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Theme and Subject Matter in Francis Parkman's *The Old Régime in Canada*

#### Abstract

'There are no political panaceas, except in the imagination of political quacks.' These are the words used by the American historian Francis Parkman (1823-1893) to suggest that the English and French settlements on the North American continent had been quite different from their onset and were quite possibly bound to remain as such in years to come. This paper examines the failure of France to establish the basis of a well-regulated political community in North America in the context of the Anglo-French rivalry for the control of that continent as conveyed by Francis Parkman in Part Four of his *History of France and England in North America* (1874), entitled *The Old Régime in Canada*. Though fact-based, Parkman's narrative evidences a deep-seated political and cultural bias against the French which sheds some light on the colonial beginnings of New England as well, offering us a story that is novelistic in style and all-encompassing in theme and subject matter.

#### KEYWORDS

American Historiography / Anglo-Saxonism / New England / New France / Romantic History

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### Résumé

«Il n'y a de panacées politiques que dans l'imagination des charlatans politiques.» Ce sont les mots employés par l'historien américain Francis Parkman (1823-1893) pour suggérer que les colonies anglaises et françaises sur le continent nord-américain étaient très différentes de leurs débuts et le resteraient probablement dans les années à venir. Cet article analyse l'échec de la France à établir la base d'une communauté politique bien réglementée en Amérique du Nord dans le contexte de la rivalité anglo-française pour le contrôle de ce continent tel que véhiculé par Francis Parkman dans la quatrième partie de son *Histoire de la France et de l'Angleterre en Amérique du Nord* (1874), intitulée *L'ancien régime au Canada*. Bien que fondé sur des faits, son récit historique sur la Nouvelle-France met en évidence les préjugés politiques et culturels profonds contre les Français, en jetant aussi une certaine lumière sur les débuts coloniaux de la Nouvelle-Angleterre. Parkman nous offre une histoire romanesque dans le style et vaste en matière de thème et d'objet.

### MOTS-CLÉS

Historiographie américaine / anglo-saxonisme / Nouvelle-Angleterre / Nouvelle-France  
/ Histoire romantique

## Theme and Subject Matter in Francis Parkman's *The Old Régime in Canada*

### Introduction

This paper examines the failure of France to establish the basis of a well-regulated political community in North America as conveyed by the American historian Francis Parkman in Part Four of his *History of France and England in North America*, entitled *The Old Régime in Canada* (1874). Parkman's choice of theme and subject matter for his *History* points to differences between the English and French settlements which portray, as has been suggested, 'the struggle between France and England as a heroic contest between rival civilizations with wilderness as a modifying force' (Jacobs 582). This struggle and these differences reflect a deep-seated cultural and political bias against colonial France on the part of New England historians that stretch as far back as Joseph Dennie's *Portfolio* and Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). It is my contention that Part Four of Parkman's *History*, informed by the 'Teutonic germ' commonly associated with the historiography of New England's nineteenth-century Romantic or literary historians, provides us with an account of the colonization of New France which sheds some light on the colonial beginnings of New England as well. Not infrequently, in fact, Parkman's historical narrative on New France is juxtaposed on that of New England, one providing a sort of backdrop for the cultural and political make-up of the other.

The son of a Unitarian minister, Francis Parkman (1823-1893) was born in Boston, Massachusetts. A graduate of Harvard, he completed the requirements for a law degree in 1845, but never practiced it. In 1846, he went on an expedition to the West along the Oregon Trail as far as Fort Laramie, Wyoming, which was to be hugely important for him in terms of his writing. It allowed him an insight into the seventeenth-

century Iroquois which he was able to use in the construction of his narrative, *Oregon Trail: Sketches of Prairie and Rocky Mountain Life* (1849) and *History of the Conspiracy of Pontiac* (1851). In *History of France and England in North America until 1763* (7 vols., 1865-1892), regarded as Parkman's major historical work, he details the colonization and administration of New France by the French from the late fifteenth to mid-eighteenth century. Part Four, the focus of my paper, is structured around three major sections: 'The Feudal Chiefs of Arcadia', 'Canada, A Mission', and 'The Colony and the King', respectively, each one subdivided into a total of twenty-four chapters. These numbered chapters correspond to a particular period of time and a general title, followed in turn by the standard subheadings found in works of this nature, detailing each of the major topics discussed in the chapter in question.<sup>1</sup> The timeframe covered by Parkman's *The Old Régime* stretches from 1497, with the arrival of the first French explorers in Acadia, to 1763, the year the English formally took over the control of the territory, a period of precisely two hundred and sixty-six years.

Over the past thirty years, criticism on Francis Parkman has been varied and wide-ranging, most it dating to the 1980s. Wilbur R. Jacobs, who taught at the University of California at Santa Barbara, and David Levin, who taught at the University of Virginia until his retirement in 1992, are central figures in the body of critical works devoted to Parkman. Jacobs, who published regularly on Parkman until his death in 1998, edited Parkman's correspondence, *The Letters of Francis Parkman* (2 vols., 1960), and developed a body of critical work on this historian that includes a significant number of essays and monographs on such matters as the literary devices used by Parkman and the latter's interest in the natural world. In 1991, he brought out *Francis Parkman, Historian as Hero: The Formative Years*, where he argues that Parkman projected himself on the historical figures he describes in his texts. Levin's

seminal work *History as Romantic Art – Bancroft, Prescott, Motley, and Parkman* (1959, reprinted in 1995) is still a highly useful monograph on the overall themes which “gentleman-historians” such as Parkman dealt with in their narratives. Howard Doughty’s *Francis Parkman* (1962, reprinted, 1983) is a somewhat eulogistic biography of Parkman written by a non-historian, but it remains a comprehensive study of Parkman's writings and ideas, covering the whole of his literary production, from his historical works to his essays and articles for periodical publications, such as the *North American Review* and Boston's *Advertiser*. A thorough analysis of the themes and methods used by the Romantic historians, and particularly insightful on account of the stylistic contrasts it draws between them, can be found in Richard Vitzhum’s *The American Compromise* (1974). The publication of Parkman’s complete works in the Library of America Series, *France and England in North America* (2 vols., 1983), edited by David Levin, and *The Oregon Trail and The Conspiracy of Pontiac* (1991), edited by William R. Taylor, have been highly instrumental in keeping Parkman alive among scholars and the general reading public to this day.

