

JOHN LEPAGE

William Henry Drummond's *Habitants* and the Quebec of My Youth

I WAS BROWSING AMONG THE mildewed fare at Voltaire and Rousseau, purveyors of fine second-hand books, in Glasgow some years ago when I came across a rarity not likely to be appreciated by Scottish readers: *The Habitant, And Other French-Canadian Poems*, by William Henry Drummond, published by G.B. Putnam's Sons, New York and London, 1897. Drummond (1854–1907) was an Irish immigrant to Canada, who received an MD from Bishop's College in 1883 and practised medicine in Montreal and the Eastern Townships. He was made a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1899 and received honorary degrees from the University of Toronto and Bishop's College. *The Habitant* was the first of five books of verse produced by Drummond, including *Phil-o-Rum's Canoe* (1898), *Johnnie Courteau* (1901), *The Voyageur* (1905), and *The Great Fight* (1908). The ballad was in fashion at the time, and Drummond wrote ballads in heavily accented dialect English, mingled with colloquial French, on the character of rural life in Quebec.

As I had not heard mention of Drummond in twenty-five years or more, the volume reached out to me like a fond remembrance of things past. In fact, it was a reminiscence of my childhood, and my lips curled into a parody of Jean Chrétien from a time of my life before I had heard of Jean Chrétien, as I reverently intoned, "On wan dark night on Lac St. Pierre, / De win' she blow, blow, blow." There was hardly a moment of hesitation on my part, and not a flicker of shame. On the contrary, I wondered innocently what had become of this friend of my youth. I seized the volume, thinking nothing of the asking price of £3.50—it never occurred to me to talk the unknowing seller down.

The Habitant brought me back to my childhood in rural Quebec, and it made me yet again aware of an absence that I have felt in different ways for many years. I have always regarded myself as a "Quebecker," not

to say (pretentiously) a “Québécois,” for when I left Quebec in the 1970s to study in Britain and to teach, first in Nova Scotia then in British Columbia, it was with a fierce division of loyalties to Quebec and to Canada. I’m sure it would not be the same were I leaving Quebec today: “Québécois” would serve naturally for my identification with that distinct society.

When I cast my mind back to the things that defined the Quebecness of my childhood, it is full of trite images often mythologized (ironically) by Canadian culture as a whole: Roch Carrier’s *The Hockey Sweater*, maple syrup and the *cabane à sucre*, *tortière* and the *veillon* after Midnight Mass at Christmas; the garishly painted tin roofs, the mortar-and-stone houses, the clustered villages radiating from the parish churches, and the narrow fields; the roadside crosses about which I had once wanted to write a travel book. Then, of course, there were the commonalities with the rest of Canada—hockey, snow and ice, skating on frozen ponds and lakes in the winter, short, hot, mosquito-bitten summers, maple and birch forests with limpid streams and lakes where one burnt the leeches off one’s shins with cigarette butts.

I cannot do justice in my reveries to the Quebecness of Quebec in the way that my rediscovery of William Henry Drummond did. For it revived a quaint something that I quickly realized was not supposed to be revived—and I suddenly felt the shame and the humiliation, and, at the same time, I realized what had happened to the friend of my youth. He had been cleared out of the past like old photo albums out of the basement. The volume that I held in my hands was a fetish of imperialism buried in the earth it had once worked, an *habitant* ploughshare turned into a sword of repression, and by holding the volume I was accessory after the fact—one hundred years after the fact.¹

I leafed through the book. It was a beautifully turned-out edition. Mine was the thirty-second impression of an obviously popular work and it featured, as well as a series of evocative photogravure illustrations by Frederick Simpson Coburn, an introduction in French by “the French-Canadian

¹ Although Drummond has little prominence today, there are still remnants of enthusiasm, and a handful of the best-known poems are readily available on the Internet. The one recent biography is J.B. Lyons’ *William Henry Drummond: Poet in Patois* (Markham, ON: Associated Medical Services and Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1994). More to the point, C.J. Taylor writes in the *Canadian Encyclopedia*, “His first book of poetry, *The Habitant* (1897), was extremely successful, establishing for him a reputation as a writer of dialect verse that has faded since his death.”

