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Yves Frenette

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A Canadian-American Historian – my career in Canadian Studies

*Yves Frenette*¹

Am I a Canadianist? For a long time, I asked myself this question, my scholarly identity having never been clear. When I was a young scholar, it somewhat impacted negatively on my search for a permanent position, but nowadays I do not ask this question anymore and I embrace wholeheartedly the blurriness that has characterized my career since it allowed me to do things I would not have done if I had confined my teaching and research within a national framework.

After having flirted like many boys of my age with the idea of becoming a policeman or a fireman, and with more originality perhaps, a notary,² at the age of ten I settled upon the past: either I would be an archeologist or a historian. I do not remember why the latter prevailed. What I do remember is that history became a passion which made me watch television series and films about all time periods and listen eagerly to my grandfather and father telling stories about old times. In high school I took as many history courses as possible that I was allowed to, and I did the same in CEGEP,³ in addition to courses in other humanities and social sciences. At Quebec City's Université Laval, where I was admitted in the fall of 1974, students had the option to major in one discipline and minor in another, or to pursue a specialized BA in one discipline. For me the path was clear: history, only history. Besides the first-year compulsory courses that covered all periods of western history

¹ I am extremely grateful to the Editor-in-chief of the journal, Dr. Jatinder Mann for his comments and suggestions on my article.

² In the French tradition, the practice of law in Quebec is divided between lawyers and notaries, the latter dealing mostly with real estate transactions and not pleading in court.

³ Here again Quebec is unique within Canada: after high school, you go to CEGEP (Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel) where you either spend three years being trained for the job market in an array of professions or you take preparatory courses for university.

and Canadian history, I took upper-level courses in Medieval and Modern European history, African history, United States of America (USA) history, and Quebec history. The last two were my favourites, and I wanted to combine them in Graduate School. Since doctoral studies south of the Canadian-American border was an option, I started to learn German, having heard that it could be a requirement in some Ph.D. programs. To perfect my English and under the influence of a visiting professor from Carleton University in Ottawa, I decided to go there for my MA since I could continue to take courses on the History of Canada and the History of the USA, and since I could write my papers in French. At Carleton in 1977-78, I discovered the rich historiography of slavery and I thought about applying to the Ph.D. Program at the University of Rochester where Eugene Genovese – a leading expert on the USA South and slavery – taught. But before embarking on my doctoral studies, I wanted to take a year off to travel in Europe as was the fashion among young people at the time. Circumstances would lead me in another direction.

In the summer of 1978, I was working on a local heritage project in my hometown of Cap-Santé when I heard on the radio that a plane carrying the members of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada had crashed in Newfoundland. Several historians died, including Marc La Terreux, one of my professors at Laval, who was Chair of the Board. His colleague Jean Hamelin took upon himself to make sure that Marc La Terreux's research and publication projects would come to fruition. Among this was a History of the Gaspé region of Quebec. Jean Hamelin hired me and other recent graduates for a research contract that was supposed to last a few months. It took three years, and my status was upgraded to

that of co-author.⁴ Since I had to be based in Quebec but anxious to start my doctorate, I stayed at Laval where I worked under Yves Roby on the history of the French-Canadian community of Lewiston, Maine.⁵ I may have given up doing a Ph.D. in the USA but by studying migrations between Quebec and New England I was still pursuing my goal of becoming both a Canadianist and a USA specialist. After the launching of the book in the fall of 1981, I moved south of the border to do archival research for my thesis. However, by the summer of 1983 I had run out of money. Salvation came through a last-minute job opening at the University of Maine at Orono (UMO): It was the middle of July and they needed someone to start teaching six weeks later. Only two other people applied and I was chosen despite my All But Dissertation (ABD) status and my somewhat basic English.

At that time UMO was a Canadian Studies powerhouse. It was probably the university outside of Canada offering the most Canadian-content courses, and in the Faculty of Arts, every department had at least one expert on Canada. In history, there were two of us. The Canadian-American Center (CAC) was a hub for professors, students, and anybody else interested in the neighbour to the north. It held lectures, conferences, symposia, and other activities. Indeed, the CAC was very dynamic but it was not always easy to distinguish between scholarly and promotional events as was often the case for such centers funded by the Canadian government.

I spent two years in Maine. In 1985 my spouse at the time was hired on a three-year contract at the University of Washington and we moved to Seattle. This is where I wrote my thesis. I also started to look for a tenure-track position in either Canadian or USA history. I applied to many places in both countries and even had a

⁴ Jules Bélanger, Marc Desjardins, and Yves Frenette, *Histoire de la Gaspésie* (Montreal: Boréal, 1981).

⁵ Yves Frenette, "La genèse d'une communauté canadienne-française en Nouvelle-Angleterre: Lewiston, Maine, 1800-1880" (Ph.D. Thesis: Université Laval, 1988).

couple of interviews but it did not take me long to realize that contrary to my expectations, specializing in Canadian-USA history was not an asset. Quite the contrary; for Canadian history jobs I was too much of a USA specialist and for USA history jobs I was too much of a Canadianist. In this context, I felt lucky when I was offered a one-year position at Lewiston's Bates College where I taught Canadian history and USA history, and where part of my duties consisted in giving public lectures to the local Franco-American community on which I had just written my dissertation. It was a perfect mix for me.

