations from a rising secular trend for in each high conjunction permanent capital will be laid out in new regions which will, in turn, provide the low point in the next reaction. The position of the Flin-Flon and Sherritt-Gordon mines illustrates this point.