

NAOMI GRIFFITHS

Longfellow's *Evangeline*: The Birth and Acceptance of a Legend

Longfellow first heard the story which was to be the basis of *Evangeline* at a dinner party in the winter of 1840-41. Nathaniel Hawthorne was also present on that occasion and for some time Longfellow tried to persuade him "to write a Story based upon a legend of Acadie, and still current there; the legend of a girl who, in the dispersion of the Acadians was separated from her lover, and passed her life in waiting and seeking for him, and only finding him dying in a hospital when both were old".¹ Longfellow was so convinced that Hawthorne would find the story of interest that he finally bound the novelist to agree not to treat the subject in prose until he had made an attempt at writing a poem on the theme. On 28 November 1845 the poet wrote in his diary that he had started his epic "Gabriel"; six weeks later he was calling his work "Evangeline".² The poem was completed on the morning of 27 February 1847, and published in Boston by Ticknor on 20 October.³ It was an instant success. During the next 12 months five editions, each of 1000 copies, sold out.⁴ In the 100 years which followed its first appearance, the poem went through at least 270 editions and some 130 translations.⁵

Evangeline is very obviously the statement of another era. An epic told in hexameters and based upon a desire to enshrine and celebrate a tale of heroic virtue is, at least on the surface, distant indeed from the poetry of the late 20th century, which is most often centred upon the moral problems posed by survival rather than the ethics possible once the necessities of life are guaranteed. But in fact, the attraction of the theme for Longfellow was not the story of the Acadians but the tale of individual virtue. He is reported to have remarked at one point, "It is

- 1 Longfellow, undated memorandum quoted in Hawthorne Manning and Dana Longfellow, *Origin and Development of Longfellow's "Evangeline"* (Portland, Mne., 1947), p. 12.
- 2 S. Longfellow, *Life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow with extracts from his Journal and Correspondence* (Boston, 1891), II, p. 30.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 4 C. Welsh, *The Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (Cambridge and New York, 1909), V, p. 78. This is the definitive edition of Longfellow's work and the quotations of the poem used in this article are from *ibid.*, pp. 79-178.
- 5 Hawthorne and Longfellow, *Origin and Development of "Evangeline"*, p. 12. This monograph, by a descendant of Nathaniel Hawthorne and a grandson of Longfellow, contains the most complete bibliographical study of the poem. It is interesting that the first translations of *Evangeline* were into German and Polish in 1851. It was translated into French and into Danish in 1853, into Swedish in 1854, into Dutch and Italian in 1856, Spanish in 1871, Norse and Portuguese in 1874, Czech in 1877 and Flemish in 1890. See also E. Martin, *L'Évangéline de Longfellow et la suite merveilleuse d'un poème* (Paris, 1936), pp. 356-8.

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the best illustration of faithfulness and constancy of women that I have ever heard of or read".⁶ Yet despite Longfellow's interest in personal motive and dedication, *Evangeline* is not dominated by the character of either its heroine or any other individual. There is no vibrant quirk of humanity that makes any one of the cast memorable in his or her own right. It is the theme and the setting, rather than the distinctiveness of the lovers, their families and friends, that creates the drama of the poem. The essence of *Evangeline* is the history of the Acadians, whom Longfellow saw as a simple, devout and prosperous people, whose community was unwarrantedly and brutally destroyed by the English. This disaster was accepted by Longfellow's Acadians with stoic calm, Christian fortitude and resignation. By far the greater part of the poem centres upon the fate of the community and it is the last sections alone that turn upon the destiny of *Evangeline* and Gabriel. After wandering across a continent in search of her own true love, *Evangeline* meets him on his death-bed, a consolation vouchsafed to her because of charitable works of mercy during the smallpox epidemic which had struck the town in which she was then living.