### Romantic History

The name of Francis Parkman is usually grouped together with a set of American historians often labeled as Romantic historians, literary historians, or gentlemen-amateur historians, among which we find William Hickling Prescott,<sup>2</sup> George Bancroft<sup>3</sup> and William Lothrop Motley.<sup>4</sup> Active throughout most of the nineteenth century, they are labeled as such for obvious reasons, but above all so as not to be confused with the late nineteenth-century, professional or ‘scientific historians’, individuals such as Herbert Baxter Adams (1850-1901),<sup>5</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner (1861-1932),<sup>6</sup> and J. Franklin Jameson (1859-1937),<sup>7</sup> associated with the newer universities of Johns Hopkins, Clark, and Chicago. The worldview we find in the historical narratives of the

Romantic or literary historians is one informed by their social and economic backgrounds: they were men of means who could afford to acquire original manuscripts, hire research assistants and copyists to do the more laborious part of their work, and travel to capital cities in order to gain access to official documents in governmental archives. They could write history independently, without having to rely on it for their own (and their families') sustenance.

The strength of New England's intellectual tradition, stemming from its Puritan roots, can be seen in the historical narratives of these gentleman-amateur historians, whether in Prescott's histories surrounding the unification of the kingdom of Spain by Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile, in Bancroft's depiction of the political origins of the United States, in Motley's description of the beginnings of the Dutch Republic, or in Parkman's characterization of the French occupation of Canada, more precisely the territory which is now Quebec. Brought up under the strictures of Protestantism, in its Congregationalist or Unitarian form, the gentlemen-amateur historians belonged to the educated elites of New England. They attended Harvard College with their minds set on a legal or religious career, their historical narratives, fact-based (it is common to differentiate among different genres of historical narratives – fictional, fact-based, hybrid), reflecting the values and interests of the dominant classes in the country at the time with respect to what constituted good art, literature or history. Ideologically conservative, they were raised on a stable set of republican principles and ideals which can be traced back to the political origins of the country. They were initially supporters of the Federalist Party, then of its successor, the Whig Party, and finally, in post-Civil America, of Lincoln's Republicans, the exception being George Bancroft, who always showed a preference for the Jacksonian democrats (it was a commonly-held view that each page of his *History* voted for the Democratic Party).

For them, the writing of history was an art, to be put side by side with literature. They felt that the writing of history required creativity and imagination, which meant that they considered themselves to be artists as well as judges of what constituted good historiographical work. Peter Novick observes in his book *That Noble Dream – The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession* (1999) that Romantic historians wrote because they had some urgent message to communicate to their reading public, preferring ‘to tell’ rather than ‘to show’ (45-46). These historians lacked the objectivity and distance from the subject matter one associates with a ‘scientific’ analysis of historical facts, which means that not infrequently the neutral voice which must characterize historical discourse is missing. The slow-moving action and universal themes of Romantic historians imply that their histories run for many, many pages, resulting in works with a large number of volumes, with a sort of ‘novelistic quality’ to them. Although they were primarily interested in political and constitutional matters, we find in their narratives the kind of love for Nature that we associate with fiction writers of this period, two of their favorite authors being the historical romancers Sir Walter Scott and James Fenimore Copper. Their narratives include, therefore, elaborate descriptions of scenery and landscape, as well as setting, an essential element of their depictions of the past. Just like the historians Gibbon, Michelet, Tocqueville, and Carlyle, they were read for ‘literary pleasure’, in the words of Richard J. Evans (60).

In the construction of his narrative on New France, Parkman followed the methodological precepts of nineteenth-century German historiography, as laid down by of Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886),<sup>8</sup> who had maintained that the primary goal of the historian was to provide a version of history as it really was or happened (*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*), having argued for the use of documentary evidence and philological methods in history, in conjunction with a critical attitude towards primary

sources. In the Preface to *The Old Régime*, he writes that he employed all the documents he could lay his hands upon, letters, dispatches, memorials, and official records from government and religious archives on both sides of the Atlantic. With a certain degree of sarcasm, he alludes to the massive amount of information available to the historian interested in the colonial beginnings of New France, remarking that ‘[t]he pen was always busy in this outpost of the old monarchy’ (x). He also details the kind of primary materials he used to compose his narrative, ‘letters, despatches, and memorials’, as well as the records of the Superior Council of Quebec and the documents in the civil and ecclesiastical archives of Canada (x). Again there is sarcasm when he writes that this voluminous documentation exists because ‘[t]he king and the minister demanded to know everything;’ (x) moreover, he adds, these documents managed survive ‘the perils of revolution and the incendiary torch of the Commune’ (x), the latter comment an obvious reference to New Englanders’ dislike for radical forms of political activity such as Jacobinism. In the Preface to Part Four of his *History*, he also states unequivocally the thesis of his work: ‘This volume attempts to show by what methods it [the monarchical administration of France] strove to make good its hold, why it achieved a certain kind of success, and why it failed at last’ (x). And he continues: the aim of the first volume is ‘to examine the political and social machine’, whereas that of the volume that follows is to see ‘the machine in action’ (xii). His claim to historical objectivity is also clearly asserted by him at the beginning of his narrative: ‘With the help of a system of classified notes, I have collated the evidence of the various writers, and set down without reserve all the results of the examination, whether favorable or unfavorable’ (xi).