Poet-Laureate,” Louis Fréchette, a friend of the author.² The book had found praise in important quarters: “Unconventional, captivating,” wrote the *New York Tribune*; “Plenty of true humor here,” wrote *The New York Sun*; “Fresh and racy in flavor and deftly rhymed,” wrote the *Chicago Dial*; and “There is nothing to equal it in fun-making,” wrote the *Boston Globe*. This is the hype of a former era, and today it would smack of disingenuousness: “Plenty of true humor here” might be caustically sarcastic, “Deftly rhymed” the praise of a poetaster, and “Fun-making” the ironic complement to both.

Of another work by Drummond, *The Voyageur, And Other Poems*, the *Outlook* observed: “Dr. Drummond . . . has interpreted for us the simple life of the Canadian folk . . . One is convinced that the author saw the places that he describes, laughed with his characters, mourned with them, but above all, that he loved them and took a virile joy in their lives and in making them his companions.” It is on the whole more difficult to find ambiguity in these remarks, unless of course we set Drummond’s paternal relationship with the French Canadian in the context of the last quarter-century. Even so, Drummond was a medical doctor, and paternal relationships must have come easy. Nor must we forget that “the simple life of the Canadian folk” is the patronizing sentiment of American journalism rather than British or immigrant Irish (of all things!) or Anglophone Canadian imperialism. Any civilized European, let alone nineteenth-century American aspirants to civilization, might have viewed French Canada in the same light.³

From the point of view of the present, *The Habitant* is an account of a people such as, it seems now, never existed, especially not in Quebec. The *habitant*, the parody of the submissive, ignorant, unworldly, inarticulate frontier farmer, who was nevertheless crammed with human decency and unlearned folk wisdom, can no longer exist because its subject has been removed from the history books. In Quebec especially, even to recall this nonexistent phenomenon is to bring shame on the “Québécois,” and that is why so many people in Quebec found Jean Chrétien personally offensive. He was too close to the *habitant*. He was too much the Anglophones’ parodic image of the French Canadian. He did not radiate the quality of the modern “Québécois.” Inside Quebec, to some, *The Habitant* is a grating

² The tag may have been a publisher’s error in later editions of the work, a slip ironically returning Fréchette’s favour in writing the introduction, for, as Gerald Noonan points out in “Drummond—The Legend & the Legacy,” *Canadian Literature* 90 (Fall 1981): 180, Drummond’s obituary in the *Montreal Star* grossly labeled him “Poet Laureate of French Canadians.”

³ For some examples, see Noonan, esp. 180–81.

reminder of the theatre of stereotypes, a popular brand of pea and other soups. Outside Quebec, the *habitant* is a menacing image, a symptom of racial hatred frowned upon in correct circles. Where the “Québécois” are disliked, above all where I live in British Columbia, they are no longer looked upon as social simpletons—“white niggers” (usually manifested in linguistic difference—Rochester’s “Yas, boss . . . , yas, Mistah Benny” might as well have been the words of Drummond’s fictional narrator of “Le Vieux Temps”: “Yass—yass I say’ mebbe you t’ink I’m wan beeg loup garou . . .”). They are seen as complex villains, abusers of Anglophone innocence.⁴

Yet Chrétien was a much more accurate portrait of the human face of the rural Quebec I left in the 1970s than Trudeau (with his quasi-European urbanity) or Lévesque (with his mannered, street-wise, no-nonsense English—in part a self-conscious anti-French-Canadian affectation) or Parizeau (with his witty Oxford overbite), or even Bouchard (with his calculated lugubriousness of speech). And, of course, the memory of this cast of characters has been all but swept aside in the fierce pragmatism of the last decade, whose new actors define the fabric of an increasingly complex if not pluralistic society. Non-reactions against reactions against reactions abound. Drummond’s patois evocation of a simpler world so much at odds with the present day has affinities with the idiom of Joel Chandler Harris’ Uncle Remus stories in the United States. Harris was acutely (perhaps naively) mindful of the dignity of his stereotypes. His stories were popular a hundred years ago but have divided critics and readers alike, on similar grounds, for more than half a century. Like Harris, but more so, at the centenary of his death William Henry Drummond is missing, and presumed dead. Indeed, he recalls for me many of the missing or obscured qualities of Quebecness in the present-day Quebec.