Longfellow's inadvertent achievement was the presentation of the drama of the Acadian deportation, in which the personal tragedy of the lovers became the summary of a people's suffering. *Evangeline* personifies the innocence of the Acadians. Less the yearning heart desperate for its own beloved partner, she stands clothed with the moral authority of the innocent sufferer, an Eve from Paradise lost through no proven original sin. Her story both gives and gains strengths from being recounted in the context of Acadian life. *Evangeline* is described in detail as the embodiment of a simple and, by inference, almost saintly loveliness. Seventeen years old, black eyes gleaming softly beneath brown locks, sweet-breathed and "fair in sooth when, on a Sunday morn, while the bell from its turret/ Sprinkled with holy sounds the air, as the priest with his hyssop/ Sprinkles the congregation, and scatters blessings upon them,/ Down the long street she passed, with her chaplet of beads and her missal".⁷ In the same way the Acadian dwellings are pictured as built in a "happy valley", the houses of oak and chestnut, with thatched roofs, calm in the tranquility of a summer evening when "Softly the Angelus sounded, and over the roofs of the village/ Columns of pale blue smoke, like clouds of incense ascending/ Rose from a hundred hearths, the homes of peace and contentment. . .".⁸ Similarly, *Evangeline's* character is depicted as one of filial obedience, to father and to priest, while the "simple Acadian farmers" also "Dwelt in the love of God and of man. Alike were they free from/ Fear, that reigns with the tyrant, and envy, the vice of republics./ Neither locks had they to their doors, nor bars to their

6 Quoted in F.A. Landry, "The historical origin of the poem *Evangeline*", *La Société Historique Acadienne*, 23ième cahier (1969), p. 114.

7 Welsh, *The Works of Longfellow*, V, p. 84.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

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windows;/ But their dwellings were as open as day and the hearts of the owners;/ There the richest was poor, and the poorest lived in abundance".⁹

This harmony between heroine and her people is an indication of one of the most satisfying aspects of the poem — its impressive coherence, its steady pulse of hexameter, the magnificence of its lengthy descriptive passages.¹⁰ *Evangeline* has an almost symphonic impact; its ordered resonances taken up and underlined, its opening and closing stanzas setting the poem as a framed and completed vision apart. The opening lines — "This is the forest primeval. The murmuring pines and the hemlock" — lead on to a description more imagined than real of the Acadian homeland, but they have an evocative power that is once more brought into play at the close of the poem. "Still stands the forest primeval" are the opening words of the epilogue. Here is the poetic art of Wordsworth's rules complete: the recollection of emotion in tranquility. Longfellow has achieved the imposition of order upon human events. The troublings of human grief are now set in Eternity's perspective.

But any attempt to account for the success of *Evangeline* by dissection is very much like seeking the success of a Chopin nocturne in a single bar or phrase; murder indeed will have preceded dissection. The opening words of the poem have, by the very difficulty that they pose to translators, a ring of quality. Pamphile Le May, the first French-Canadian to embark upon the task, rendered "This is the forest primeval" as "C'est l'antique forêt".¹¹ Two 20th century translations, one published in France and one in the United States, both render the phrase as "Voici la forêt primitive".¹² The translation into French prose made by Louis Duprêt in the 1880s, which the French professor of literature Ernest Martin considered the best effort, has the phrase as "tu vois ici la forêt des vieux ages".¹³ However great the problems posed by the phrase for the translator, there is no doubt that Longfellow has sounded a note true enough to engage the reader's imagination, whether the forest imagined is that of Rousseau or of Emily Carr.

While the poem has some stanzas which seem no more than a travelogue in hexameters, the lines which describe the herding of the villagers to the sea-shore, the burying of Grand-Pré, the death of *Evangeline's* father and the scuffle of the embarkation move, with the eye of a hand-held camera, insistently from one image to the next. One has the impression of being there, and of being forced to

9 *Ibid.*

10 This magnificence was the inspiration for the engravings of F. Dicksee that illustrated the French translation made by Louis Duprêt, *Evangéline* (Paris, 1886).

11 Pamphile Le May, *Evangéline, traduction du poème Acadien de Longfellow* (Québec, 1865).

12 Suzanne Le Touquin Vinet, *Acadie* (Belle Isle en Mer, 1970); Maurice Trottier, *Poème de Henry Longfellow* (Lafayette and Manchester, New Hampshire, 1977).

13 *Evangéline* (Paris, 1886), p. 33. Dicksee's illustration to this line, in this edition, is that of a simple field bordered by forest; the field is overgrown and one can imagine this also as an illustration to Tolkien's *Hobbit*.

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witness suffering, caught involuntarily in this unforeseen event, that unimaginable moment: the children running to the shore with toys in their hands by the side of wagons piled high with household goods, the sudden flare of flame and smoke as the village catches fire, the face of *Evangeline's* father "Haggard and hollow and wan, and without either thought or emotion/ E'en as the face of a clock from which the hands have been taken".¹⁴ Great tragedy is told here through the contrast of the safe and familiar with the widening crisis. The clock, a link to a peaceful time, is the image to present the agony of a father's stroke. The moral universe of *Evangeline* is one where the forces are beyond the control of any human. Acts of war and acts of pestilence are tides of Fate aided by the very limitations of the human, and are the shapers of individual life. In *Evangeline* there are no great individual people but just poor scraps of humanity, of who knows what personal tastes and abilities, forced to act the Virtues and the Sins, Fidelity or Anger, because the moral belief of their time and the circumstances of their age give them no alternative. The poem is essentially a 19th century morality play: here walks sweet Constancy, her name is Woman, and here cruel War, the Soldier arguing "by the orders so given me", and here is Faith, the unquestioned piety of the aged priest serving the good God.