In line with the precepts of good Romantic historiography, Parkman also follows stylistic convention in his narrative on *The Old Régime*, paying attention to character,

scene and incident, three of the prerequisites of good fictional writing. In his description of Louis XIV's court at Fontainebleau, Parkman's literary style is particularly noticeable, namely the attention to detail, the fast pace of the narrative and the copious use of adjectives, as the following quotation suggests:

Leave Canada behind; cross the sea, and stand, on an evening in June, by the edge of the forest of Fontainebleau. Beyond the broad gardens, above the long ranges of moonlit trees, rise the walls and pinnacles of the vast chateau, — a shrine of history, the gorgeous monument of lines of vanished kings, haunted with memories of Capet, Valois, and Bourbon. There was little thought of the past at Fontainebleau in June, 1661. The present was too dazzling and too intoxicating; the future, too radiant with hope and promise. It was the morning of a new reign; the sun of Louis XIV was rising in splendor, and the rank and beauty of France were gathered to pay it homage. (229-30)

And Parkman continues in the same register, adding to his text a reference to the source of his inspiration, the painting of Louis XIV by Philippe de Champagne:

A youthful court, a youthful king; a pomp and magnificence such as Europe had never seen; a delirium of ambition, pleasure, and love, — all this wrought in many a young heart an enchantment destined to be cruelly broken. [...] Here was Anne of Austria, the King's mother, and

Marie Thérèse, his tender and jealous queen; his brother, the Duke of Orleans, with his bride of sixteen, Henriette of England; and his favorite, that vicious butterfly of the court, the Count de Guiche. Here, too, were the humbled chiefs of the civil war, Beaufort and Condé, obsequious before their triumphant master. Louis XIV, the centre of all eyes, in the flush of health and vigor, and the pride of new-fledged royalty, stood, as he still stands on the canvas of Philippe de Champagne, attired in a splendor which would have been effeminate but for the stately port of the youth who wore it. (230)

Literary historians tended to focus on representative men and their personalities so as to reveal the better how human experience manifested itself. Great men made history and their decisions reflected their personalities. David Levin points out in his seminal work *History as Romantic Art – Motley, Prescott, Parkman and Bancroft* (1959, 1995) that it became a sort of convention for literary historians to include in their narratives sketches of their heroes, often based on contemporary portraits, the idea being these could indeed reveal the character or personality of the individual in question (13). Consequently, physical attributes and character delineation feature prominently in the narratives of the Romantic historians. In *The Old Régime*, for instance, Parkman draws for his readers illuminating portraits of Daniel de Rémy de Courcelle<sup>9</sup> and Jean Talon,<sup>10</sup> the individuals chosen by the central government in Paris to put into place ‘the great experiment’ of building a colony for France under a system of ‘paternal royalty’. The portrait of Talon, the colony’s intendant, is particularly detailed in this respect as we can gather from this excerpt:

His appearance did him no justice. The regular contour of his oval face, about which fell to his shoulders a cataract of curls, natural or supposititious; the smooth lines of his well-formed features, brows delicately arched, and a mouth more suggestive of feminine sensibility than of masculine force,— would certainly have misled the disciple of Lavater. (268)

### Theme and Subject Matter in *The Old Régime in Canada*

The themes and subject matter of America's nineteenth-century Romantic historians were grandiose and all-encompassing, national origins and myths featuring prominently in their narratives. In their own way they all contributed to the construction of a national history for the territories and peoples covered in their narratives and, of course, to a feeling of nationalism. As Evans has pointed out, their search for 'master narratives' capable of explaining the whole process of historical change are today avoided altogether, contemporary historians favoring 'structural histories', that is to say, thematic narratives of more limited scope and content, like Ferdinand Braudel's *Mediterranean*, or Stephen Therrstrom's *The Other Bostonians* (130). In the case of *History of France and England in North America*, there is no doubt that Parkman wishes to highlight in his narrative the nature of the confrontation which enveloped the forces of liberty and democracy, on the one hand, *vis-à-vis* those of absolutism and/or authoritarianism (or freedom *versus* oppression), on the other, which England and France embody respectively in the way they went about the settlement of their North American territories.<sup>11</sup> In line with an eighteenth-century Whig interpretation of history, Parkman still saw politics as a struggle between the forces of liberty and constitutionalism, associated with the Whigs, and the forces of absolutism and royal

prerogative, connected with the Tories (Evans 28). The contrast he draws between what informed the foundation of the New England colonies as opposed to those of New France, most notably the personal qualities of the settlers themselves, are particularly evident in the following passage:

Whence arose this difference, and other differences equally striking, between the rival colonies? It is easy to ascribe them to a difference of political and religious institutions; but the explanation does not cover the ground. The institutions of New England were utterly inapplicable to the population of New France, and the attempt to apply them would have wrought nothing but mischief. There are no political panaceas, except in the imagination of political quacks. To each degree and each variety of public development there are corresponding institutions, best answering the public needs; and what is meat to one is poison to another. Freedom is for those who are fit for it; the rest will lose it, or turn it to corruption. Church and State were right in exercising authority over a people which had not learned the first rudiments of self-government. Their fault was not that they exercised authority, but that they exercised too much of it, and, instead of weaning the child to go alone, kept him in perpetual leading-strings, making him, if possible, more and more dependent, and less and less fit for freedom. (463)

Still under the influence of Jacksonism, Parkman's *The Old Régime* evidences, in line with his New England, upper-class Puritan upbringing, a distrust of mass

Democracy, excessive materialism and demagoguery. His criticism of French colonial officials and settlers driven by the material gains obtained from the lucrative fur trade reflects a social bias against the acquisitiveness urge of some citizens to the detriment of the social and political well-being of the community as a whole. He seems to imply in his narrative that by concentrating on their material progress, the settlers of New France were neglecting an aspect of their communal lives which the colonists of New England had privileged to very significant extent, namely, literacy. Literacy, whose primary function among New England settlers had been at first of a religious nature (to allow the general population to read the sacred texts), took on a whole new significance later, that of creating an educated citizenry capable of carrying out with efficacy political and administrative tasks. New France officials did not seem to have dispensed the same kind of attention to the education of their population, although a college to train individuals for the priesthood, the *Séminaire de Québec*, had been set up by the Jesuits in New France as early as 1663.

