



“Nos ancêtres les Gaulois”: Ethnicity and History in Vermont

“Our ancestors the Canadians” raises the array of issues, the universals and the particulars, that are germane to the definition and the importance of ethnicity in Vermont history. Who is ethnic in the Green Mountain State?

By JOSEPH-ANDRÉ SENÉCAL

The modern world lends us complex identities. The many groups to which we belong have their own gravitational pull and they can become significant forces affecting our orbit. Some of us are pulled more by our sexual orientation than our gender or more by our social status than our instinct to behave in a certain way. To varying extents, we all have to come to terms with these many forces that set the course of our lives. All these Weberian categories reflect our complexity as human beings, as women and men existing at some point in time and space. If, as historians, we want to chart our collective course, we can focus on an unlimited number of positions to define our collective selves. One of these coordinates is called “Vermont and Ethnicity.” To what extent is ethnicity critical to an understanding of Vermont’s past and, it follows, Vermont’s present and future?

The proposition “Our ancestors the Canadians” is as good a place as any to start a discussion of Vermont’s ethnic history or the lack of it.

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Canadians, French and English speaking, make up the largest ethnic group in our state.¹ “Our ancestors the Canadians” raises the array of issues, the universals and the particulars, that are germane to the definition and the importance of ethnicity in Vermont history. Who is ethnic in the Green Mountain State? Is Vermont history fundamentally different from the main American narrative whose title could be “A Nation of Immigrants”? Is Vermont a state of immigrants? If the Green Mountains are replete with Canadian Catholics, Italian Socialists, and Russian Jews, why are we fascinated with “Real Vermonters”: the Protestant “Last Yankees” who milk their historical constructs for *Vermont Life*?

I once had a student who defined “member of an ethnic group” as “a person who moved from somewhere else.” This is an excellent, if incomplete definition of who we are. We are all Vermonters and none of us are real, first, or native, not in a way that should matter. Our understanding of Vermont’s past should not overstate claims to the status of being first, or dwell upon the persistence or preponderance of any single group among us. What does “First” or “Real” Vermonters mean? There is something fundamentally evil in proclaiming to be the first when territorial occupation is the subject of history. Such pretensions, especially those accompanied by claims to divine election, are at the root of nationalism. There are no First Vermonters; only Abenakis who have left their mark upon the land for thousands of years. There are no First Vermonters; only European immigrants who planted themselves in Western Connecticut, Western Massachusetts, and elsewhere just long enough to become Americans before transplanting their roots into Vermont soil. The majority of these early Vermonters stayed in the Green Mountains no more than two or three generations before scattering to a West that unfolded to the Pacific.² Others—Canadians, Irish, Italians, Swedes, Poles, Lebanese, etc.—came, early and late, in large and small numbers.³ For the most part, they did not identify their role in daily life with power and ascendancy; they failed to become bankers, railroad magnates, lumber barons, admirals of White Fleets, governors of the state; or if they did, they had no compulsion to define their roots or proclaim the special status of their ancestries. In short, insofar as ethnic identity is concerned, unless they could claim a Yankee lineage and in that way pass for white, Vermonters who made history remained as shrouded, ethnically speaking that is, as women. Most Vermonters, Yankee white or not, made the history of which I speak: the history of textile workers, mostly women and children, and lumberjacks, mostly men, of farm hands and quarry workers. It is the history of Canadians—of French Canadians who worked in the tanneries of Pownal, of

Scottish Canadians who made their way to Barre, of Irish Canadians who toiled in the railroad repair shops of St. Albans, of English Canadians (my litany follows the order of numerical importance),⁴ and of course, of direct immigrants from Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Italy, Poland, etc. Is this history, the history of ethnic Vermont, important enough to merit a major part of our attention?

The answer is yes, emphatically. If we are all ethnic, then ethnicity lies at the heart of a definition of Vermont. But today, much if not most of our history focuses, often with insistence, on one of the state's ethnic groups: the Yankee. Vermont's construct of ethnicity is synonymous with whiteness, a most peculiar brand of whiteness at that. Vermont's definition of ethnicity, the source of much racial, gender, and ethnic prejudice, inequality, and intolerance, is closely associated with the narrative that we have built around the Yankee, the Native Vermonter that Frank Bryan has tried to transform into a witty, taciturn, likeable "Real Vermonter" who does not milk goats.⁵ The nature of this prejudice is, in a way, our claim to fame: Vermont's original contribution to the American experience. We have made much of the environment, the small demographic scale and the racial and ethnic "natural selection" that has saved us from the violence of the Watts's of this country, the urban blight of the Lowells or Manchesters of New England, the sterile sprawl of the Levittowns of postwar America. George S. Weaver, in his piece, "Vermont's Minority," a paper read before the 1888 meeting of the Providence (Rhode Island) Association of the Sons of Vermont, captured the essentials of this long-lived ideology that has turned Vermont into the cultural product we market so successfully today. Evoking the settler days, the time of Vermont's "minority," Weaver transforms the Green Mountains into the setting for a eugenic Arcadia:

There were no sleepy hollow neighbourhoods in our brainy young State. The whole of it was alive with the spirit of the times. Under these circumstances it could scarcely be otherwise than that a community of intelligent and conscientious people should be produced, as well as one of energy and independence of character. But there is another thing to go into the estimate of character which resulted from the early life of our State, that is, *the stock of which the people were composed*. [The italics are found in the original text]. It was settled chiefly by people from New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut. These States had been settled by people from different parts of England; mostly from the middle ranks of society. They had been improved and vitalized by a generation of American life. Those who went to Vermont were mostly children of those who had come from England, and were protestants of protestants—as good a stock as that time produced. They were not cousins who had intermarried for generations and grown weak by their nearness of

relationship, but had come from sound European stocks settled in Vermont to mingle strains of health, vigor and spirit. Then there were the freshness of a new soil, the vitality of a mountain climate, air and water, and the vigor that comes from new enterprises. All these things entered into the ancestry that founded our State.⁶

The following passage from Cora Cheney's storybook tales admirably sums up how Vermont authors have amplified Weaver's themes:

"Grandpa, what's a Vermonter?" asked a Yankee boy a hundred years or more ago.

Grandpa thought a minute. "Why, son, it's a person who chooses to live here and take part in the community," he said. "There's been a lot of talk about 'Vermonters' running the 'foreigners' out, but as I see it, all people were foreigners here once, even the Indians."

"I just wondered," said the boy. "Some fellows at school talk about it. I'll tell them what you said."

"Something about the Green Mountains makes the people who live here get to be a certain way," said the old man thoughtfully. "The people who move here don't change Vermont, but instead they change to Vermonters."

The boy took this thought back to school and became friends with the new Irish and French-Canadian children at recess. When he grew up, the boy married one of his French-Canadian neighbors and together they raised a family of Green Mountain boys and girls.⁷

What degree of historical truth and reality can we lend these images of our past? Let us ask major voices. The first testimony comes from the pen of Rowland E. Robinson. The text, taken from *Vermont: A Study of Independence* (1892), reflects the sentiment of some of Weaver's contemporaries as they had to grapple with new realities, changes that included the arrival of new "stocks." Robinson, the son of a family who shepherded blacks to Canadian freedom, cast a different eye on what the aboveground railroad was ferrying from the North. The Sage of Rokeby refers to newcomers who fill the place left by the Yankee emigration to the West as "foreign elements," "swarms," "gangs."⁸ The verbs "maraud" and "pilfer" seem to find their way naturally into his dramatic prose. Words such as "infestation" and "inundation" prepare the reader for the following outburst of self-righteous contempt: "They [French-Canadian migrant workers] were an abominable crew of vagabonds, robust, lazy men and boys, slatternly women with litters of filthy brats, and all as detestable as they were uninteresting."⁹

Robinson takes stock of what Vermont is becoming in its "majority": "The character of these people is not such as to inspire the highest hope for the future of Vermont, if they should become the most numerous of its population. The affiliation with Anglo-Americans of a race so different in traits, in traditions, and in religion must necessarily be slow,

and may never be complete. Vermont, as may be seen, has given of her best for the building of new commonwealths, to her own loss of such material as had made her all that her sons, wherever found, are so proud of,—material whose place no alien drift from northward or overseas can ever fill.”¹⁰

Robinson’s lament elucidates the subtext of Weaver’s praise of “vigor” and “sound European stock” and it calibrates the dark intimations contained in such phrases as “They were not cousins who had intermarried for generations.”

To begin to understand the origin of such prejudice, we can turn to deeply buried evidence, the writings of a non-Vermonters perhaps, but an immigrant from England who gained renown in New England as the author of widely-used geography textbooks. Robinson and Weaver, the entire *nomenklatura* of intrabellum New England (from the Civil War to the Spanish-American War and beyond) learned by rote the following passage from William Swinton’s *Elementary Course in Geography Designed for Primary and Intermediate Grades*:

They [The French Canadians] are a gay, polite, simple-hearted folk, generally quite ignorant, and caring little for all the great new things that are setting the world astir. Of course you must understand this as a description of the peasants. The educated people are quite different. And you must not think that all Canadians belong to the French race; for though these form the largest part, yet there are many thousands of English, Scotch, and Irish Canadians. These are highly intelligent, progressive people, and have built railroads and telegraphs, and established excellent schools, and are making Canada a very prosperous country.¹¹