Louis Fréchette’s introduction evokes the image of Quebec’s parochial past. It begins with a note of insecurity, the familiar Canadian practice of looking south of the border for the stamp of cultural legitimacy: “The great American poet Longfellow had the pleasing benevolence to call me *The pathfinder of a new land of song*.” This is an odd sort of praise for Longfellow to register, and for Fréchette to recall, for the new land of song was arguably older than the one whose trails Longfellow blazed. Fréchette uses Longfellow’s confirmation of Fréchette’s legitimacy in turn to confirm Drummond’s legitimacy: “for if ever anyone in this country has merited the title *pathfinder of a new land of song*, it’s assuredly he.” He compares

⁴ See L.B. Thompson, “The Shelving of a People’s Poet: The Case of William Henry Drummond,” *Journal of American Culture* 2 (1980): 682–89.

Drummond's activity in verse to the inimitable village stories of George Sand: "She gives them a refined spirit even in their naïve simplicity and cordial heartiness. Altogether, she fashions natures, temperaments, something of the typical, at the same time balanced of hue and shape."⁵ But Fréchette gives Drummond still greater credit:

The task undertaken by Mr. Drummond presented a much more difficult challenge. Here, in truth, the poet was in the right setting, placed squarely before his subject. In managing the effects of light and shadow, he was familiar enough with his actors to show them to advantage. Naturally, he was enough of an artist not to neglect whatever pose would strike the picturesque. Above all, he well understood the type to reproduce, its habits, passions, sentiments, inclinations, its superstitions and weaknesses. But how, without falling into the charge of buffoonery, does one make one's characters speak a foreign language, necessarily incorrect in the mouths of those who learn by ear, who cannot read even in their own language?... In his study of the French Canadian, Mr. Drummond has found a way of avoiding a trap that would have seemed inevitable for all others. He has remained true without lapsing into vulgarity, and sharp without becoming grotesque. (vii–viii)⁶

Fréchette's terms of praise (on the purple side to modern sensibilities) are more closely linked to *belle lettristic* than to social or political values. He detects in Drummond's verse subtle command of nuance, for example, and elements of the literary picturesque. But there is the hint of awareness of the danger of parodic verse to lapse into non-literary—social and political—vulgarity. It took an unusual person to manage that tightrope even in the nineteenth century. Now, of course, that kind of circus is out of fashion.



I don't wish to be misunderstood. Although I count William Henry Drummond as an influence on my childhood, I'm not sure I had ever read a complete poem by Drummond until I leafed through the mouldy pages of *The Habitant*. Nor do I remember any copies of his works in my parents' library. But my father trotted out verses of Drummond as if he had commit-

⁵ This and the following quotation by Fréchette are given in my translation.

⁶ Noonan touches upon the irony of the unlettered *habitant* here referred to by Fréchette: "the habitant—'unable to read his own language,' as Fréchette's Introduction says, 'helplessly and hopelessly incorrect' in English as the *Globe* said—nonetheless had learned to be understood by his Anglo companions, whereas the Anglo incompetence was total" (182).

ted the collected works to memory, and as I read the poems now, individual lines and phrases stand out as if *I* had committed them to memory. Some of the French phrases are part of the Quebec idiom I recall lapsing even when I lived in Quebec. An old man I worked with in the 1970s, Jean-Baptiste Plante, a grizzled man in his sixties, expressed himself in certain stock phrases that we all recognized as belonging to the older generations: “*Calvere! il-y-a ains qu’un qui travail, pi c’est moë,*” he repeated tirelessly to the amusement of some and the tedium of others. Occasionally, in reading Drummond’s brief swatches of French I am brought to mind of Baptiste. Other idioms are the stuff of pure, living, rural “Québécois.”