New England's 'patrician' historians, Parkman included, saw themselves as the last in line of the Anglo-Saxon peoples. They were convinced that the political system that had been put in place by the Founding Fathers was none other than a continuation of the democratic practices that had begun in the forests of Germany centuries before, then carried by the Anglo-Saxons to the shores of England, and later on transplanted on to the North American continent.<sup>12</sup> As Anglo-Americans, they subscribed to the existence of a 'Teutonic germ' in American society which they themselves embodied, dismissing the Norman contribution to the formation of the cultural and political make-up of the English people throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In the passage below, Parkman's contrast between Germanic and Celt tribes is quite telling as an example of the overt cultural biases held by the gentlemen-amateur historians towards

Latin peoples, as regards their propensity to think emotionally rather than rationally, to act and behave in unpractical ways and inability to reach consensuses for the common good:

The Germanic race, and especially the Anglo-Saxon branch of it, is peculiarly masculine, and, therefore, peculiarly fitted for self-government. It submits its action habitually to the guidance of reason, and has the judicial faculty of seeing both sides of a question. The French Celt is cast in a different mould. He sees the end distinctly, and reasons about it with an admirable clearness; but his own impulses and passions continually turn him away from it. Opposition excites him; he is impatient of delay, is impelled always to extremes, and does not readily sacrifice a present inclination to an ultimate good. He delights in abstractions and generalizations, cuts loose from unpleasing facts, and roams through an ocean of desires and theories. (465)

This theory of a Teutonic germ responsible for the shaping of America's body politic and institutions was first called into question by Frederick Jackson Turner's<sup>13</sup> 'frontier thesis', which added a new dimension to the understanding of the nation's political and territorial development, and then by scholars such as Herbert Croly and Charles A. Beard, who drew the attention of American historians to the economic and social implications behind some of the principles with which the country's founding documents had been imbued.<sup>14</sup>

Parkman opens his Preface to *The Old Régime* with a quotation from Alexis de Tocqueville's *L'ancien régime et la révolution* (1856) on the subject of the administration of New France which points to the kind of political biases I have alluded to above and which informs the whole narrative: 'The physiognomy of a government can best be judged in its colonies, for there its characteristic traits usually appear larger and more distinct. When I wish to judge of the spirit and the faults of the administration of Louis XIV, I must go to Canada. Its deformity is there seen as through a microscope' (ix). Again and again, in the text under analysis, this historian contrasts the character of the settlers of New England with that of the settlers of New France, insisting on the natural inclination and experience of the former in conducting the affairs of the community and on how that defined the political make-up of the New England colonies, as this excerpt attests:

In the building up of colonies, England succeeded and France failed. The cause lies chiefly in the vast advantage drawn by England from the historical training of her people in habits of reflection, forecast, industry, and self-reliance, – a training which enabled them to adopt and maintain an invigorating system of self-rule, totally inapplicable to their rivals.  
(463-4)

And he continues:

Under the hard and repellent surface of New England society lay the true foundations of a stable freedom, — conscience, reflection, faith,

patience, and public spirit. The cement of common interests, hopes, and duties compacted the whole people like a rock of conglomerate; while the people of New France remained in a state of political segregation, like a basket of pebbles held together by the enclosure that surrounds them.  
(464)

Parkman clearly saw the French and English political systems as rivals, the former having replaced the latter for its intrinsic superiority, but he does not fail to recognize those cases in which extremes do indeed meet. In a visibly presentist reading of history, he writes in the Preface to *The Old Régime*: ‘The political system which has fallen, and the antagonistic system which has prevailed, seem, at first sight, to offer nothing but contrasts; yet out of the tomb of Canadian absolutism come voices not without suggestion even to us. Extremes meet, and Autocracy and Democracy often touch hands, at least in their vices’ (ix-x). In chapter XVIII, for instance, he details the characteristics of Canadian feudalism, writing that with one difference it was simply an extension of French feudalism in North America. The settlers were entirely at the mercy of the King, as nothing could be changed without an order from the monarch:

A decree of the King, an edict of the council, or an ordinance of the intendant, might at any moment change old conditions, impose new ones, interfere between the lord of the manor and his grantees, and modify or annul his bargains, past or present. He was never sure whether or not the government would let him alone; and against its most arbitrary intervention he had no remedy. (309)

Parkman holds, in effect, that the system was totally unpredictable, with the rights of individuals, be they noblemen or not, in any way protected. This contrasts clearly with the history of the English colonies prior to the 1776 Revolution, which had been left more or less alone to run their affairs and without much interference from the Parliament in Westminster, with American colonists in no way doubting their rights as Englishmen. In the case of New France, the authority of the King over his colony was absolute and undivided, serving, in Parkman's words, 'a double end, — to produce a faint and harmless reflection of French aristocracy, and simply and practically to supply agencies for distributing land among the settlers' (305). It was a 'well-meaning despotism', according to him, whereby the *censitaire* had obligations towards his *seignior* which included payments in money, kind or both, but these payments were not very high, neither regularly enforced on the *habitants*, as Canadian noble families, Parkman adds, were destitute, practically beggars, though full of 'pride and sloth' (319).

As Howard Doughty points out in connection with *The Conspiracy of Pontiac*, Parkman's narratives are infused with contrasting formulations of two competing cultures, that of the French and that of the English, creating binary oppositions between Feudalism and Democracy, Popery and Protestantism, the sword and the ploughshare, war and adventure *versus* trade and industry, monopoly as opposed to free enterprise (179). He labels as "counterexperiment" the dissimilarities between the colonization of New France and that New England (251), identifying a triad of ideas in Parkman which explains the success of the New England settlements: "Libertarianism, laissez faire, and the Puritan gospel of mundane works [...]" (251-2). Parkman, he adds, was "steeped [...] in the Puritan-individualist ethos of personal accountability" and contrary to English

settlers, those of New France, in his view, were accountable not to themselves, but to a higher entity, the centralized authority of the King of France (264).

