SOCIETY AND IMPRINTS: THE LOWER-CANADIAN CASE (1801-1840)

Some individuals, while expertly driving their car, also understand and appreciate its mechanics, its workmanship, its beauty, and its relative position in the automotive world. Their attitude does not necessarily stem from a *connaisseur's* idiosyncrasy. It encompasses such substantial problems as the technical and generally the economic considerations that underlie the whole phenomenon called the automobile. Physical properties and use, vehicle and content are fused, as they should be. Others use and smash cars. They evince little interest in anything else. An analogy springs to mind in relation to imprints and social scientists. Most historians are geared to research in manuscripts, often very singular and atypical documents. They sometimes even revere them. With the exception of newspapers, historians have a tendency to downgrade imprints or to utilize them as a source like the others, whereas they are in fact quite a different technical and intellectual, hence social, means of communication, from private correspondence or a personal journal. By limiting themselves too often to the contents of imprints in a narrow sense, historians thus neglect the important relationship between the physical existence of the imprint (the technical and financial conditions of its existence and diffusion), its content and its social impact. Not only are imprints historical artifacts in themselves, related to the history of capital, tools and authorship, but by their content, they illuminate the ideologies of a given period; by their distribution in society, they illustrate the channels of communication and social history.

The richness of such a source explains why, seven years ago, John Hare and I embarked on this long-term project of identifying, locating and summarizing as exhaustively as possible all imprints published in Lower Canada between 1801 and 1840. We thus hoped to complement for the period after 1800 the tremendous achievement of Marie Tremaine, who had covered the years 1750-1800, although for all the colonies that were to be comprised in the future Canada. A check list, although of some use, could not fulfil our purpose. We aimed at providing a complete description of the imprints actually found, with notes on the paper and sometimes on the techniques used, the price, the quantity printed, in short, on the different material aspects of this vehicle. How else could one assess the infrastructure required for producing such imprints, or their use, or their influence? As many locations as possible for each imprint appeared also to be necessary. Finally, the content had to be summarized.

The thematic analysis, in particular, was an essential part of the project, not a kind of extra information. It was the best way to guide historians in their research. Titles in themselves often mean little or are misleading. They may cite some major theme(s). They rarely indicate the numerous and intertwined secondary themes that, like threads, constitute the complete tapestry of a social or intellectual context, embracing particular trends that a historian wants to explore. No one can read every single item. It is much easier to survey a series of fairly detailed analyses, to pinpoint particular imprints for further investigation,

and, in the case of a historian concerned with the more general evolution, to gather most of the elements from a well-documented analytical bibliography. Such bibliographies play the role, in the field of imprints, that the annual reports from the Public Archives of Canada or the Archives de la Province de Québec used to play in the late nineteenth and in the early twentieth century; these used to publish substantial summaries (and even whole texts) of their main collections of manuscripts, thus rendering invaluable service to generations of historians. Analytical bibliographies are maps that guide the researcher in the maze of Canadian imprints.

Historians are turning more and more to the systematic scrutiny of imprints. These, indeed, shed priceless light on a society at a given point in time or on its evolution through numerous economic, social, political and ideological changes. First, they are a reflection of the interests, views, goals and ideologies of certain social classes: of the literate groups, usually the social and political élite, who support artists, writers, thinkers, and propagandists. In the Canadian case, most imprints emanate from the aristocratic class (bureaucrats, officers and seigneurs, both British and French); the merchants, nearly all British; the professionals, nearly all French-Canadian; the clergy (not a social class in its own right, but a body largely associated with an oligarchy of government; and a few lesser sub-groups. This simplified delineation already suggests certain Lower-Canadian characteristics: for example, the unnatural conflict – from a social point of view – between the merchants, on the one hand, and the professionals on the other, instead of their alliance in a *bourgeois* movement against the aristocracy. Here, ethnic duality derails the social struggle and prevents it from evolving in the usual pattern. Intellectual history is still in its infancy, as far as Lower Canada is concerned. We are forced to assume too much about the ideology conveyed by the imprints, about their circulation and penetration into the lower layers of society, about their social and political impact, their relationship with more strictly literary and artistic imprints. By comparison, the latter have been examined much earlier.

Imprints inevitably mirror also the problems, socio-economic interests, ideologies and perceptions that permeate the life of the working classes and of the farmers. Since they are the tools of the literate part of society, mostly of the upper classes, their reflection is distorted. But like a prism or a lens, they deform reality in a usually specific and stable fashion and may thus permit the reconstruction of the life and aspirations of the lower classes. No doubt, we are faced with the élite's view of its "inferiors". But in a situation of quasi-democracy on the political level, there was a feedback from the popular classes in this process of inter-reaction between political leaders and their supporters. The message travelled in both directions. Otherwise, it would not sell.

Finally, the aggregate of imprints in general categories, and even in smaller ones, outlines the areas of interest and activity of a given society at a specific period. They are like slides "freezing" the landscape, like crystallized X-rays of intellectualized representations of the problems, developments, ideas, conflicts, and achievements of that society in given slices of time and space. Thus the accumulation of "stills" retraces in fact the moments of change and shifts in

emphasis, interests and activities. In the Lower-Canadian case, for example, the enormous economic and social changes of the late 1800s seemingly delay their impact till the 1810s, while the war of 1812 dampens political and ethnic conflicts. From 1801 to 1810, imprints related, by order of importance, to "political" questions (including constitutional, ethnic and related social conflicts) number 140; to religion, 40; to education, 22; and finally to social and economic matters, 5. From 1811 to 1820, a dramatic shift occurs that represents much more than numbers and must be related to fundamental changes in the society itself. While religion remains strong, with 80 imprints, social and economic matters rise to the fore (62), political concerns tumble down to 40, and education grows to 25. Even such a crude overview reveals large patterns which only detailed analysis can explain.

Imprints are more than rarities that odd collectors gather on protected shelves. In their time, they were the tools of communication, which were in turn extended by a variety of other channels, including a sophisticated word-of-mouth system of inputs and outputs. Today, for us, they are X-rays, cameras recording a distorted, but a systematically distorted, view of society in a given time and place through the lens of social class and party interests. And even in consolidated form, prior to serious analysis, they may constitute a technique for taking a society's pulse, in the same way as prices and exports are used to detect and measure economic trends as they shift through time. And, of course, singly or in bulk, they have remained an invaluable source for literary and intellectual history.

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