What I remember now, as I read Drummond, is a combination of my father’s memories of Drummond, and my own of the old Quebec. But I am also aware of something very distressing about Drummond’s *The Habitant*. It is that the poems are often not very “deftly rhymed” at all, but they are in their own way very good. Moreover, they are much less patronizing than I anticipated, and, as such, they are shockingly inoffensive. They are, rather, an historical artefact now buried for the most prejudicial of reasons in the vaults of the past. Literary critics remain as uncomfortable as ever with Drummond, for purely sympathetic reasons, and they all too readily fashion pretexts for according the poetry the least attention. One critic has recently argued for the merit of Drummond as a seminal figure in the freeing of vernacular speech from received formal constraints. This may be true, but it is also faint praise for a poet much better than critics would ever have him be today.⁷



Let me devote a few paragraphs to the image of the French Canadian created in *The Habitant*. Perhaps the poetry will allow us to draw certain conclusions.

De place I get born, me, is up on de reever
Near foot of de rapide dat’s call Cheval Blanc
Beeg mountain behin’ it, so high you can’t climb it
An’ whole place she’s mebbe two honder arpent.

So begins “De Habitant,” the opening ballad in the book. It is the narrator’s account of the vicissitudes of the simple life of the country farmer whose

⁷ Paul Matthew St. Pierre, “*Atteindre la centaine: William Henry Drummond,*” *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 176.8 (April 2007): 1135–36.

father and grandfather and great grandfather were all *habitant* farmers. The poem is marked by familiar images of the four seasons in rotation, the felicitous and unchanging routines of farming, and also by largely benign poverty. In contrast to the image of the *habitant* is the recurrent one of the *voyageur*, a rough equivalent to the modern entrepreneur, the adventurer who is not tied to a particular place, and whose life is governed by instability and the pursuit of riches:

Dat's very nice tam for wake up on de morning
 An' lissen de rossignol sing ev'ry place,
 Feel sout' win' a'blowin' see clover a-growin'
 An' all de worl' laughin' itself on de face.

Mos' ev'ry day raf' it is pass on de rapide
 De voyageurs singin' some ole chanson
 'Bout girl down de reever—too bad dey mus' leave her,
 But comin' back soon' wit' beacoup d'argent.

The verse is about typical of the interlinguistic cleverness of Drummond, the mixture of broken English and idiomatic French-Canadian French. The general laboriousness of the ballad structure and the rhyme suggest the humour of the work. So, the internal rhyme between “reever” and “leave her” is meant to appeal to a traditional taste for the wit of polysyllable rhyme. This same disposition has a self-consciously English quality in the internal rhyme between “a-blowin’” and “a-growin’.” The effect briefly undermines the characterization of the speaker. Drummond is not simply characterizing the *habitant*; he is writing English verse. At times the music of the verse is forced, and it can be hard to find Drummond's register. These are the natural weaknesses of the comic balladeer who, however briefly, affects “poesy,” like Robert Service's overcooked Yukon boot, “The lonely mountains flare forlorn.” There are surprisingly few of such literary lapses in Drummond, most of them concentrated in one or two “straight” poems in the anthology, notably “Memories,” a sentimental piece strategically placed, as Drummond's *habitant* characters would say, “flamme en milieu” of the work.

The interplay between the ideas of the two ballad stanzas quoted above suggests a concern on the whole characteristic of Drummond's work. The stability of the life of the *habitant* is contrasted with the instability of the voyageurs. It becomes the central theme of the poem. By the poem's end, the prosaic French-Canadian expression “beaucoup d'argent” is repeated and its prosaic demands on our imagination are replaced by the stability of the line, repeated from the opening, “On farm by de rapide dat's call Cheval Blanc”:

But I tole you—dat's true—I don't go on de city
 If you geev de fine house an' beacoup d'argent—
 I rader be stay me, an' spen' de las' day me
 On farm by de rapide dat's call Cheval Blanc.

