

Teaching “en français”

In May 1925, historian George M. Wrong addressed the Canadian Historical Association on “The Two Races in Canada.” In his address, Wrong implored historians to take a greater interest in each other’s language, culture and history. He hoped that Francophone scholars might one day “discover romance” in Ontario’s folk history, and that Anglophone scholars would help “English-speaking people to understand the outlook of the French race occupying the valley of the St. Lawrence.” Wrong’s message reflected a broader concern among intellectuals about national unity in the wake the Conscription Crisis (1917-1918) and the fight for French-language education outside Quebec. They believed that scholars and academics had a crucial role to play in helping encourage cross-cultural interaction and understanding among the public. My research of this movement has brought about some reflection on my own recent engagement with the French-language teaching of history in Canada. Moreover, the current issue of the *Bulletin* contains a number of fascinating articles that touch on pedagogy and on the plight of the sessional professor, and I thought that I might share some of my own experiences.

Last fall, I was offered the opportunity to teach the French-language introductory survey course, “La formation du Canada,” at the University of Ottawa. At first, I had some misgivings about taking on the class, having never before taught in my second language. Was I truly prepared to put my French-language skills to the test in front of 150 students twice a week for an entire semester? To be sure, I would hardly be breaking new ground. Several of my colleagues had already taught or were teaching courses in their second language. Moreover, as a sessional prof with a family to help feed, I must take advantage of the opportunities (and wages!) that come my way, and I decided that it would be a good challenge. Besides, I thought, even if I crash and burn, I could at least tell myself that George Wrong would have approved of my efforts.

I have not regretted taking on the class. For their part, the students have been fairly magnanimous with regards to my French. I have received no complaints so far (teaching evaluations pending), although there have been a few hiccups. My mispronunciation of “alcool” as “al-kool,” and not the proper “al-kol,” for instance, was a source of both confusion and amusement. I have learned to apply a healthy dose of self-deprecating humour at moments like these, which the students appear to appreciate. Some of my “anglicismes” have resulted from using English words without the “proper” French pronunciation – one student corrected me on my pronunciation of “Dufferin” when I made reference to Quebec’s historic

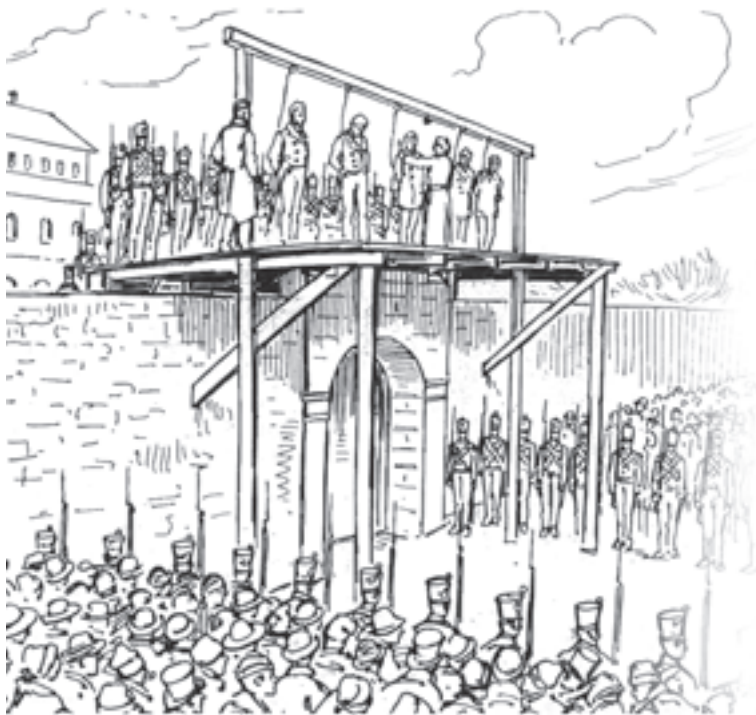
Dufferin Terrace, which, incidentally, was named after a *British* earl.

An early challenge for this class related to assigning readings. While there is an embarrassment of riches when it comes to English-language textbooks and readers for Canadian history, there are, disappointingly, very few options in French that cover the entire period and the country as a whole (and not just Quebec). I ended up assembling my own course pack after conferring with colleagues who had taught the course in French previously. While Quebec must play a central role in any Canadian survey history, I have attempted to venture beyond the lower St. Lawrence to find topics that might be of particular interest to my Francophone students. For instance, I have made a point of assigning readings that highlight the Canadian Francophonie both in and outside Quebec, including Franco-Albertans, Franco-Ontarians, and Acadians.