Common to all the Romantic historians, Parkman included, was the idea that human progress, which they thought could be traced in the history of nations, was a sort of line that ran, if you looked at the globe, invariably from East to West and from North to South. Politically, this progress had been associated to a change from autocrat to democratic regimes, from absolutism to democracy (the idea that Feudalism and Royal Absolutism are archaic forms of government is implicit in *The Old Régime*, as the title itself suggests), but as far as religion was concerned it was closely tied to Christianity. It was a line of evolution that, as David Levin has pointed out, ran from Roman Catholicism to the Reformation and Protestantism and from the latter to Bostonian Unitarians, with Roman Catholics, Amerindians, Moors and Jews being regarded for the most part as anti-progressive forces (126). Although religion informed the foundation of New England and New France, the outcomes were unmistakably different. In this passage from the final paragraph of *The Old Régime*, the superiority of English Protestantism, which Parkman associates with the material progress of its society and with the individual freedom enjoyed by citizens in general, is evident.<sup>15</sup>

This English conquest was the grand crisis of Canadian history. It was the beginning of a new life. With England came Protestantism, and the Canadian Church grew purer and better in the presence of an adverse faith. Material growth; an increased mental activity; an education, real though fenced and guarded; a warm and genuine patriotism, -- all date from the peace of 1763. (467-8)

One of the arguments put forth by Parkman for the divergent political paths chosen by the colonies of New England and New France has to do with the exclusion of the Huguenots from the settlement of Acadia. The Company of New France, created by Cardinal Richelieu to regulate the administrative affairs of the colony, excluded the French Protestants from the settlements along the St. Lawrence River, as well as the Franciscan Récollets, rivals of the Jesuits. For Parkman suggests that if Louis XIV had allowed the Huguenots to immigrate to New France, freer, more industrious and independent communities would have emerged along the St. Lawrence River, similar to those that had developed in the Massachusetts Bay area. For him, this was a major flaw in the colonization of New France, as the Huguenots, excluded from a process that was solely in the hands of the Jesuits, were associated with a more entrepreneurial spirit and stronger work ethic (and how much of this idea is a reflection of Gilded Age thinking is an open question). All of this would have translated, Parkman observes especially in his narratives *The Jesuits in North America in the Seventeenth Century* (1867) and *La Salle and the Discovery of the Great West* (1869), into material growth and progress for the men and women of New France. Parkman's anti-clericalism against the Jesuits and Catholic priests in general was quite strong (and recurrently against the Puritans of New England as well), not infrequently noting that their power and influence had been left unchecked by the authorities. In *Montcalm and Wolf* (1884), for instance, referring to François Xavier de Laval (1623-1708), who was to become the first bishop of Quebec, Parkman observes: "The Jesuits, adepts in human nature, had made a sagacious choice when they put forward this conscientious, zealous, dogged, and pugnacious priest to fight their battles" (qtd. in Doughty 342).

Superstition, fanaticism and religious belief were all anathema to rationalists like Parkman, who along with other literary historians, liked to contrast, in the words of Novick, 'Protestant virtue with Catholic vice, as well as Anglo-Saxon liberty with Latin absolutism' (46). The Catholic clergy was an obvious target of literary historians for its supposedly licentious behavior and corrupt morals, the priestcraft being precisely, as Levin also puts it, 'the most unnatural, non-libertarian, non-Teutonic subject' (92). Parkman's criticism of religious institutions in New France extended to the subject of education, entirely in the hands of the Jesuits, who are strongly criticized not only for their shortcomings as educators, but also for their co-responsibility in maintaining the political *status quo* in the colony. The following passage is to that effect:

All education was controlled by priests or nuns. The ablest teachers in Canada were the Jesuits. Their college of Quebec was three years older than Harvard. We hear at an early date of public disputations by the pupils, after the pattern of those tournaments of barren logic which preceded the reign of inductive reason in Europe, and of which the archetype is to be found in the scholastic duels of the Sorbonne. The boys were sometimes permitted to act certain approved dramatic pieces of a religious character, like the *Sage Visionnaire*. On one occasion they were allowed to play the Cid of Corneille, which, though remarkable as a literary work, contained nothing threatening to orthodoxy. They were taught a little Latin, a little rhetoric, and a little logic; but against all that might rouse the faculties to independent action, the Canadian schools prudently closed their doors. There was then no rival population, of a different origin and a different faith, to compel competition in the race of

intelligence and knowledge. The Church stood sole mistress of the field. Under the old regime the real object of education in Canada was a religious and, in far less degree, a political one. The true purpose of the schools was: first, to make priests; and, secondly, to make obedient servants of the Church and the King. All the rest was extraneous and of slight account. (425-6)

It should not be forgotten, however, as has been suggested, that although the Catholic and the Protestant clergy had different interpretations of 'the tenets of the One True Faith', 'they stood united in their scorn for native religious beliefs' (Nobles 29).

A believer in the 'manifest destiny' of the United States as a nation, Parkman shows biased attitudes in his historical narratives towards Native Americans, who are often depicted as being treacherous, irresolute, and controlled by the senses, rather than by reason. As Stephen Tonsor has noted, rather than seeing the Indian as embodying the image of the noble, though uncivilized, human being, 'Parkman found the Indian to be savage, cruel, capricious and incapable of rational thought' (249). He saw no problem in the displacement of the Indian populations from their territories, considered as simply a victory of civilization over barbarism. Parkman is particularly critical, for instance, of Indian superstition, as we can infer from this passage in connection with Jesuit attempts at proselytizing the native populations:

There was a beastly superstition prevalent among the Hurons, the Iroquois, and other tribes. It consisted of a "medicine" or mystic feast, in which it was essential that the guests should devour everything set before

them, however inordinate in quantity, unless absolved from duty by the person in whose behalf the solemnity was ordained, — he, on his part, taking no share in the banquet. So grave was the obligation, and so strenuously did the guests fulfil it, that even their ostrich digestion was sometimes ruined past redemption by the excess of this benevolent gluttony. These festins *a manger tout* had been frequently denounced as diabolical by the Jesuits, during their mission among the Hurons; but now, with a pliancy of conscience as excusable in this case as in any other, they resolved to set aside their scruples, although, judged from their point of view, they were exceedingly well founded. (90-1)