Thus, right off the bat Drummond develops a type he will dwell on throughout the book, the secure, anti-entrepreneurial *habitant*, conscious of the land and the past, and closely tied to both.

But *The Habitant* is not simply a celebration of rural life. It is a treatise on parochialism and the fear of displacement, and that can occur even to city folk. In one of Drummond's most famous poems, "The Wreck of the 'Julie Plante'," a heavy storm on Lac St. Pierre frightens the crew of the "Julie Plante"—"An' de crew of de wood scow 'Julie Plante' / Got scar't an' run below"—despite the fact that the boat is a mere "Wan arpent from de shore." The cook on the vessel, Rosie, comes from Montreal, where she had worked on the lumber barges of the Lachine Canal. She quickly realizes that her urban experience has not equipped her for a storm on Lac St. Pierre. The poem at once takes a dark—but not very dark—comic turn:

De night was dark lak' wan black cat,
 De wave run high an' fas',
 W'en de captinne tak' de Rosie girl
 An' tie her to the mas'.
 Den he also tak' de life preserve,
 An' jomp off on de lak',
 An' say, "Good-bye, ma Rosie dear,
 I go drown for your sak'."

An absurd parody of the "Wreck of the Hesperus," the poem kills off both Rosie and the captain, at the same time suggesting parochial superstition in the image of the black cat. Here, also, Drummond reveals an unerring ear for the distorted sounds of French-dialect English, best evidenced by the heavily accented phrase "life preserve." The comic moral of the story affirms Drummond's theme of the *habitant* as the parochial figure, in the country or the city, who prefers the safe to the dangerous course of action:

Now all good wood scow sailor man
 Tak' warning by dat storm
 An' go an' marry some nice French girl
 An' leev on wan beeg farm.
 De win' can blow lak' hurricane
 An' s'pose she blow some more,

You can't get drown on Lac St. Pierre
 So long you stay on shore.

What is it to stay on the shore? It is to marry a French girl, live on the farm and insulate oneself culturally from the *étrange*—in particular, the Anglophone outsider. Here, Drummond seizes not only on a fixture of the French-Canadian literary heritage, the underlying theme of *Menaud, maître-draveur* and other novels mythologizing the French Canadian, but also on the xenophobia of the new Quebec. The characterization is all too true; if it is offensive it is because it is observed by a percipient Anglophone outsider.

Drummond measures the relationship between the French Canadians, who in his time knew themselves as *Canadiens* (and outsiders as *les anglais*), and others in frequent asides, observing if not blithe indifference at least rueful amusement with respect to power. Thus, in “Le Vieux Temps,” the proverbial largeness of French-Canadian families is remarked in contrast to the infertile English:

De English peep dat only got wan familee small size
 Mus' be feel glad dat tam dere is no honder acre prize
 For fader of twelve chil'ren—dey know dat mus' be so,
 De Canayens would boss Kebeck—mebbe Ontario.

The humour of the occasion is underscored by the dreadful last rhyme. There is greater subtlety, however, in the reference to the “honder acre prize,” for elsewhere Drummond persistently refers to the traditional French land measure, the *arpent*, except in this dig at the measures of power. The narrator of this particular poem is nobody's fool, and he is not above winking at his Anglophone audience (and this, I think, is what is really at stake in Drummond's verse). But he does not covet the power to which he slyly alludes. The story he tells is about his happy and secure *habitant* existence in the company of his beloved Elmire, and about the promise of one final adventure, the one time in his life when he will take upon himself the character of the voyageur, this time led securely by “le Bon Dieu”:

Wall? we leev happy on de farm for nearly fifty year,
 Till wan day on de summer tam—she die—ma belle Elmire
 I feel so lonesome lef' behin'—I tink't was bes' mebbe—
 Dat w'en le Bon Dieu tak' ma famme—he should not forget me.

But dat is hees biz-ness ma frien'—I know dat's all right dere
 I'll wait till he call “Poleon” den I will be prepare—
 An' w'en he fin' me ready, for mak' de longue voyage
 He guide me r'roo de wood hesef upon ma las' portage.

