

BRETONS, CANADA AND THE REVENGE OF THE CELTS

A presentation by

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As a Breton saying goes: "E-lec'h ma tremen an heol a dremen ar breizhad" "where the sun passes, Bretons also pass". It is not surprising, therefore, to find some Bretons in Canada.

But what role have they played in its discovery? and what role have they played and still are playing in its settlement? Finally what role can they play, as a group, or jointly with other Celts, on a short and a long term basis? These are the questions we will try to answer.

The first contribution of Bretons to Canada was in its discovery. We know that this country was officially discovered by the Breton, Jacques Cartier, in 1534; but what is less well known is that many other Bretons came before him, among them Coatanlem who met Christopher Columbus in 1484 and is said to have told him about the New World.

Another contribution was made in 1511 when Jeanne de Castille sent Jean d'Agramonte to Brittany to recruit Breton pilots to sail westward, probably toward Newfoundland.

One can also mention a map drawn by the Portuguese Fagundès and dated 1520, 14 years before the Jacques Cartier trip. On this map one can read "Cap Breton" and "Belle-Isle".

To me these three facts alone indicate that Bretons came to Canada before Jacques Cartier.

The Breton, Louis Kervran, goes much farther and claims that Celts came to North America 1000 years before Christopher Columbus and he quotes, to support his thesis, Norwegian Sagas written around 1180. These Sagas say that crossing the North Atlantic was common practice at that time and, what is more important for our purpose, that Celts already had established settlements in America.

Two monuments in the United States intrigue archeologists and perhaps support his thesis, namely the round tower of Newport in Rhode Island and the granite table of North Salem in New Hampshire.

The second contribution of Bretons to Canada has been in its settlement.

Three large waves of migration can be easily identified. But if these migrations were important for Brittany, they do not appear that significant, numerically at least, for Canada.

From 1534 to 1763 some Bretons came to New France. It seems that at the very beginning of the colony they formed a relatively high percentage of the immigrants since a study of the population indicates that, in 1628, of 153 persons whose origin is known, 25 were Bretons, (that is one out of six). But other studies covering the 17th century mention 4% and 3.3% of those who immigrated to New France as being Breton and 8% is quoted for the period of 1700 to 1770.

The percentage of Bretons was therefore small and the percentage of those who spoke Breton must have been still smaller since they have left no trace of their language or their culture... or very little! Even Breton craftsmen were scarce. There is a very small Breton influence on furnitures and houses; but even there, nothing very important.

Nevertheless, is it possible that Breton immigration during that period was more important than statistics show? Yes, it is possible. In any case popular tradition says so: a lot of Quebecers claim that they are of Breton origin.

Where does that conviction come from? I feel it has been inculcated in them either by the many priests, nuns and friars who came to Quebec during the 19th and 20th century, or by the genealogical institutes which, did not hesitate to invent origins for those whose genealogical tree was incomplete.

Then what can we trust? Patronyms? These are useless. Girls changed their surnames when they got married and men often changed theirs too when they came here. Can we rely on written records of birth, marriages and death? Partly only since many documents have been lost or destroyed by fire.

I, myself, became interested in sales and work contracts as a possible source of information. By compiling them I confirmed two hypotheses which seem to me to be very plausible. The first was that very few immigrants bearing Breton names came to Canada.

Secondly, I discovered a migratory phenomenon which has not yet been studied. This is that some Breton fishermen came to the Grand Banks of Newfoundland with their families, or a part of them. While men were fishing, women and children were landed ashore where they proceeded to smoke the fish, an operation which, for obvious reasons could not be done on board. What happened to those families? Have they left any descendants? As nobody has yet researched this field, we do not know how many of these early visitors stayed behind and became settlers.

If the number of Bretons who came to Canada during the period 1534-1763 is not very high, how can we explain it? The reading of work contracts are, on this score, very revealing. Settlers were looking mainly for coopers and carpenters. Coopers came from the French Vineyard regions (therefore outside Brittany) and carpenters from the area of origin of the settlers because the settlers wanted their homes in New France built like the ones they had left in their homeland.

This explanation obviously is only partial. Alan Heussaff has proposed a more global one.

"Perhaps the clearance of new land and the active sea trade provided the most enterprising of our compatriots with sufficient additional employment. Due to their autonomous status our people enjoyed a more liberal regime than the French, and hence perhaps a greater desire to stay in the home country".

Acadia also deserves a special mention, because Alexandre Leborgne, on his father's request, developed the Annapolis Valley by granting land to 45 Breton families bearing Celtic names. It is, as far as we know, one of the rare settlements in Canada in the 17th century which was made of families originating from lower Brittany.

From 1763 to 1867, under the English regime, and even until 1900, only a few French speaking emigrants came to Canada. Some of them were Bretons, who initially settled in St. Pierre & Miquelon; the remainder were missionaries. If the first ones have contributed to settlement in Canada, the second ones have only left Breton names to a few lakes, rivers or villages in areas populated by Indians or Eskimos.