Stable employment came in the fall of 1988 at Glendon College, the bilingual campus of York University in Toronto. The job was in USA history and some of my colleagues would eventually tell me that they had not supported my candidacy, since they doubted that I was a 'pure' USA specialist. At Glendon I immersed myself in developing and teaching courses on the USA in the 20th century, and on immigrant, Black, and Francophone America. In the end, the colleagues who were recalcitrant to my hiring were proven right; slowly but surely I was pulled again and again toward Canadian Studies. First, by teaching an undergraduate course on Canadian-USA Relations. Second, by creating a graduate seminar on North American immigration and ethnic history which was very popular with second-generation immigrant students who without surprise elected to write papers on their own ethnic group. Third, by expanding my research interests to Canada's Francophone minorities, a move that resulted in publications and a website – a medium which was then in its infancy.⁶ Fourth, by making professional contributions to the field: From 1994 to 1998 I was Canadian Studies Coordinator at Glendon which involved restructuring the

⁶ Jacques Cotnam, Yves Frenette, and Agnès Whitfield, Eds., *La francophonie ontarienne: Bilan et perspectives de recherche* (Ottawa: Le Nordir, 1995); Yves Frenette, *Brève histoire des Canadiens français* (Montreal: Boréal, 1998); Yves Frenette, ed., *Francophonies canadiennes: Identités culturelles* <http://sites.ustboniface.ca/francoidentitaire>.

Program, going to national and regional meetings, and getting to know personally some pioneers of Canadian Studies such as Tom Symons whose 1975 report is considered as a founding act.⁷ I also got involved in the Association of Canadian Studies. For instance, I was Chair of its 1996 Annual Conference which took place at Brock University in St. Catharines (Ontario).⁸ Closer to my scholarly interests, between 1997 and 2004, I was on the Steering Committee of the Réseau de la recherche sur la francophonie canadienne which I chaired from 2000 to 2004, and for several years I sat on the Director's Academic Council at the Multicultural History Society of Ontario and I was a member of its Encyclopedia Project's Editorial Committee.⁹ In addition, I did consulting work for the Ontario Ministry of Education and for Francophone Schoolboards, and I was a frequent commentator in the media on issues pertaining to Francophone Canada. In my eighteen years at Glendon I was thus leading a double life teaching mostly USA history and researching mostly Canadian history, more specifically French-Canadian history. However, in the last years of my tenure, I developed a continental perspective that has endured to this day.¹⁰

⁷ T. H. B. Symons, *To Know Ourselves: The Report of the Commission on Canadian Studies*. 2 vols. (Ottawa: Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 1975). For a history of Canadian Studies in Canada, see Dirk Hoerder, *To Know Our Many Selves: From the Study of Canada to Canadian Studies* (Athabasca: AU Press, 2010).

⁸ Joy Cohnstaedt and Yves Frenette, Eds., *Canadian Cultures and Globalization* \Cultures canadiennes et mondialisation, *Canadian Issues* \Thèmes canadiens 19 (1997).

⁹ Paul Robert Magosci, ed., *Encyclopedia of Canada's Peoples* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Yves Frenette, Marcel Martel, and John Willis, Eds., *Envoyer et recevoir: Lettres et correspondances dans la diaspora francophone* (Quebec City: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2006); Thomas Wien, Cécile Vidal, and Yves Frenette, Eds., *Du Québec à l'Amérique française: Histoire et mémoire* (Quebec City: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2006); Yves Frenette, Étienne Rivard and Marc St-Hilaire, Eds., *La francophonie nord-américaine* (Quebec City: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2012); Yves Frenette and France Martineau, *Les voyages de Charles Morin, charpentier canadien-français* (Quebec City: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2018); France Martineau, Yves Frenette, Annette Boudreau, and Françoise Gadet, Eds., *Les francophonies nord-américaines: Langues, frontières et idéologies* (Quebec City: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2018); Yves Frenette, Marie-Ève Harton, and Marc St-Hilaire, Eds., *Déploiements canadiens-français et métis en Amérique du Nord (18^e-20^e siècles)* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of History & University of Ottawa Press, 2023).

In 2006 I left York University for the bilingual University of Ottawa to become the Director of the Center for Research on French-Canadian culture (CRCCF) which also collected documents and had a program of publications, with seven staff members devoted to these tasks. Having been founded in 1958, it was the oldest research center on Francophones in North America, if not in the world,¹¹ but at the time of my arrival it had lost some of its dynamism and prestige. I thus spent much energy in securing its place in the university community, the Francophone community of Ontario, and the Francophone world. As for teaching, it was a nice mix of undergraduate and graduate courses in history (methodology, Canada, USA), in addition to a fourth-year Canadian Studies course.