With hindsight, we can appreciate that Rowland Robinson was unduly alarmed. Vermont has domesticated the French Canadians and the Irish Catholics. Climate, geography, small-scale industries, and poverty have conspired to deny us our allotment of Blacks, Chinese, Eastern, or Southern Europeans. We are as white as a virgin page, as buffered as snow. We live in Senator Dillingham’s dream: Vermont has stayed that mythic kingdom that Currier and Ives can come home to. Much of this pious, infectious construct is dangerous and insidious. It blinds us to the nature of Vermont’s ethnic past and our role, our peculiar role in the history of American inequality and prejudice.

Vermont’s uneasiness with its ethnic past, its failure to valorize the accomplishments of French Canadians or Irish Catholics as such, its insistence on rescuing atypical blacks and other members of minorities, all these symptoms invite us to assess our fascination with what Weaver calls Vermont’s “minority,” and to explore the full meaning of our whiteness. There is much in the concept of whiteness as defined by contribu-

tors to *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*¹² that applies to Vermont, its ideology and its historiography; much in this second wave of whiteness studies to illuminate how Vermont “morphs” its ethnic past. Allan Bérubé’s essay “How Gay Stays White and What Kind of White It Stays”¹³ could easily be transposed to define what historians of Vermont’s women or blacks are rescuing from the past and why. If there were French-Canadian Vermonters studying the ethnic history of the Franco-Americans in Vermont, we could easily transform Bérubé’s title into “How the History of Franco-American Vermont Stays White and What Kind of White It Stays.” It should suffice to say *hic et nunc* that the images we have of Franco-American Vermonters are for the most part generated by *Vermont Life*, images that are consistent with Cheney’s *Vermont: The State with the Storybook Past*, a work that is in print and still in use in our schools.

How much of Vermont ethnic history has been written? None of it.¹⁴ None if a history needs its epistemology. None if a history needs to devote whole chapters to its largest ethnic actors. We have begun to rescue women, the Abenaki, the mercifully rare but romantic black from the twilight of Vermont history. But what will it take to give life to those who gave Vermont a second life after the Civil War, after the momentous diaspora that emptied the Green Mountain valleys and piedmonts: the Canadians who took over marginal dairy farms? the Irish who made the railroad work? the Springfield and Bennington Jews who processed mountains of shoddy? the Italians, the Poles, the Swedes, the Irish, the French Canadians who emptied the stables of Shelburne Farm, manicured Arlington lawns, waited on tables at Clarendon Springs, and met the indignities and assaults of being a maid in the white compounds of Saint Albans or the Hill District of Burlington? Who has produced this history of Vermont?

Judging by the written word, historians and other intellectuals have not explored these aspects of our past. There is little in the epistemology of Vermont that could be construed as a reflection on the nature and complexity of our ethnic identity. Indeed, there is little but fortuitous, fragmented documentation to inform such a debate. Until such history is written, Vermont’s knowledge of its past will remain as disingenuous as the history lesson dispensed by Republican France to its metropolitan population as well as the teeming masses of the French Empire. “Nos ancêtres les Gaulois,” the opening words of the state-mandated history textbook, has made the French Republic the easy target of revisionists worldwide.¹⁵ Can a more meaningful icon of colonialism be found than millions of black children preparing to be *Président du Sénégal* or *Cardinal du Mali* or *Dictateur de la Côte d’Ivoire* by

reciting “Our ancestors the Gauls” as their first history lesson? The phrase “Nos ancêtres les Gaulois” is not only a superb illustration of colonialism, it is a rich, telling demonstration of history as a construct. In full denial of their Germanic, Frankish roots, French historians of the Bismarck era closed their eyes to a mountain of evidence, evidence as ready as the name “France” or “Frankfurt” for example, and created a preposterous caricature: Those irreducible Gaulois who defied Jules César. Let us not laugh too loudly or snicker at these “Real Frenchmen.” Here in Vermont, the new history has hardly made a dent into “Nos ancêtres les Yankees.” How about “Nos ancêtres les Canadiens, les Québécois” to shake things up a bit?

NOTES

¹ According to the 1990 Census, over 29 percent of all Vermonters report “French” or “French-Canadian” as one of their ancestries. Statistics on ancestry from the 1990 Census will be found in *Census of Population and Housing, 1990: Summary Tape File 3A*. Major tables will be found in *1990 Census of Population: Social and Economic Characteristics: Vermont* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of the Census, 1993). This French/French-Canadian ancestry is the largest reported for the state and we can safely assume that much of the reported “French” ancestry refers to a French-Canadian immigration to Vermont. See Joseph-André Senécal, “Franco-Vermonters on the Eve of the Millennium: Tales From the 1990 Census,” *Links* (Spring 1997): 8–11, 32.