Whatever the precise literary standing accorded the poem today, the publication of *Evangeline* was undeniably a major literary event. One immediate result was the number of travel-cum-history books which began to appear using some reference to the Acadians or to *Évangéline* in their titles. The pattern of a book written by the New York wine merchant, F.S. Cozzens, published in 1859 and called *Acadia; or, a Month with the Bluenoses*, was repeated over and over again: part the immediate experiences of the author, part a recounting of the "legend" of *Evangeline*, and part general speculation on the matter of the Acadians, present and future. The acclaim given to the poem aroused an immediate interest in the country of the Acadians, wherever it might exactly be located.¹⁵

The interest of poetry-lovers and tourists was matched by the attention the poem attracted in more scholarly quarters. The events surrounding the deportation had been a matter for comment almost from the outset. Robert Rogers in his *Concise Account of North America*, published in London in 1765, mentioned that the Acadians had been utterly rooted out, due to their hostile conduct in previous years.¹⁶ A much fuller account of what happened was given by William Burck, in a work which apparently survives only in the French translation which was made almost simultaneously with its publication in English.¹⁷

14 Welsh, *The Works of Longfellow*, V, p. 121.

15 See also J.A. Grant, *Through Evangeline's Country* (Boston, 1894), and H.R. Casgrain, *Un Pèlerinage au pays d'Évangéline* (Quebec, 1888).

16 Robert Rogers, *Concise Account of North America* (London, 1765), p. 22.

17 William Burck, *Histoire des colonies européennes dans l'Amérique, en six parties* (Paris, n.d.). No copy of the English edition of this work is to be found in the British Museum, the Athenaeum,

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This account was the source of Abbé Raynal's knowledge of the Acadians¹⁸ and his work, *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (Paris, 1766), was a major source for Longfellow.¹⁹ In fact, many of the descriptive passages of *Evangeline* read as if they had been a direct translation and transmission of Raynal's words from prose to poetry, from French to English. The emphasis of the account given by Burck is above all political; the deportation is seen as the result of government decisions and the struggle for empires: he mentions the difficulties caused by the general lack of agreed limits to the colony and then goes on to say that at the beginning of the recent hostilities Nova Scotia had contained "un grand nombre de Français (quelques une le font monter à dix ou douze mille) que l'on traitoit comme un peuple neutre, au lieu qu'ils eussent du être sujets du Roi d'Angleterre"²⁰ Burck asserts that it was the neglect of the English, the lack of fortifications for protection of the Acadians against the Indians, the non-existence of British magistrates, that resulted in the British being forced by a necessity, "si tant est que c'en fut une, de prendre des mesures qui, bien que conformes à la politique, sont telles qu'un coeur humain et généreux ne les adopte jamais qu'à regret"²¹ Raynal elaborated considerably on this brief passage. This colleague of Diderot presented the Acadians as a simple, pastoral people, devout, content, hospitable, and almost without stain of original sin:

Cette précieuse écartoit jusqu'à des liaisons de galanterie que troublent si souvent la paix des familles. On ne vit jamais dans cette société, de commerce illicite entre des deux sexes. C'est que personne n'y languissoit dans le célibat. Dès qu'un jeune homme avoit atteint l'âge convenable au mariage, on lui bâtissoit une maison, on défrichoit, on ensememcoit des terres autour de sa demeure; on y mettoit les vivres dont il avoit besoins pour une année. Il y recevoit la campagne qu'il avoit choisie, et qui lui apportait en dot des troupeaux. Cette nouvelle famille croissoit et prosperoit, à l'exemple des autres. Toutes ensemble composoient en 1749, une population de dix-huit milles âmes.²²

For the Abbé the expulsion was the tragic ruin of a Golden Age, an event that

the Library of Congress or the Bibliothèque Nationale. Commentary on this work by Dr. Andrew Brown, "Papers Relating to the Acadian French", *Nova Scotia Historical Society, Collections*, II (1879-80), p. 150, provides evidence that the English edition had some circulation.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 129.