The most political of the poems is “De Papineau Gun.” The political events date back to the 1837 Rebellion, and so the poem is an opportunity for some wry commentary on the power of the *habitant*, which is the power more of Bartleby-like passive resistance than of active rebellion. While many die in the battle lavishly described by Drummond, the narrator’s father exhibits the *habitant*’s more typical instinct for survival:

Ma fader shoot so long he can
 An’ den he’s load hees gun some more,
 Jomp on de ice behin’ de church
 An’ pass heem on de ’noder shore.

Wall! he reach home fore very long
 An’ keep perdu for many day,
 Till ev’ry t’ing she come tranquille,
 An’ sojer man all gone away.

Perhaps it is a stroke of genius, or perhaps it is my fancy, but there seems to be additional weight in the fact that the narrator’s father uses the church to hide his escape from the spectre of violence, for the Church was the foremost advocate of the *habitant*’s passive way of life. The poem concludes with a statement of the *habitant*’s stubborn passivity looking forward with prescience to Canada’s internecine battles over conscription in the twentieth century:

An’ offer dat we get our right,
 De Canayens don’t fight no more,
 Ma fader’s never shoot dat gun,
 But place her up above de door.

There are references to the imperial theme throughout *The Habitant*, mainly in the comic image of Queen Victoria. 1897 was Victoria’s Jubilee year, and no doubt Drummond sought to cash in on the hoopla. Perhaps these references had the savour of Drummond’s Irish upbringing. They reveal the pretensions of French Canadians who seek to be other than they are from the point of view of French Canadians who have their feet squarely on the ground. Thus, when a small-town girl from Chambly goes to London to pursue the life of a *chanteuse*, she becomes “Madam Albanee,” who, ridiculously, has brought fame to the *habitants* and taught Victoria how to sing. But images of Queen Victoria also illustrate the impact of the outsider on the French-Canadian way of life in more devastating ways, changing *arpents* into acres, *piastres* into dolors, and generally reducing French Canadians

into “white niggers.”⁸ One of the most touching instances of this comes in Drummond’s account of the unrecalcitrant characteristics assumed by the voyageur when sent abroad on an imperial expedition. “Maxime Labelle, A Canadian Voyageur’s Account of the Nile Expedition,” reveals the stolid ignorance of the French Canadian when it comes to imperial policy:

Victoriaw: she have beeg war, E-gyp’s de nam’ de place—
 An’ neeger peep dat’s leev’im dere, got very black de face,
 An’ so she’s write Joseph Mercier, he’s stop on Trois Rivieres—
 “Please come right off, an’ bring wit’ you t’ree honder voyageurs.

“I got de plaintee sojer, me, beeg feller six foot tall—
 Dat’s Englishman, an’ Scotch also, don’t wear no pant at all;
 Of course, de Irishman’s de bes’, raise all de row he can,
 But nobody can pull batteau lak good Canadian man.

“I geev you steady job for sure, an’ w’en you get’im t’roo
 I bring you back on Canadaw, don’t cos’ de man un sou,
 Dat’s fir’s-class steamboat all de way Kebeck an’ Leeverpool,
 An’ if you don’t be satisfy, you mus’ be beeg, beeg fool.”⁹

No big fools, the *voyageurs* commit themselves to two-dollars-a-day labour. In the end, while they paddle heartily, exotically negotiating the cataracts of the Nile, they see no military action, and the narrator draws this *habitant* conclusion:

⁸ Noonan reveals ways in which Drummond’s “Jubilee Ode” was subject to varying interpretations (181). He also points out the degree to which Drummond’s work was used to document a primitive society—a reading of seven new poems by Drummond before the Folklore Club of Montreal was accompanied by a talk “on superstitions of the Negro race” (180). In spite of himself, Drummond may have contributed to the theme of “negritude” used by subsequent generations of French Canadians to define their colonial servitude; for a treatment of this subject, see Max Dorsinville, “*La négritude et la littérature québécoise*,” *Canadian Literature* 42 (Fall 1969): 26–36.