As Director of the CRCCF, I *de facto* sat on the Executive Committee of the Institute of Canadian Studies. Created in 1997 by historian Chad Gaffield, the Institute had its heyday in the first years of the 21st century, thanks to its Founding Director's drive and connections, and to the financial support provided by the federal government and the University of Ottawa. But by 2010 these monies had vanished and the number of students in the Undergraduate Canadian Studies Program was declining. This is the context in which I became Acting Director of the Institute, a position I occupied for three years. Still the Institute had some assets: three permanent staff, the prestigious annual Bronfman Lecture, a program to host International Fellows, and an Interdisciplinary Ph.D. Seminar that I taught twice and which gave the students who took it the mention 'Canadian Studies' on their diploma. I worked hard to promote the Institute, and I organised many events in partnership with other centers and departments and with embassies, but it was not enough. In

¹¹ Yves Frenette, ed., *Le Centre de recherche en civilisation canadienne-française 1958-2008: Archives, recherche, diffusion* (Ottawa: Le Nordir & CRCCF, 2008).

the age of Globalisation, Canadian students wanted to expand their horizons (who could blame them?), and consequently Canadian-content courses suffered. After a mandatory review which was rather negative, we had to close our Undergraduate Program. The *coup de grâce* came with the transformation of the Institute into an Institute of Canadian and Indigenous Studies, a move I opposed because I thought that Indigenous Studies should have its own institute. But for financial reasons It was not to be. Foreseeing what was to come, I then proposed that the Institute of Canadian Studies be closed but the University did not want that: being in the National Capital, the University of Ottawa wanted to show the federal government and the world that it cared about the study of the nation. Indigenous Studies had resources, Canadian Studies almost none. It was a question of time before the latter disappeared.

When it happened, I had already left for the French-speaking Université de Saint-Boniface (USB) in Winnipeg where I had been offered a Canada Research Chair on Migrations, Circulations, and Francophone Communities. My teaching at USB is divided between the History of the USA and the History of the Canadian West. I also supervise students in our MA Program in Canadian and Intercultural Studies. Because of the many international contacts I had made in Ottawa, I was invited to teach in France, Germany, and Belgium, and I attended many conferences throughout Europe. With the leverage of my Chair, I secured funding for two major research projects, including the 2019-2027 Partnership Grant: 'Three Centuries of Francophone Migrations (1630-1940)' that comprises 41 researchers and 25 institutional partners, in addition to Post-doctoral Fellows, Graduate, and Undergraduate students and support staff. Most of the contributors are Canadian and there are also Americans, British, French, and Belgians. My hiring at Saint-

Boniface coincided with my becoming the Board Member in charge of Public Advocacy at the Canadian Historical Association during the Conservative Government of Stephen Harper who aimed, among other things, to reinstate the British component of Canadian identity to the detriment of bilingualism, multiculturalism, and Indigeneity. For three years I acted as a near-official critique of the government's memory policies.¹²

Thus, for more than forty years I have been a historian whose teaching and scholarship have embraced Canada and the USA from local, regional, national, and continental perspectives. Occasionally, I also delved into Transhemispheric and Transatlantic Studies¹³ – a path that I plan to pursue.

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¹² Yves Frenette, "Conscripting Canada's Past: The Harper Government and the Politics of Memory," *Canadian Journal of History/Annales canadiennes d'histoire* 19 (Spring-Summer 2014): 49-65.

¹³ Yves Frenette and Gabriele Scardellato, "The Immigrant Experience and the Creation of a Transatlantic Epistolary Space: A Case Study," in *More than Words: Readings in Transport, Communication and the History of Postal Transportation*, ed. John Willis (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2007), 189-202; Rosana Barbosa and Yves Frenette, "De l'Amérique du Nord au Brésil: Deux épisodes d'immigration francophone dans la deuxième moitié du XIX^e siècle," in *Les Français au Brésil (XIX^e - XX^e siècles)*, eds. Laurent Vidal and Tania Regina de Luca (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2011), 79-90; Yves Frenette, "Quelques réflexions sur les échanges épistolaires entre l'Amérique française et le Saint-Siège, 1840-1920," in *Le Saint-Siège, le Québec et l'Amérique française: Les archives vaticanes, pistes et défis*, Eds. Martin Pâquet, Matteo Sanfilippo, and Jean-Philippe Warren (Quebec City: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2013), 147-155; Paul-André Linteau, Yves Frenette, and Françoise Le Jeune, *Transposer la France: L'immigration française au Canada (1870-1914)* (Montreal : Boréal, 2017); Rosana Barbosa and Yves Frenette, "À la recherche des passagers du *Panola*: Un épisode de migration française et nord-américaine au Brésil, 1875-1876," *Études canadiennes/Canadian Studies* 86, no. 2 (2019); Yves Frenette, Isabelle C. Monnin, and Christine Nougaret, Eds., *Dans leurs propres mots: La mobilité dans les écrits personnels et les correspondances, XVII^e-XX^e siècles* (Winnipeg: Presses Universitaires de Saint-Boniface, 2020).

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