19 "The authorities I mostly relied on in writing *Evangeline* were the Abbé Raynal and Mr. Haliburton: the first for the pastoral simple life of the Acadians; the second for the history of their banishment". Quoted in H.E. Scudder, *Evangeline* (n.d. n.p.), p. 6.

20 Burck, *Histoire des colonies européennes*, p. 319.

21 *Ibid.*

22 Raynal, *Histoire philosophique et pratique*, VI, pp. 360-1.

was part and parcel of "les jalousies nationales, de cette cupidité des gouvernements qui avore les terres et les hommes".²³

Raynal's work gave Longfellow a stylized account of the deportation: it was based upon the common assumption of many French 18th century intellectuals that there existed somewhere a human community characterized by virtues, in particular those of charity and chastity. This conviction was most coherently expressed towards the close of the century by Rousseau, certain that there existed elsewhere a people nobler than the contemporary European. For Raynal, the Acadians were such a people. It is from the pages of his account that Longfellow mined the rough material which he shaped into his poetic vision of the general nature of Acadian community life. Raynal wrote that the Acadians were a people of material abundance such as would allow them to "exerciser à la générosité. On ne connoissoit pas la misère, réparés avant d'être sentis. Le bien s'operoit sans ostentation d'une part, sans humiliation de l'autre. C'étoit une société de frères, également prêts à donner ou à recevoir ce qu'ils croyoient commun à tous les hommes".²⁴ In *Evangeline* the reaction of Benedict Bellefontaine, the heroine's father, to the arrival of English ships in the harbour is, "Perhaps the harvests in England/ By untimely rains or untimelier heat have been blighted./ And from our bursting barns they would feed their cattle and children".²⁵ For both the 18th century French philosopher and the 19th century American poet, the Acadian community before the deportation had been a community of a vision simple, devout, charitable and apolitical.

Thomas Chandler Haliburton was Longfellow's other acknowledged reference, and it is from the Nova Scotian that the poet took inspiration for many lines. Haliburton's description of the deportation itself reads in part as follows: "The volumes of smoke which the half-expiring embers emitted, while they marked the site of the peasant's humble cottage, bore testimony to the extent of the work of destruction. For several successive evenings the cattle assembled round the smouldering ruins, as if in anxious expectation of the return of their masters: while all night long the faithful watch dogs of the Neutrals howled over the scene of desolation, and mourned alike the hand that had fed, and the house that had sheltered them".²⁶ For the poet "as the night descended/ the herds returned from their pastures;/ Sweet was the moist still air with the odor of milk from their udders;/ Lowing they waited, and long, at the well-known bars of the farmyard,/ Waited and looked in vain for the voice and the hand of the milkmaid".²⁷ In the poet's mind the burning village resulted in

23 *Ibid.*, p. 364.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 360.

25 Welsh, *The Works of Longfellow*, V, pp. 96-7.

26 T.C. Haliburton, *An Historical and Statistical Account of Nova Scotia* (Halifax, 1829), I, pp. 180-1.

27 Welsh, *The Works of Longfellow*, V, p. 120.

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“Columns of shining smoke” and “Flashes of flame” that were “Thrust through their folds and withdrawn, like the quavering hands of a martyr”.²⁸ Similarly, Longfellow picked up Haliburton’s references to animal life, and wrote, “anon the lowing of cattle/Came on the evening breeze, by the barking of dogs interrupted”²⁹

Longfellow acknowledged that he used Raynal as the source for his account of the simple pastoral life of the Acadians, and Haliburton for the history of their deportation, but it is much easier to trace the influence of the philosopher upon the poem than to discover that of the historian. This is not surprising, since Longfellow was not interested in writing the epic of a people but in telling a story about two lovers taken from a peaceful setting by events over which they had no control, who then lived out their lives divided but faithful. The philosopher’s account was short, brilliantly depicted, and provided material to set out such a tragedy of innocence. The historian’s work, on the other hand, was lengthy and complex, a detailed recounting of political ambitions, religious bigotries and the inter-play between national aims and colonial desires. For Raynal, the Acadians were a people visited unwarrantedly by a war begun elsewhere by people to whom they had no real link and with whom they had no deep quarrel. To Haliburton, the Acadians were an “unfortunate and deluded people”³⁰ and the deportation the inevitable result of a process begun with a treaty signed more than 40 years previously.³¹