The next group in importance is made up of Vermonters with an English ancestry (26 percent), followed by people with foremothers and fathers from Ireland (17 percent). Are these Vermonters who claim an ancestry from Great Britain (England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland) direct emigrants from the British archipelago, or could Canada claim many of them on the basis of a long stay (one generation or more), layovers lengthy enough to transform them into English Canadians? We are aware of the vast French-Canadian immigration to the U.S. northeast, but how many of us know that the English-Canadian immigration to the United States was slightly larger than the Québécois and Acadian? The most accurate and intelligent treatment of this phenomenon will be found in Walter Nugent, *Crossings: The Great Transatlantic Migrations, 1870–1914* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 117–148. Unless the multigenerational mobility patterns of the Anglo, Irish, Scotch, Scotch-Irish and Welsh Canadians who came to Vermont are vastly different than the dispersal of French Canadians who immigrated to the Green Mountains, the percentage of contemporary Vermonters who claim a British or an Irish ancestry, but who are also English Canadians, is very high, high enough to make Canadians (French and English Canadians combined) the largest ethnic group in Vermont.

² For the classic treatments of this essential chapter of Vermont’s history see Stewart Hall Holbrook, *The Yankee Exodus: An Account of Migration from New England* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), and Lewis D. Stilwell, *Migration from Vermont* (Montpelier: Vermont Historical Society, 1948; reprinted Rutland, Vt.: Academy Books, 1983).

³ Some material is available to sketch a preliminary narrative of ethnicity in Vermont. One can consult Elin L. Anderson, *We Americans: A Study of Cleavage in an American City* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1937; reprinted New York: Russell & Russell, 1967); Betsy Beattie, “Community-Building in Uncertain Times: The French Canadians of Burlington and Colchester, 1850–1860,” *Vermont History* 57 (Spring 1989): 84–102, and “Opportunity Across the Border: The Burlington Area Economy and the French Canadian Worker in 1850,” *Vermont History* 55 (Summer 1987): 133–152; John Duffy, *Vermont: An Illustrated History* (Northridge, Calif.: Windsor Publications, 1985; second edition, with Vincent Feeney, Sun Valley, Calif.: American Historical Press, 2000); Gene Sessions, “‘Years of Struggle’: The Irish in the Village of Northfield, 1845–1900,” *Vermont History* 55 (Spring 1987): 69–95; Dorothy Mayo Harvey, “The Swedes in Vermont,” *Vermont History* 28 (January 1960): 39–58; Paul R. Magocsi, “Immigrants from Eastern Europe: The Carpatho-Rusyn Community of Proctor, Vermont,” *Vermont History* 42 (Winter 1974): 48–52; Otto T. Johnson, “History of the Swedish Settlement at Proctor, Vt.,” *The Vermonter* 38 (March 1933): 63–65; William Wolkovich-Valkavicius, “The Lithuanians of Arlington,” *Vermont History* 54 (Summer 1986): 164–174; James O’Beirne, “Some Early Irish in Vermont,” *Vermont History* 28 (January

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1960): 63–72; Jules Older, “Jews Among Gentiles,” *Rutland Herald, Vermont Sunday Magazine*, 8 October 1989; Myron Samuelson, *The Story of the Jewish Community of Burlington* (Burlington, Vt.: Samuelson, 1976); Bruce P. Shields, “Scots Among the Yankees: The Settlement of Craftsbury East Hill,” *Vermont History* 64 (Summer 1996): 174–183; Marjorie Strong and Gregory Sharrow, *They Came to Work: Oral Histories of the Vermont Granite Industry during the 1920s and 1930s* (Middlesex, Vt.: Franglais Cultural Enterprise, 1997); Mari Tomasi, “The Italian Story in Vermont,” *Vermont History* 28 (January 1960): 72–87; Ralph Vicero, “French-Canadian Settlement in Vermont prior to the Civil War,” *The Professional Geographer* 33 (October 1971): 290–294; Peter Woolfson and J-André Senécal, *The French in Vermont: Some Current Views* (Burlington: Center for Research on Vermont, University of Vermont, 1983).

⁴ For statistics on the English-Canadian presence in Vermont see Leon Truesdell, *Canadian Born in the United States: An Analysis of Statistics of the Canadian Element in the Population of the United States, 1850–1930* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1943).