The narratives of the Romantic or literary historians are of an exceptionalist nature, American institutions and political practices being praised for their unrivalled qualities. Parkman is no exception in this respect, as we have been trying to demonstrate. A historian in whose narratives the exceptionalist quality of the American political nation is particularly noticeable is George Bancroft. Though admitting in his *History of the United States from the Discovery of the American Continent* (1838) that the progress of the country had occurred under the banner of ‘a favoring Providence’, he observes that the ‘germ’ of American institutions, namely the desire for freedom and popular sovereignty, can be found in the early history of the country. He writes that the United States was the first nation ‘in the practice and the defense of the equal rights of man’, a nation where ‘the sovereignty of the people’ was undisputed (1). When Parkman posits in his text *Liberty and Providence versus Absolutism / Royal Prerogative and Jesuitical Fanaticism*, he is writing in the literary vein of Bancroft, therefore. The following passage from the opening pages of Bancroft’s *History of the*

*United States* is particularly telling, not just for being tendentious and biased, something of particular interest to us, historiographically, but because it condenses the moral creed, the political rhetoric, and the historical myths that have been perpetuated throughout U.S. history from Parkman's days to the so-called consensus historians of the 50s and early 60s.<sup>16</sup>

The United States of America constitute an essential portion of a great political system, embracing all the civilized nations of the earth. At a period when the force of moral opinion is rapidly increasing, they have the precedence in the practice and the defence of the equal rights of man. The sovereignty of the people is here a conceded axiom, and the laws, established upon that basis, are cherished with faithful patriotism. While the nations of Europe aspire after change, our constitution engages the fond admiration of the people, by which it has been established. [...] Our government, by its organization, is necessarily identified with the interests of the people, and relies exclusively on their attachment for its durability and support. Even the enemies of the state, if there are any among us, have liberty to express their opinions undisturbed; and are safely tolerated, where reason is left free to combat their errors. (1-2)

Parkman shares with the historian Henry Adams, author of *History of the United States during the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison* (1889-91), and a transitional figure between the above-mentioned Romantic historians of the earlier part of the nineteenth century and the 'professional' historians of the latter part of the

century, the idea that the colonization of the North American continent had represented an extension of European civilization in the New World. Parkman, though, as John Higham has noted in his book *History – Professional Scholarship in America* (1989), always showed a particular preference for ‘exploring the common experience of the great mass of the American people’, unlike Adams, who chose the proximity of the corridors of power (155). Precisely on what separates these two historians, Wayne Fields, in an essay entitled ‘The American Adams’, observes: ‘If Francis Parkman (1823-93) wrote history in which heroes occupy center stage, generate the energy which drives history, Adams regarded heroes as harder to come by, forcing history, for the most part, to get along with them’ (202).

In *The Old Régime* Parkman shows a keen interest in social matters in New France.<sup>17</sup> He goes to great lengths to describe Canadian society in its various aspects, thus providing a social backdrop to his narrative (this was not uncommon for nineteenth-century historians: Thomas Macaulay (1800-1859) and J. R. Green (1837-1883), for example, included detailed information on the state of English society in separate chapters of their narratives). But, again, Parkman’s account of the settlement of New France contrasts strongly with that of the English colonies. He writes, for instance, that the French Crown worked hard to encourage emigration to the colony, drawing on the best elements from different parts of the country, even though these were mostly uneducated peasants, with little or no money. Furthermore, he notes that the officers who had served in the colony were given incentives to remain in the territory, including tracts of land, a ‘military colonization’ which, in his view, marked indelibly the character of the Canadian people (279). Women had to be imported to the colony from different parts of France and from different socio-economic backgrounds, some of whom of ill-repute (280).

Rhetorically, he asks why despite such generous policies encouraging people to emigrate and to have children the population of Canada never grew much (estimated to be approximately 25,000 at the time). The answer, according to him, was because ‘it was mainly an immigration of single men and single women’ (291), rather than families already constituted, which would have provided a much better background upon which to build stable communities. Moreover, the whole process was directed by the King himself: ‘The new settler was found by the King, sent over by the King, and supplied by the king with a wife, a farm, and sometimes with a house. Well did Louis XIV earn the title of Father of New France’ (291). For Parkman, this excessive centralization of policy was counterproductive, suggesting that this fact made Canadian settlers less entrepreneurial, less educated, and quite possibly less democratic in their political aspirations. Where was room for the kind of rugged individualism and self-reliance that had characterized the settlement of the US, traditionally associated with profit in the South and religious feeling in the North?

This excessive interference in the life of the colony by the royal government in Paris extended to the economy as well. True, the settlers could engage in trade or commerce, but those activities were limited in scope, as Parkman remarks, so much so that ‘exposed to such vicissitudes from the intervention of intendants, ministers, and councils, [...] at times it [the domestic trade] was almost banished’ (322). To make his point, Parkman describes one of the most interesting ‘characters’ in his historical narrative, the ‘roving *gentilhomme*’, the untitled noblemen who engaged in trade, the Western fur-trade that is, in time of peace and were ‘a menace and a terror to the neighbouring English colonist’, in these terms:

On the Great Lakes, in the wastes of the Northwest, on the Mississippi and the plains beyond, we find the roving *gentilhomme*, chief of a gang of bush-rangers, often his own *habitants* — sometimes proscribed by the government, sometimes leagued in contraband traffic with its highest officials; a hardy vidette of civilization, tracing unknown streams, piercing unknown forests, trading, fighting, negotiating, and building forts. (323)

‘Saint-Castin, Du Lhut, La Darantaye, La Salle, La Mothe-Cadillac, Iberville, Bienville, La Vérendrye, are names that stand conspicuous on the page of half-savage romance that refreshes the hard and practical annals of American colonization’ (323), Parkman adds. The lazy and unindustrious *gentilhommes*, the sons of nobles who lacked a regular occupation and resorted to robbery and banditry, contrast markedly with the ‘hard and practical’ colonists to the South.<sup>18</sup> They were a threat to the civilized communities of New England, where the descendants of the Puritan settlers – educated, industrious, morally upright and with a sense of mission – were busy putting together a model of social and political organization which the rest of the world could only but replicate. They lacked, as has been observed, the economic principles of free trade, free enterprise and industry, some of the natural principles that Romantic historians wished to communicate to society at large (Levin 41).