For Longfellow the context of war and politics was only the background setting for his drama. The history of the deportation presented in *Evangeline* is without political complexity or social depth. There is no mention of the tangled pattern of the years leading up to 1755, when “Acadia or Nova Scotia” was a disputed frontier between English and French colonial empires and the Acadians were a border people. There is no suggestion of division within the Acadian communities, of the tensions produced by the existence of Louisbourg, or of the Acadians captured within Beauséjour. The political material which Longfellow does include merely adds to the larger portrait of the “patient, Acadian farmers”.³² The notary is represented as once having endured “suffering much in an old French fort as the friend of the English”.³³ The only explanation of the actions of the English is a short speech made by an officer to the assembled Acadians, a speech remarkable for its complete absence of political import: “You are convened this day”, he said, “by His Majesty’s orders./ Clement and kind has he been; but how you have answered his kindness,/ Let your own hearts reply! To

28 *Ibid.*, p. 123.

29 *Ibid.*

30 Haliburton, *An Historical and Statistical Account of Nova Scotia*, I, p. 195.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

32 Welsh, *The Works of Longfellow*, p. 117.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 109.

my natural make and my temper/ Painful the task is I do, which to you I know must be grievous/ Yet I must bow and obey, and deliver the will of our monarch;/ Namely, that all your lands, and dwellings, and cattle of all kinds,/ Forfeited be to the crown; and that you yourselves from this province/ Be transported to other lands. God grant you may dwell there/ Ever as faithful subjects, a happy and peaceable people!/ Prisoners now I declare you: for such is His Majesty's pleasure!"³⁴

Despite Longfellow's intentions, the historical truth of *Evangeline* soon became a matter of considerable controversy. At first, introductions to the poem merely referred to the historical context equably enough. Godefroid Kurth, for example, wrote in his introduction to the translation that he published in 1883: "Cette simple et touchante histoire n'est pas une complete fiction. Il y eu une Acadie francaise: il y a eu des malheurs comme ceux qu'a chantée le poète".³⁵ But by the middle of the 1880s, as B.C. Cuthbertson has written, "The literary debate became a public issue and Nova Scotians felt compelled to defend the removal". In his view the impetus for this came from "the publication in 1884 of Francis Parkman's *Montcalm and Wolfe*".³⁶ Yet while the writings of Parkman and other historians were undeniably an important part of the debate, the argument was neither purely academic nor just the question of the historical reputation of Nova Scotia. During these same years people identifying themselves as Acadians had held national conventions at Memramcook, New Brunswick in 1881, at Miscouche, Prince Edward Island in 1884, and at Pointe de l'Eglise, Nova Scotia, in 1890. It is in this context, that of the presence in Canada of a distinct Acadian population, that the debate concerning what happened in 1755 found its greatest impetus. It is also in this context that the argument concerning the historical accuracy of *Evangeline* should be placed. For however interesting the work is as an epic in hexameters, however intriguing it might be to comment upon Longfellow the romantic historian, the adoption and use of *Evangeline* by the Acadians as an acceptable embodiment of their own myths remains the most complex and the most crucial issue yet to be fully examined concerning the poem.

It is not possible to date without caveat the arrival of the poem among the

34 *Ibid.*

35 G. Kurth, *Évangéline, conte d'Acadie* (Liege, 1883), p. xxxi.

36 B.C. Cuthbertson: "Thomas Beamish Akins: British North America's Pioneer Archivist", *Acadiensis*, VII (Autumn 1977), p. 96. Given the number of Acadians living then in the province it would perhaps have been more accurate to say anglophone Nova Scotians. Forty years after Parkman one eminent Canadian, the Rev. Dr. H.J. Cody, then chairman of the Board of Governors at the University of Toronto, began a movement for the removal of *Evangeline* from Canadian schools, as it created "a wrong impression of British justice, chivalry and administration", cited by M.S. Spigelman, "The Acadian Renaissance and the Development of Acadian-Canadian Relations, 1864-1912, 'des freres trop longtemps séparés'", (Ph.D. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1975), p. 13.

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Acadians, but it gained wide currency sometime between 1864 and 1887. The first North American translation of *Evangeline* into French, by Pamphile Le May, was published in Quebec in 1865. It was immediately adopted for use in the classes of the Acadian college, St. Joseph's, Memramcook, which had been founded the previous year. Pascal Poirier, named a Senator in 1885 "comme représentant des Acadiens",³⁷ affirmed that while he was a student at St. Joseph's during the late 1860s "pendant deux ans j'ai porté sur moi le poème *Evangeline*, la sur mon coeur, et pendant mes promenades j'en récitais à haute voix des chantiers entiers".³⁸ When the first Acadian newspaper was founded in 1867, *Le Moniteur Acadien*, its early issues were distributed with a copy of the French Canadian translation of the poem and its editorials used the poem as a source of illustrations for messages concerning Acadian unity. The second major Acadian newspaper, which began life as a weekly on 23 November 1887, and which has continued to be a most important expression of Acadian opinion, was baptised *Evangeline*.

