

Colin M. Coates, *The Metamorphoses of Landscape and Community in Early Quebec* (Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000).

This book is a study of two neighbouring seigneuries, Batiscan and Ste-Anne-de-la-Pérade, situated on the north shore of the St. Lawrence River, half-way between Trois-Rivières and Quebec. The first was the property of the Jesuits until it reverted to the crown in 1800. The second initially belonged to the Tarieu de Lanaudière family before passing into the hands of the Hales in 1820. Coates examines a period extending from the seventeenth century, when the two fiefs were conceded (in 1639 and 1672, respectively), until the middle of the nineteenth. The author sets himself ambitious goals: he wishes to analyze not just the process of socio-economic change in the seigneuries, but also developments in the cultural sphere, of which, he writes, he “[takes] a broad anthropological view.” Coates seeks among other things to “show how [the people of the seigneuries] tried to make sense of their lives and their surroundings” (4). He further claims that “in linking socio-economic structures and cultural meanings [the] study elucidates one of the key transformations in early Quebec: the growth of nationalist sentiment.” (5). The book thus explores both familiar and less familiar areas; if, notably, the study of the rural dwellers’ social perceptions, is very new, the tendency to link the birth of French-Canadian nationalism to the socio-economic evolution of rural society goes back nearly half a century. One can associate it with W.H. Parker and more recently with Fernand Ouellet, an historian who, incidentally, supervised the Ph.D. thesis at the origin of this book.¹

Coates’s conclusions resemble in part his predecessors’. He too evokes a Malthusian crisis which apparently began at the beginning of the nineteenth century. But in contrast to these authors, Coates in the end sees this process more as differentiation than simply as impoverishment; it produced both a poor stratum and a local elite. After the Conquest of 1760, the latter group helped create a sense of community that had not existed previously. According to Coates, the French-Canadian nationalism formulated by colonial elites reached the rural population by blending with this local sentiment.

This argument easily explains the presence of the term “community” in the book’s title. What, then, about “landscape”? In his preface, the author explains that “[t]he theme of metamorphoses of the landscape, from aboriginal territory to French small-scale agriculture, provides the compass which this book will use to explore the region’s history” (xii). The book’s thesis can be summarized thus: French colonists transformed the aboriginal landscape with their land clearance and their construction; they made a Europeanized agricultural landscape that two British attempts to impose yet other changes did not fundamentally modify. The author refers here to the ironworks founded at Batiscan early

in the nineteenth century on the initiative of British entrepreneurs and to the Hales' project of recreating an English landscape in their seigneurie of Ste-Anne. Neither change having greatly altered what the French-Canadians had already wrought, Coates speaks of "the ultimate victory of the habitant landscape over all others." (4) He goes on to describe this victory of the French-Canadian habitants' landscape in more sociological terms: "Even through a second wave of attempted British colonization of the St Lawrence valley, even in the face of military and political domination, the local French-Canadian society survived." (4)

As the quotations clearly show, Coates's concept of landscape is a catch-all term of little explanatory value. At various points in the book, landscape can refer to way of life, power, social relations, economic investment, resource use, ethnic mix, culture, and (to use an anachronistic term), regional planning. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the notion of landscape serves here to give a semblance of unity to a study covering, with varying degrees of success, disparate aspects of the history of these two seigneuries.

Hence Chapter 1, entitled "Aboriginal Landscapes," deals superficially with the aboriginal way of life before moving on to the future that seventeenth-century French explorers imagined for the region, as well as to the fur trade. The following chapter, "Seigneurial Landscapes," presents the seigneurs, their relations with the state, and their way of laying out their domain. Coates concludes that under the British regime, the seigneurs were less present than earlier (owing simply to non-residence in the Lanaudières' case and a precarious situation in the Jesuits'), leaving more room for the local elite, an idea the book returns to on several occasions without testing it explicitly. Chapter 3, "Habitant Landscapes," first presents seigneurial concession policies and peasants' resistance against this way of controlling their access to the land. Coates insists that more than the seigneurs, the peasants had an impact on land use, energetically clearing their properties and introducing European species of plants and animals. The wheat-oats-peas combination they adopted was, however, modified late in the eighteenth century by the introduction of potatoes, which progressively replaced wheat. Following Ouellet's old schema without really taking issue with more recent explanations,² Coates interprets this change as a sign of the impoverishment of the peasantry. The proof he advances in support of this argument is, however, unconvincing: the increase in the size of households as a sign of the difficulty of finding a competency for children desiring to leave home (an increase that could be read, on the contrary, as proof of the farm's capacity to support more people), the evolution of seigneurial rent payments in Batiscan (based on a deficient and ambiguous source), the rise of local wheat and pork prices (concerning products most habitants sold rather than bought), the subdivision of land (on the basis only of contemporaries' tes-