I get the distinct impression that at least some of my Francophone students have gotten a kick out of having an Anglo from Saskatchewan teach them Canadian history “en français” – or “en français” as the case may be.

For preparing my lecture notes and PowerPoint slides, I have made occasional use of the website “Linguee” (<http://www.linguee.fr/francais-anglais/>), which can translate sequences of words and in some cases entire sentences. Unlike other translation websites that often turn up little more than gobbledygook, Linguee searches for Internet pages that have already been translated in their entirety and that contain the given search terms. Search results often yield entries from Government of Canada websites. Not only does this provide for more reliable translations, but it also turns up results for unusual terms that are specific to Canadian history by pulling from sites like the Museum of Civilization, Parks Canada and Library and Archives Canada.

The history that I have been teaching in French has been essentially an updated version of what I had taught when I gave the course in English a few years ago. There have been some subtle differences, resulting from my own assumptions (rightly or wrongly) about people’s knowledge or perspective of the past



*Execution of Patriotes, Montreal 1839, drawn by Henri Julien /
L'exécution de Patriotes, Montréal 1839, dessin d'Henri Julien*

given their linguistic background. In the French-language class, for instance, I have found myself spending more time trying to contextualize historical Anglo-Canadian loyalty to Britain, the Crown and (in some cases) to Protestantism. Conversely, I had spent more time explaining to students in the English-language class why Francophone Canadians had historically been so deeply attached to their language and to Catholicism.

My class is a diverse bunch. In addition to Francophones from across Canada, there are several students from countries throughout the international Francophonie. (Interestingly, the latter have been quicker to correct my French – a legacy, perhaps, of France's penchant for enforcing strict observance of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation in its Second Colonial Empire?) There are also thirty Anglophone students taking the course. George Wrong would be pleased! At the University of Ottawa students can take courses in their second language and, if they wish, submit assignments in their first language. The university offers an excellent mentorship programme to assist these students.

Teaching this course has reminded me that not everyone has the background information provided by a high school history of Canada, and that even those who do have been taught very different versions of that history. When I taught this course in English a few years ago, I was taken aback to discover that some students did not know what “Acadians” were. I did not expect to run into a similar point of confusion in the French-language class. A number of Francophone students, however, asked whether “French Canadians” and “Acadians” were one-in-the-same, and I had to explain how Acadians form a distinct historical and cultural group. On a separate occasion, a student from the Democratic Republic of Congo asked me why Canadian history had less to say about Blacks than American history. In my defence, I *had* highlighted the stories of Mathieu da Costa, slavery

in New France, the Black Loyalists, BC Governor James Douglas, Victoria's Black police force of 1858, and, of course, Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railway. To get to the heart of the matter, however, I had to explain that, historically, Canada had a smaller Black population because it never developed a full-blown slave economy – not because Canadians were “nice,” per se, but because the climate had not allowed for slave-labour intensive crops such as cotton and sugarcane.

My students have also drawn analytical conclusions that I had not expected. While discussing the War of 1812, I screened the government's “The Fight for Canada / La lutte pour le Canada” commercial, in which the war heroes Isaac Brock, Tecumseh, Charles de Salaberry, and Laura Secord appear to be fighting side by side. I had assumed that the commercial's central premise – that by “defeating” the Americans a unified Canadian nationality had been born – would not resonate with a Francophone audience. Much to my surprise, many students appeared ready to accept the ad at face value. It was only after I pointed out that Brock and Tecumseh were both dead before de Salaberry had even seen combat that the students adopted a more critical approach and began to deconstruct the commercial's message. The following week, during my discussion of the Upper and Lower Canadian Rebellions of 1837-1838, I screened a few minutes of Pierre Falardeau's movie *Le 15 février* for the purposes of critical deconstruction. The film chronicles the imprisonment and execution of some of the Lower Canadian Patriotes. Interestingly, students were far more skeptical of the film's nationalist and anti-Anglo message than I had anticipated.

In addition to these surprises, there have been some very gratifying moments as well. I may be projecting or simply delusional, but I get the distinct impression that at least some of my Francophone students have gotten a kick out of having an Anglo from Saskatchewan teach them Canadian history “en français” – or “en français” as the case may be. A more tangible appreciation, perhaps, was expressed by a Muslim student from Djibouti, who told me that she liked that I incorporated marginalized peoples into the national narrative – at least more than her Discover Canada citizenship guide had done. On another occasion, an Acadian student thanked me for doing more to include Acadian history in the lectures – she felt that her people's story was all too often glossed over in favour of Québécois history. I should hope that any Canadian history survey would teach students something about the regional and cultural diversity inherent in the Canadian historical experience, and how this diversity pertains to both Canada's English- and French-speaking populations. I wonder: What would George Wrong have to say about that?

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