For some scholars the undoubted connection which developed between the poem and the struggle for the survival of the Acadian identity has almost mystical overtones. In the view of the French literary professor, Ernest Martin, writing in the 1930s, the influence of *Evangeline* on the Acadians meant "la réhabilitation morale de toute une race, l'espoir et la fierté revenue au coeur d'un million d'âmes".³⁹ Martin, whose ancestry was Acadian, had no doubt:

Tous les Acadiens, sans exception, voient dans ce poème, écrit dans une langue étrangère par un descendant de leurs anciens ennemis, le symbole de leur attachement collectif au souvenir de leurs aïeux injustement persécutés, à leurs coutumes propres, à leur religion, à leur conception de la vie, à tout ce qui les différencie des Anglo-Canadiens ou des Américains qui les entourent, à tout ce qui fait, en un mot, leur *nationalité*.⁴⁰

Writing some 20 years later, the French Canadian historian Robert Rumilly, was of much the same opinion:

En Acadie *Evangeline* se lit — se dévore — dans les paroisses. . . Des Acadiennes donnent le prénom d'Évangéline à leur fille, et personne ne semble observer que Lajeunesse est un nom canadien, pas acadien. *Evangeline* crée ou réveille une mystique acadienne. . . Les Acadiens adoptent, comme leur épopée nationale, l'oeuvre d'un étranger qui ne les a jamais vus, jamais approchés ailleurs que dans quelques archives. Ils

37 *Le Moniteur Acadien*, 5 mars 1885.

38 Quoted in Martin, *L'Évangéline de Longfellow*, p. 222.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 271.

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oublie d'ailleurs le poète. *Evangeline*. . . n'est pas une légende, et c'est autre chose qu'un symbole. C'est un personnage historique qui a vraiment vécu, qui a vraiment souffert et incarne l'Acadie. *Evangeline* devient l'héroïne nationale et non seulement la plus touchante, mais la plus vivantes des filles de sa race. Cette fortune sera refusée à Maria Chapdelaine.⁴¹

The assumption behind the interpretations made by both Martin and Rumilly of the impact of *Evangeline* on the Acadians is that somehow Longfellow's poem brought to them a missing element in their culture. Martin described it as "un souffle mystique", the pulsing of life itself which revitalised the Acadians and offered "surtout susciter chez les meilleurs la volonté fervente de 'relever la race'".⁴²

This estimation of the connection between the Acadians and *Evangeline* suggests that the poem was the most powerful cultural tool available to those constructing an Acadian identity in the late 19th century. It is certainly true that *Evangeline* had considerable influence at a time when the position of the Acadians, economically and socially, was at a low ebb. At mid-century their presence in the Maritimes, though considerable,⁴³ consisted of the population of scattered villages not clearly linked to one another. In no occupation did they constitute the majority. While they had to struggle for the improvement of their living conditions, the Acadians also sought to preserve their heritage of custom and language within an Anglophone milieu and to convince the wider world of their legitimate claims to a distinctive identity.

Their difficulties in this regard were considerable. For example, the review of Rameau de St. Père's work on the Acadians by the Montreal newspaper, *Le Pays*, in 1868, alleged that "on ne vit jamais écrivain se faire des illusions aussi enfantin, se tromper aussi naïvement que M. Rameau".⁴⁴ After all, the critic asked, what was this Acadian nationality that the historian announced he had discovered growing in New Brunswick? Surely, the critic wrote, one cannot grant nationality to a people unless they stand for something ("représente quelque chose"), and unless they have "une vie propre, un caractère distinctif. . . un ensemble d'idées, de moeurs, de faits politiques, d'histoire, de direction vers un but nettement défini et clair pour tout le monde". In every case, the writer decided the Acadians lacked the necessities. In perhaps the cruelest sentence of

41 R. Rumilly, *Histoire des Acadiens* (Montreal, 1955), II, p. 715. Of French parentage, Rumilly was born in Martinique and emigrated to Canada in 1928.