Nevertheless, there were a few examples of success among the class of *gentilhommes*. Charles Le Moyne of Montreal, who managed to increase his estate substantially and pass it on to his descendants, is one such example. He represented a new generation of successful Canadians, described by Parkman in these terms:

The beggared noble of the early time became a sturdy country gentleman, — poor, but not wretched; ignorant of books, except possibly a few scraps of rusty Latin picked up in a Jesuit school; hardy as the hardest woodsman, yet never forgetting his quality of *gentilhomme*; scrupulously wearing its badge, the sword, and copying as well as he could the fashions of the court, which glowed on his vision across the sea in all the effulgence of Versailles, and beamed with reflected ray from the Château of Quebec. He was at home among his tenants, at home among the Indians, and never more at home than when, a gun in his hand and a crucifix on his breast, he took the war-path with a crew of painted savages and Frenchmen almost as wild, and pounced like a lynx from the forest on some lonely farm or outlying hamlet of New England. How New England hated him, let her records tell. The reddest blood-streaks on her old annals mark the track of the Canadian *gentilhomme*. (325)

## Conclusion

If, in the words of Parkman, there are no political panaceas, meaning political and administrative schema that can be readily applied to individuals and communities with guaranteed success, what is there for states or nations to go by? Unquestionably, for Parkman, it is the character of the people that determines the success of a colony, not the institutions put in place, not the geography or the climate of the territory, not even the natural or material resources available. Thus, for him the failure of New France to organize itself politically and socially could only be ascribed to the lack of a model in

French Canada similar to the one that had been implemented over time in the New England colonies by its settlers. The English colonization around Massachusetts Bay, with its industrious, well-educated, and politically-savvy settlers, elicited for Parkman a paradigm of social and political organization that was freer, more democratic, less controlling, undoubtedly lacking in the settlement of Canada by the French. And it was the French defeat at the end of the Seven Years' War that brought to the colony this much more desirable paradigm of social and political organization, which one can extrapolate was Parkman's vision for America / the Americas, unequivocally stated by him in the closing paragraph of his *The Old Régime*:

England imposed by the sword on reluctant Canada the boon of rational and ordered liberty. Through centuries of striving she had advanced from stage to stage of progress, deliberate and calm, — never breaking with her past, but making each fresh gain the base of a new success, — enlarging popular liberties while bating nothing of that height and force of individual development which is the brain and heart of civilization; and now, through a hard-earned victory, she taught the conquered colony to share the blessings she had won. A happier calamity never befell a people than the conquest of Canada by the British arms. (467-8)

The history of the Americas has been forged amidst much violence and distrust, mutual disrespect and indifference. The study of the accounts of nineteenth-century historians, whether centered on New England, New France, or New Spain, for that matter, allow us to continue the process of mapping out the entire body of narrative

discourses produced by Europeans and Anglo-Europeans about the New World. By contrasting them with those of the “conquered”, whether in the form of their orally-transmitted accounts or written-down texts, a finer and more detailed picture of the Americas will emerge, less blurred and consequently less prone to misinterpretation. The juxtaposition of narratives such as Parkman's *The Old Régime* with those by French, Spanish and even Portuguese historians of the time, which is beyond the scope of this paper, may yield some interesting results, permitting a process of cultural cross-referencing and comparison as old as Christopher Columbus' first descriptions of the New World.

It is my contention that Romantic historians and their accounts have been dismissed by successive generations of scholars as romanticized and fictionalized narratives because they have been judged by parameters of historical objectivity that they were never supposed to have, often compounded by presentist interpretations of their texts. It is my belief they should be analyzed on the basis of the historical parameters of the day, namely the Rankean precepts of historical rigorousness to which all of them subscribed and which can be found in the opening paragraphs of their narratives. This is to say that they must be read not only for their use of documentary evidence, but also for their literary value, their vivification of the past, and their conveyance of a reality that is as distant from ours as from those who first read them. Had these accounts not been written our historical record would certainly be poorer. This should not be understood as acquiescence and acceptance of their Eurocentric worldview, but rather as an opportunity to bring to light the diversity of voices to be heard in connection with Europe's colonial past whether in the Americas or in other parts of the world.

Although this study corroborates previous ones in that it points out that New England historians were informed by a cultural and political bias against the French and Latin peoples, in general, that stemmed from the Reformation, it is hoped that it may have also shed some light on some of their differences, which in the case of Parkman is associated with the social Darwinist thought that characterized the period in question, as expressed in his Anglo-Saxonism. As has been noted, although the conquest of North America was not as "spectacular" as those of Mexico and Peru (Doughty 161), one must continue the process of examining the shared pasts of those who now inhabit the Americas, bridging the gaps that still separate them, so as to, hopefully, reconcile them with their past. The fact that Parkman was denied an honorary degree by the University of Laval in 1878, amid much controversy, only to be granted a few years later by its English-language equivalent, McGill University, is testimony to the need to bridge these gaps and to efface eventual cultural barriers that may still persist in the Americas.

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<sup>1</sup> I have used the 1898 edition of Francis Parkman's works published by George N. Morang (Toronto), which was based on the one by John Wilson and Son (Cambridge), with copyrights by Little, Brown, and Company (1897). Parkman introduced a note to his revised edition of 1893 where he writes that he has added chapters on the 'rival claimants to Acadia, -- La Tour and D'Aulnay', as well a few other details of lesser importance, due to an absence of materials on those subjects.