We must wait for the period between 1900 and 1914 to observe a second migratory wave of Bretons to Canada. Indeed from 1880 on, the economic situation deteriorated seriously in Brittany. Numbers of Bretons began to emigrate, mainly to Paris. This alarmed the clergy, as many were the Bretons who abandoned all religious practice when going to that large city. Therefore the clergy looked for means to rectify the situation by organizing Breton immigration to rural areas. When, around 1900, the French state entered into open conflict with the Catholic Church, some religious congregations, expelled from France, took refuge in Canada where they were to have an influence out of all proportion to their number, mainly in Quebec, where the Catholic Church benefitted from an extraordinary prestige, to a point where it was almost a theocratic province.

The coming of these congregations had another effect. Having been made aware by members of their congregations that land was available to immigrants on the Prairies, a few priests, mostly non-Bretons, began to organize the emigration of Bretons to Manitoba, Alberta and Saskatchewan. By doing so they expected to achieve two objectives: to protect the Catholic faith of the Bretons and to stop the expansion of Protestantism in Western Canada.

If some Breton place names still exist and if Canadians of Breton origin continue to form a relatively important part of the population, unfortunately almost nothing remains of their language and their culture. Much too isolated they have quickly been assimilated either by the nearest Anglophone or Francophone community.

This wave of immigration stopped in 1910 when the French government decided to abandon its official anti-clerical policy.

However in 1945 there was a resumption of Breton immigration based on economic rather than religious grounds and this we may regard as the third wave. In the absence of official statistics, some have put forward the figure of 10,000 people immigrating almost exclusively to Ontario and Quebec between 1945 and 1975. This figure seems realistic.

What remains to be seen, in order to complete our overall view of Breton influence in Canada, is the short and long term influence they might have in the future.

On a short term basis they can introduce to the public the notion of the Celtic origin of the great majority of the population of this country. This could be a useful contribution to Canada's unity.

If the Celtic origin of the Irish, Scots, Welsh, Manx, Cornish and Bretons is well known then that of some Belgians, Swiss, Germans, Spanish and French is much less known. Interest in this common origin could perhaps be stimulated. One cannot rely on the French to encourage French-Canadians to discover their true origin and culture. For too long a time Frenchmen have turned their backs on their Celtic origin. Obviously they do not come from the Celtic insular branch and, for that reason, are not Celts in the same way as Scots, Irish or Bretons; but their ancestors were continental Celts, whether they like it or not, since they are all descended from the Gauls. This basic make-up was not changed because a few Gaulish girls gave their favours to some Roman legionnaires.

But what is more important is the invaluable contribution that, on a long term basis, the Bretons, jointly with other Celts, will exert not only on Canada but on the Western World and even on the entire world. And this is what I mean when I speak of the "revenge" of the Celts.



Be reassured. Celts will not finally become united and they will not start a war against the rest of the world. The revenge I want to talk about is the revenge of a civilisation which has been relentlessly attacked, defeated and ignored but which contains values our modern world badly needs to counterbalance the ill-fated effects of civilisations which have replaced it, above all the Latin civilisation.

It is well known that people project in their gods the qualities they propose as an ideal to their descendants. And what did we inherit from Rome? Jupiter (etymologically the god of the yoke, the god of slavery), Mars (the god of war) and Janus. Those three gods are ill-fated, and perhaps Janus more than the two others, because Janus is the state, the monster that Celts would have been unable to invent, the one which must see everything and see to everything: alone he is the police and the administration.

A people which places such gods at the head of their pantheon can only become, and I quote Pierre Lance, "an anti-nation, an anti-people, an anti-civilisation" and, in fact this is what we have become, after having endured that Latin civilisation for almost 2000 years.

Do not be mistaken! I am not pleading for complete anarchy and the destruction of the state. The only point I want to stress is that the pendulum of Western civilization has moved for too long in the direction given to it by the Romans and it is time for the Celts to give it a push in the other direction, because Celtic civilization, which is still alive, as this symposium testifies, contains all those values needed to fight the excess of interferences with individual freedom which overwhelms us. Even our weaknesses of the past are our strength to-day: the clan structure will oppose the oversized state, Celtic individualism will oppose overpowerful government.

The evolution of the world is governed by the interaction of existing civilizations. This is why cultures are so important. This is why Celtic culture has not only to be preserved but encouraged. To be able to bend the curve of events, Celts must remain what they are because, and I quote again Pierre Lance,

"A man who negates his principal vocation, who forgets his ideal and the dreams of his adolescence prepares his own downfall. A nation which does not live in harmony with its myths of origin, slips into defeat, disorder and decadence. And this is also true for civilizations. The Western World can last only if it remains faithful to Prometheus".

You might say that this proposal is a step backward. No! We merely want to give back to our society the human dimension it has lost.