42 Martin, *L'Évangéline de Longfellow*, p. 218.

43 The 1871 census showed 44,907 Acadians in New Brunswick, 32,833 in Nova Scotia, and 10,012 in Prince Edward Island.

44 L. Thériault, "Les Acadiens vus par les libéraux Québécois (1868)", *Les Cahiers de la Société historique acadienne*, VI (Septembre 1975), pp. 150-3.

38 *Acadiensis*

all, the Acadians were considered as “quelques milliers de pêcheurs pauvres, ignorants disséminés sur la littoral d’une vaste colonie, voilà. . . ce que M. Rameau veut mettre en face de l’énergique, de l’entreprenante race anglo-saxonne”. There was no doubt in the critic’s mind: “Non”, he wrote, “quelque sympathie que nous ayons pour ce petit peuple, essaim parsemée sur les côtes sauvages du golfe, descendant des exilés de 1755, frère de laid du peuple canadien, nous ne pouvons pas cependant lui faire l’honneur de la croire une nationalité”.⁴⁵

This review puts more baldly and bluntly an attitude usually expressed with more tact by certain Québécois, both in the 19th century and today. That is the conviction that the Acadian identity is bound up inextricably with that of Quebec and that an Acadian identity separate from that of Quebec has not, does not and cannot exist. At the Acadian conventions of 1881, 1884 and 1890, strong pressure was exerted on the Acadians to accept Quebec symbols such as the feast day of Saint Jean-Baptiste and the fleur-de-lys flag. The arguments were long and bitter. In his edition of the papers and deliberations of these conventions, published in 1907, the Acadian lawyer F.-J. Robidoux summed up the Acadian position: “C’est la nécessité de s’armer pour l’existence nationale avec les armes qui convenaient le mieux au temperament de chacun, qui seule a déterminé chez les Canadiens, le choix de Saint Jean-Baptiste et, chez les Acadiens, celui de l’Assomption”. After pointing out that the French of France had too much delicacy to criticise the independence from France shown in the Quebec choice of symbols, he went on: “l’Acadien n’a d’autre histoire nationale que la sienne propre et celle de la France”.⁴⁶

Thus the adoption of *Evangeline* by the Acadians took place at the precise time they themselves were attempting to rally the dispersed and somewhat disparate communities of their kin that then existed in Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick. At a time when Acadian self-consciousness, built upon achievements gained in the field of education, was stimulated by the growth of nationalistic sentiment that was characteristic of late 19th century western society, *Evangeline* became known not only among the Acadians themselves but also among a very much wider audience. There was a fortuitous coincidence between the needs of a struggling minority and the work of a world-renowned poet.

But if the links between poem and people are obvious enough, there remain a number of extremely complex questions to be answered about the development of this relationship and about the community values of the Acadian people as a whole and the ideals expressed in the poem. For example, there is a considerable discrepancy between the image of Christianity expressed in *Evangeline* and the actual religious life lived by the Acadians in the 18th century. In his translation of the poem Le May interpreted the last lines before the epilogue to be an ac-

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁴⁶ F.-J. Robidoux, éd., *Conventions Nationales des Acadiens* (Shediac, 1907), p. ix.

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count of *Evangeline's* death. Longfellow pointed out that he had not intended this,⁴⁷ but the translator's implicit identification of *Evangeline* with approaching sainthood apparently made her death a more appropriate conclusion for the poem, at least for a particular tradition of 19th century Catholic thought. Although the vision of Christian belief in Longfellow's poem is much at variance with actual Acadian experience, the pervading religious motifs of the poem have found a home in Acadian historical consciousness. Undoubtedly the groundwork for this acceptance is to be found in the religious traditions of the priests who served the Acadians during the middle and late 19th century. Father Camille Lefebvre, who became director of St. Joseph's in 1864, may well have been the individual who brought the Acadians and Longfellow's poem together, and it is worth noting that Lefebvre was a man who believed the Acadians to be "un peuple de generaux martyrs",⁴⁸ those who had persevered with Christian virtue when other nations had faltered. The poem's emphasis on the holiness of the parish priest and the laudable obedience of *Evangeline* to clerical authority may have found a sympathetic echo in the religious vision of men like Lefebvre, who encouraged the study of the poem among the Acadians.