<sup>2</sup> William Hickling Prescott (1796-1859) was born in Salem, Massachusetts. A graduate of Harvard, he published *History of the Reign of Ferdinand and Isabella the Catholic, of Spain* (1838), *The Conquest of Mexico* (1843), *The Conquest of Peru* (1847), and *History of the Reign of Philip II* (3 vols., 1855-1858), left incomplete.

<sup>3</sup> George Bancroft (1800-1891) was born in Worcester, Massachusetts. A graduate of Harvard, he studied at Heidelberg, Göttingen and Berlin. He published *History of the United States from the discovery of the continent to the end of the Revolutionary War* (1834-1874), in ten volumes (a six-volume abridged version of it came out in 1876) and *The History of the Formation of the Constitution of the U.S.* (1882).

<sup>4</sup> John Lothrop Motley (1814-1877) was born in Dorchester, Massachusetts. Also a graduate of Harvard, he studied in Göttingen, from 1832 to 1838. His best-known historical works were: *The Rise of the Dutch Republic* (3 vols., 1856), *History of the United Netherlands* (4 vols., 1860-1867), and *The Life and Death of Barneveld* (1874).

<sup>5</sup> Herbert Baxter Adams taught at the department of history and political science at the Johns Hopkins University from 1876 to 1901. His major writings include: *The Germanic Origin of the New England Towns*, *Saxon Tithing-Men in America*, *Norman Constables in America*, and *Methods of Historical Study*.

<sup>6</sup> A professor of history at Wisconsin (1890-1910) and later at Harvard (1911-1924), Frederick Jackson Turner is best-known for his 'Frontier Thesis', which he put forth in a paper entitled 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History' (1893), read before the American Historical Association in Chicago, during the city's 1893 World Columbian Exposition.

<sup>7</sup> J. Franklin Jameson was the first managing editor of the *American Historical Review* (AHR). In 1905, he became the director of the Department of Historical Research of the Carnegie Institution of Washington. His best-known work is *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement* (1926).

<sup>8</sup> This German historian, regarded as the father of modern historical scholarship, exerted a tremendous influence on American scholars and universities throughout the nineteenth century.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel de Rémy de Courcelle (1626 -1698), who was the Governor General of New France from 1665 to 1672, introduced improvements in the judicial system of the colony. He carried out an aggressive war against the Iroquois, but succeeded in sorting out many of the conflicts that existed among the different Indian tribes in Acadia.

<sup>10</sup> Jean Talon, Count d'Orsainville (1626 - 1694), was the first Intendant of New France to actually reside in the colony (Louis Robert was Intendant from 1663 to 1665, but never came to New France). Appointed by Louis XIV and his minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, as the Intendant of Justice, Public Order and Finances in Canada, Acadia and Newfoundland, Talon served for two terms: 1665 to 1668 and 1669 to 1672. He was instrumental in promoting emigration to the colony, including over 1,000 women known as the *filles du roi* - the king's daughters.

<sup>11</sup> Some of the titles of the chapters are themselves self-explanatory as to the overarching theme of *The Old Régime*: 'Royal Intervention' (chap. XIII), 'Paternal Government' (XV), 'Canadian Feudalism' (chap. XVIII), 'Canadian Absolutism' (chap. XXIV).

<sup>12</sup> In the *History of Ferdinand and Isabella*, for instance, on the early history of Castile and Aragon, Prescott does not fail to point out the 'liberal principles of government' brought by the Visigoths to the Iberian Peninsula, who, in his view, shared with their Teutonic brothers 'the germ of some of those institutions which, with other nations, and under happier auspices, have formed the basis of a well-regulated constitutional liberty' (3). The same is true of Motley, who, in *The Rise of the Dutch Republic* also alludes to this Teutonic germ, writing that the Dutch Revolution, the English Revolution, and the American Revolution had all been part one chain of events: 'To all who speak the English language, the history of the agony through which the Republic of Holland was ushered into life must have peculiar interest, for it is a portion of the records of the Anglo-Saxon race - essentially the same, whether in Friesland, England, or Massachusetts' (iv).

<sup>13</sup> Turner had been a student of Herbert Baxter Adams, one of the above-mentioned professional historians, who taught him at Johns Hopkins in the 1880s.

<sup>14</sup> Their most influential works were, in the case of Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913), and with respect to Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (1909)

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<sup>15</sup> At the end of the Seven Years' War, or the French and Indian War, as it is often referred to on the North American continent, the Bourbons lost New France to Great Britain, as well as Spanish Florida, some Caribbean islands and Senegal. The terms of the agreement were set in The Treaty of Paris, also known as the Peace of Paris, signed on 10 February 1763 by the kingdoms of Great Britain, France and Spain.

<sup>16</sup> Henry Steele Commager, Louis Hartz and Daniel Boorstin are the names that come immediately to mind. Their most influential books were: Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind* (1950), Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955), Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans – The National Experience* (1965). It should not be forgotten, however, that the Progressive historians of the early twentieth century had already questioned this vision of American history.

<sup>17</sup> The titles of the following chapters of *The Old Régime* indicate their social subject matter: 'Marriage and Population' (chap. XVI), 'The New Home' (chap. XVII), 'Trade and Industry' (chap. XX), 'Morals and Manners' (chap. XXIII).

<sup>18</sup> Parkman quotes Jacques-René de Brisay de Denonville, Marquis de Denonville (1637-1710), Governor General of New France from 1685 to 1689, who in one of his letters to Jean-Baptiste Colbert, dated November 13, 1685, warns him of this real danger in Canadian society: 'Above all things, Monseigneur, permit me to say that the nobles of this new country are everything that is most beggarly, and that to increase their number is to increase the number of do-nothings. A new country requires hard workers, who will handle the axe and mattock. The sons of our councillors are no more industrious than the nobles; and their only resource is to take to the woods, trade a little with the Indians, and, for the most part, fall into the disorders of which I have had the honor to inform you.' (320)