⁹ Compare William Wye Smith’s amusing poem, “The Canadians on the Nile,” which begins, “O, the East is but the West, with the sun a little hotter; / And the pine becomes a palm, by the dark Egyptian water: / And the Nile’s like many a stream we know, that fills its brimming cup,—well / We’ll think it is the Ottawa, as we track the batteaux up! / Pull, pull, pull! as we track the batteaux up! / It’s easy shooting homeward, when we’re at the top . . .” (*Canadian Poems and Lays: Selections of Native Verse, Reflecting the Seasons, Legends, and Life of the Dominion*, ed. William Douw Lighthall [London, W. Scott, 1893] 9).

But w'ere's de war? I can't mak' out, don't see no fight at all!
 She's not'ing but une Grande Picnique, dat's las' in all de fall!
 Mebbe de neeger King he's scare, an' skip anoder place,
 An' pour la Reine Victoriaw! I never see de face.

But dat's not ma beez-nesse, ma frien', I'm ready pull batteau
 So long she pay two dollar day, wit' pork an' bean also;
 An' if she geev me steady job, for mak' some more l'argent,
 I say, "Hooraw! for all de tam, on Queen Victoriaw!"

The poem clearly casts the hardy *voyageur* as a social simpleton, but it is also a mockery of imperial policy, and Queen Victoria is turned into a mere abstraction of British grandeur. Finally, the poem sees the *voyageurs* as benefiting from a free holiday—a “Grande Picnique”—traveling abroad under conditions of cartoon-like security, ultimately to return to the real stability of the *habitant* way of life.

“How Bateese Came Home” tells the story of the *habitant*-turned-entrepreneur. To express himself fully he must do what all home-grown entrepreneurs must do, leave. It is a story almost as old as New France, and the story persists into the present, where “south of the border” continues to hold fascination for those desirous of breaking out of the *habitant* mould:

“I go on Les Etats Unis, I go dere right away
 An' den mebbe on ten-twelve year, I be riche man some day,
 An' w'en I mak' de large fortune, I come back I s'pose
 Wit Yankee famme from off de State, an' monee on my clothes.

“I tole you somet'ing else also—mon cher Napoleon
 I get de grand majorité, for go on parlement
 Den buil' fine house on borde l'eau—near w'ere de church is stand
 More finer dan de Presbytere, w'en I am come riche man!”

Once again the church takes the place of stability and security. Predictably, when Baptiste Trudeau returns from the United States, superficially he is a transformed man. And he wears on his sleeve all the affectations of a man desperate to assert his freedom but fundamentally unable to do so:

I say “Hello Bateese! Hello! Comment ça va mon vieux?”
 He say “Excuse to me, ma frien' I t'ink I don't know you.”
 I say, “She's very curis t'ing, you are Bateese Trudeau,
 Was raise on jus' sam' place wit' me, dat's fifteen year ago?”

He say, “Oh yass dat's sure enough—I know you now fir's rate,
 But I forget mos' all ma French since I go on de State.

Dere's 'noder t'ing kip on your head, ma frien' dey mus' be tole
 Ma name's Bateese Trudeau no more, but John B. Waterhole!"

Finally, having seen the error of his ways, Baptiste reverts to the better life, at the same time rejecting the entrepreneurial spirit that led him, like a wayward *voyageur*, to covet American success. The poem ends with characteristic praise of the *habitant's* life:

I see Bateese de oder day, he's work hees fader's place
 I t'ink mese'f he's satisfy—I see dat on hees face
 He say "I got no use for State, mon cher Napoleon
 Kebeck she's good enough for me—Hooraw pour Canadaw."

Today, those who have stayed behind often revile and ridicule those who have departed, and yet they keep half an eye on the border themselves, knowing full well that if the weather gets too cold there will always be a warm source of shelter in Miami Beach, and, if not there, Myrtle Beach, and, if not there, perhaps Old Orchard. Nationalism has little enough patience for real entrepreneurialism. It prefers the safe *habitant*, whether that *habitant* has religion or not, whether he has fifteen children or not, whether he lives on the farm or not, whether or not he winters abroad.