Another theme which requires close attention is the question of the significance of *Evangeline* beyond the ranks of the Acadian elite of the late 19th century. The culture of 19th century Acadians was primarily an oral culture, and while *Evangeline* may have served as an effective symbol of cultural revival (and indeed of the wider recognition and acceptance of Acadia) for an educated minority, we need to know a great deal more about how familiar or important *Evangeline* was to the majority of the Acadian people. This can only be established through careful research in the realm of Acadian popular culture, and this avenue of investigation already suggests further provocative issues. For instance, it is interesting to note that much 19th century folk culture in North America focuses on the theme of separated lovers, and the success of *Evangeline* among the Acadians may have owed more to the theme of fidelity, which Longfellow himself considered the key to the poem, than to the religious and political themes so important to leaders of the Acadian renaissance. Indeed, we may also want to explore a prior question: how important was Longfellow's poem in introducing the themes of *Evangeline* to the Acadians, or does the legend have a buried and perhaps irretrievable history in the Acadian popular culture of the first century after the deportation? These comments point to the need for work which will help to better establish the relationship between Acadian nationalism and Acadian folklore. In the context of the Acadian renaissance it may be that other cultural symbols also contributed to the definition of Acadian identity, and the acceptance of *Evangeline* was only one element in that

47 Pamphile Le May, trad., *Longfellow: Evangeline* (Quebec, 1870), Introduction, p. 12.

48 Father Camille Lefebvre to Pascal Poirier, 27 décembre 1872, cited by Spigelman, "The Acadian Renaissance", p. 8.

40 *Acadiensis*

process.⁴⁹

What has been examined, notably in the work of Jean-Paul Hautecoeur,⁵⁰ is the Acadian reliance since the 1860s upon a particular interpretation of history for much of their sense of identity, an interpretation mostly centred upon the deportation. That approach has a long history. Speaking at the first Acadian national convention in 1881, Poirier described the Acadian people as the sons of the martyrs of 1755.⁵¹ Similarly, Hautecoeur has quoted Adélarde Savoie in 1954 underlining the deportation as something much more than a collective memory: "Le Grand Dérangement a été l'événement capital de l'histoire acadienne, un événement si radical et si complet qu'il a bouleversé non seulement l'existence matérielle des Acadiens, mais les a marqués au tréfonds de leur âme d'une empreinte que les siècles n'ont pas effacée. Sans la Déportation, les Acadiens ne seraient pas ne pourraient pas être ce qu'ils sont aujourd'hui".⁵² With considerable scholarship and elegance Hautecoeur has summarized what he has called the "Mythique Acadie", the image of their past developed among Acadians during the late 19th and early 20th century.⁵³ It is rooted, he has shown, in a belief in the first days of the Acadian community as a time of an earthly Paradise, as the creation of a harmonious community dominated by a primitive but vital Christianity. This is the community that was wantonly destroyed by the act of 1755, sending exiles from Eden in an event variously called "le Grand Drame, le Grand Dérangement, la Tourmente, la Grande Tragédie, le Démembrement, l'Expulsion, la Dispersion, La Déportation".⁵⁴ The final act that Hautecoeur has described is the resurrection of the Acadians due to the blessings of Providence, a renaissance brought about above all by the work of the priests among the returning exiles and in the isolated communities. For Hautecoeur, there is no doubt that this vision of the past was assiduously cultivated by the Acadians themselves and he has suggested that there was something in such a vision for those who have sought to establish it of the "divine et belle comme Evangéline, courageuse et forte comme Gabriel".⁵⁵

While Hautecoeur has demonstrated the importance of a very simple conception of their past current among the Acadians in the late 19th and early 20th cen-

49 For the ideas in this paragraph I am indebted to Professor Gerald Pocius, Department of Folklore, Memorial University, who has generously allowed me to draw on the commentary he presented when the original version of this article was delivered at the Atlantic Canada Studies Conference in Halifax in 1980. For another folklorist's comments on "évangélinisme", see Antonine Maillet, *Rabelais et les traditions populaires en Acadie* (Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1971), pp. 13-14.

50 *L'Acadie du discours: pour une sociologie de la culture acadienne* (Quebec, 1975), p. 119.

51 Robidoux, *Conventions Nationales*, pp. 87-91.

52 Hautecoeur, *L'Acadie du discours*, p. 118.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 68 et seq.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 77.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

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ture, a conception which was a most important part of the Acadian sense of identity, it is a conception that is virtually the same as that presented by Longfellow in *Evangeline*. But it would be unfair to conclude by entering an indictment against Longfellow, who saw the poem as a monument to the fidelity of women and not as an animating myth for 19th century Acadian nationalism. The poem was about the opening of his own "magic casements on faery lands forlorn". With its rhythmic innovations, Longfellow's epic was addressed, first and foremost, to the reading public of the English-speaking world. The fate of *Evangeline* as a chosen embodiment of Acadian historical sentiment was never foreseen by its author.