⁵ Frank Bryan and Bill Mares, *Real Vermonters Don't Milk Goats* (Shelburne, Vt.: New England Press, 1983).

⁶ G.S. [George Sumner] Weaver, *Vermont's Minority: A Paper, Read Before the Providence Association of the Sons of Vermont, December, 1888, and January, 1889* ([Providence, Rhode Island: The Association, 1889]), 12.

⁷ Cora Cheney, *Vermont: The State with the Storybook Past* (Brattleboro, Vt.: Stephen Greene Press, 1976), 148. For a later edition: Shelburne, Vt.: New England Press, 1996.

⁸ “When the acreage of meadow land and grainfield had broadened beyond ready harvesting by the resident yeomen, swarms of Canadian laborers came flocking over the border in gangs of two or three, baggy-breeched and moccassined habitants, embarked in rude carts drawn by shaggy Canadian ponies.” Rowland E. Robinson, *Vermont: A Study of Independence* (Rutland, Vt: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1975), 329.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 330.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 331–332.

¹¹ William Swinton, *Elementary Course in Geography Designed for Primary and Intermediate Grades and as a Complete Short Course* (New York: Ivison, Blakeman, Taylor, and Company, 1875), 40.

¹² Birgit Brander Rasmussen, Eric Klinenberg, Irene Nexica, and Matt Wray, eds., *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2001).

¹³ Allan Bérubé, “How Gay Stays White and What Kind of White It Stays,” in Rasmussen et al., *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*, 234–265.

¹⁴ An exaggeration to be sure. Two titles, Elise Guyette, *Vermont: A Cultural Patchwork* (Peterborough, N.H.: Cobblestone Publishing, 1986), and Gregory Sharrow's *Many Cultures, One People: A Multicultural Handbook about Vermont for Teachers*, Meg Ostrum, photo editor, Susan K. O'Brien, bibliographer (Middlebury: Vermont Folklife Center, 1992), merit the title of pioneer works. In their search for ethnicity, Sharrow and his team have focused primarily on visible characteristics: cultural language, religion, material culture with an emphasis on folklore. The textbook highlights the history of more than fifteen ethnic groups in Vermont. The work is essential reading not only for the documentary base it provides for the study of these groups but because it aims to combat the historical legacies of whiteness in Vermont. The authors consciously treat the Vermont Yankees as one ethnic group and reserve one chapter, commensurate with the length of the other chapters, to deal with the topic. They are also conscious of their Eurocentric bias and go to great lengths to nullify it. For example, the words “settler” and “pioneer” are avoided in the discussion of English Vermonters. Sharrow is well-aware that such words “tend to elevate the Early English above the other ethnic groups.” Guyette's *Vermont: A Cultural Patchwork* affords a summary but balanced and enlightened treatment of ethnicity in Vermont. The most important lesson of this textbook may be the ties that Guyette documents between the story of ethnic Vermont and the preponderance of manufacturing in the state. In cultivating our bucolic image we have evacuated from our collective memory the large, essential historical role of manufacturing, mining, and lumbering in Vermont. In the importance of manufacturing between 1830 and 1930, Vermont mirrors the rest of New England. Only the scales vary. At no time could we have found a Manchester (New Hampshire) or Lowell (Massachusetts) in Vermont, but the resources of the Green Mountain State provided ample power and workers to support the important industrial complexes of St. Johnsbury, Bellows Falls, Bennington, and Brattleboro, to name but a few. The traces of the manufacturing vocation of those towns and large villages still linger in the decrepit Lombard factory architecture that one can observe in St. Albans, Winooski, or Rutland. But who remembers the vocation of Barton as the world capital of piano soundboards, the attraction of Jamaica as the site of a chair factory? Who remembers the importance of suspenders for the economic mainstay of Swanton, or wooden bobbins for the workers of Enosburg? Vermont's ethnic history is tied to its industrial past and one narrative will not emerge without the other.

¹⁵ For a general treatment of the “Nos ancêtres les Gaulois” theme, see Charles-Olivier Carbone, *Histoire et historiens: une mutation idéologique des historiens français, 1865–1895* (Toulouse: Privat, 1976). Also, one could consult Dominique Maingueneau, *Les livres d'école de la République, 1870–1914 : discours et idéologie* (Paris: Le Sycomore, 1979); Paul Marie Duval, *Pourquoi “nos ancêtres les Gaulois?”* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982); Claude Billard and Pierre Guibert, *Histoire mythologique des Français* (Paris: Éditions Galinée, 1976); Philippe Joutard, “Une passion française : l'histoire,” André Burguière, ed., *Les formes de la culture* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1993), 505–567.