I have rather gracelessly discussed a few of Drummond's poems mostly in order as they come up in *The Habitant, And Other French-Canadian Poems*. The fact is, the poems are remarkably consistent in their mildly ironic and yet beneficent picture of the *habitant*. They are full of humour, full of joy in the social stability that was a mainstay of Quebec culture. The modern "Québécois" have put some energy into severing themselves from their stable roots and the enslaved character of their colonial past. But the Quebec I grew up in was still marked by the stubborn passivity of the *habitant*, and in endeavouring to shed the image of the past the Quebec of the present day has been unable to rid itself of certain defining features of its culture, its desire for isolation and insularity, its fear of the outsider, and its craving for a romanticized ideal of the simple life (coincidental with its detestation of that life) such as in some ways it knew, and such as William Henry Drummond documented in his verse.¹⁰

¹⁰ And so I have gone to some pains to differ, for example, with Roy Daniels' genially dismissive view of Drummond: "The picture of the *habitant* life is superficial, comedy and pathos

It is perhaps no accident that *The Habitant* concludes with a poem celebrating “Ole Docteur Fiset” of Saint Anicet, like Drummond a medical doctor, a nurturer of the social structure, a parental force for stability and security. It is one of the great ironies of the Quebec of the last thirty or more years that it has participated in and indeed promoted a climate of insecurity and instability in the search for a new incarnation of the old *habitant*. While I miss the Quebec of my youth and know that it will never be restored, I miss above all the sense of goodwill to admit that the old Quebec had something worth preserving. I will place *The Habitant* proudly on my bookshelf partly as an historical document, partly as a literary document, and partly to document the freedom of which Drummond’s *habitants* boasted and which will be sorely missed if the new Quebec succeeds in mindfully forgetting the past. Now, for my part, “je me souviens,” and I do so in broken English.

are precariously related, the presentation of ‘un pauvre illetré’ (in Fréchette’s phrase) as a national type is itself hazardous. But Drummond’s transparent goodwill and the sincerity of his regard for his characters serve to overcome his limitations So few Canadian poets induce their characters and readers to join in cheerful and kindly laughter that Drummond has the advantage of being almost unique. Unique also is the illusion he gives of an easy and amiable interchange between the two cultures, French- and English-speaking. The complexities of the actual situation have proved less tractable” (*Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English* [Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 1965; second ed., 1976] vol. 1, 438). With respect to these last observations, I can only surmise that Daniels, following commonplace judgments of Drummond, read rather more “goodwill and sincerity” into his verse than I.R.E. Rashley, who, apologizing for Drummond’s *habitant* patois, credited him not only with a “freshened, renewed language” and style, but also with a genuine liberating influence on Canadian letters (“W.H. Drummond and the Dilemma of Style,” *Dalhousie Review* 28.4 [January 1949]: 387–96). Louis Dudek later remarked that Drummond unconsciously “loosened the straitjacket of literary puritanism and made it possible to free language for the expression of real life and human character” (cited by Gerald Noonan, “William Henry Drummond,” in *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, ed. William Toye [Toronto: Oxford U Press, 1983] 214). Noonan agrees with this verdict: “That Drummond also managed to produce some enduring poems is a pleasant testimony that literature and life can draw strength from each other without either delving deeply into anguish Although Drummond and his poems may not have moved critics to much comment, both were front-page news at his death and both broadened the general public’s notion of poetry and extended for many readers their receptivity to literature” (“Drummond—The Legend & the Legacy,” 186). To be sure, critics who mention Drummond go to great lengths to credit him with goodwill and sincerity, even those few who praise him for his stylistic innovations. Often these are the apologies of those who fear lest his verse be tarred with the brush of racial bigotry—or lest they themselves be taken to task for having a taste for such verse. The quality of Drummond’s verse—the accurate, if parodic ear, the subtle characterization of a way of life—has been much abused by critics’ unwonted, guilt-edged, insecurity.