timony rather than an empirical study of the phenomenon), and the marriage rate of men younger than 25 years, lower in older parishes than in more recently-established ones (which Coates interprets as a sign of the increasing difficulty of setting up children on farms of their own, as if young people from older parishes did not seek out opportunities in newer ones). On the whole, this chapter devoted to agriculture and the evolution of peasant society does not add much to our knowledge. On the contrary, it returns to an old interpretation of the "agricultural crisis" that is now generally rejected.

The author returns to the notions of impoverishment and the increasing difficulty of finding land for children beginning toward the end of the eighteenth century in chapter 4, covering the family and marriage. For Coates, this turn for the worse explains the growing proportion of consanguine marriages, reflecting poorer families being forced to marry within a smaller circle. Elsewhere, however, the author presents the local elite, scarcely impoverished, as adopting precisely the same marriage pattern as part of its reproductive strategies. The slowing of out-migration early in the nineteenth century is also seen as a sign of the difficulty of placing children on farms. "As a result," concludes Coates, "the families of Batiscan and Sainte-Anne made sense of their world by drawing smaller and smaller boundaries around it." (74) Ouellet's old idea of the narrowing of the habitants' world-view at a time when wheat exports to England ceased, is presented here in a new guise.

Chapters 5 and 6 represent the book's most useful contribution. Here the author studies local society and especially, its members' perceptions of it. Skilfully using the archives of the seigneurial and royal courts, as well as correspondence, Coates depicts a society whose hierarchical nature was reinforced by the judicial system. Habitants, he observes, won their cases much less frequently than the members of the elite. In general, though, ordinary people seemed to accept their place in the social hierarchy. They rarely sued their social superiors and when they demanded redress from a seigneur, it was not to contest their authority, but to incite them to take their responsibilities. Seigneurs on the other hand tended to reject all criticism from below and went to great lengths to consolidate their position at the summit of local society. From time to time, this brought them into conflict with parish priests, they too were very sensitive to perceived slights. Progressively, however, seigneurs lost influence as the local elite gained it. In the nineteenth century, the latter was able to foster a community spirit that was expressed in collective action to obtain schools and roads. Coates contrasts these campaigns with the earlier reluctance of the peasantry to contribute labour to road-building or money or materials to church construction. This contrast between an individualistic eighteenth and a more collectively-oriented nineteenth century is, however, more apparent than real. On the one hand, collective action in the later period sup-

ported projects that were at least partly funded by government, while in the earlier period, peasants were expected to shoulder the entire burden of construction and were understandably less enthusiastic. On the other hand, chapters 3 through 6 present numerous examples of *eighteenth-century* collective action against seigneurs and *curés*.

The last two chapters of the book are essentially descriptive and cover subjects already alluded to earlier: the brief (1799-1813) period of activity of the Batiscan Iron Works Company and the Hale family's dream of settling Protestants in their seigneurie and creating around their manor house a picturesque landscape reminiscent of England.

The Metamorphoses of Landscape and Community, then, elicits a mixed reaction. Its contribution to the study of socio-economic change is slight and tends to follow outdated interpretations; in the cultural sphere, where Coates is visibly more at ease, the social perceptions of the members of this community are traced with considerable success. This last aspect represents a new approach to the rural society of pre-industrial Quebec and makes the book well worth reading.

Sylvie Depatie
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¹ W.H. Parker, "A New Look at Unrest in Lower Canada in the 1830s," *Canadian Historical Review*, XL, 3 (1959): 209-217; F. Ouellet, *Histoire économique et sociale du Québec, 1760-1850*, (Montreal: Fides, 1966), 639.

² For example, Serge Courville, "Le marché des subsistances. L'exemple de la plaine de Montréal au début des années 1830 : une perspective géographique," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française*, 42, 2 (automne 1988) : 193-239.

J.K. Gibson-Graham, Stephen A. Resnick, and Richard D. Wolff, eds., *Class and its Others* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

J.K. Gibson-Graham, Stephen A. Resnick, and Richard D. Wolff, eds., *Re/presenting Class: Essays in Postmodern Marxism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

Class and Its Others and *Re/presenting Class* are essay collections assembled by editors associated with the journal *Rethinking Marxism*: J.K. Gibson-Graham (a pen name for the combined efforts of Katherine Gibson and Julie