# HUMOROUS ASPERSIONS: THE VERBAL TRADITIONS OF DIFFERENCE IN THE EASTERN TOWNSHIPS*

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While there are probably more professional folklorists in Quebec than in any other province, and while the folklore institute (CELAT) at Université Laval is the one of the oldest in North America, there has been very little folkloristic research among the anglophone populations of the Eastern Townships. Aside from one book-length study of the Hebridean Scottish enclave in this part of the province (Doucette 1980), there has been no extensive treatment of the folklore of any of the English-speaking groups which settled in the Eastern Townships.

When I came to Quebec in late 1977, Jean-Claude Dupont, then Director of CELAT at Université Laval, suggested that I work among these anglophones, and thus it was that in the winter of 1978, I attempted a folkloristic survey of the anglophones of Brome and Missisquoi Counties (see Taft 1978b). The enormity of this task, considering that no other such work had been done previously, did not faze me then — I was full of youthful enthusiasm; today, I doubt that I would attempt anything so broad and unmanageable as the survey of all the folklore of a region. Still, in "tacking…between the small imaginings of local knowledge and the large ones of cosmopolitan intent" (to quote Geertz 1983: 15-16), I learned much from my foray into the Eastern Townships, and I think that I gained some insight into the nature of the folklore of this part of Quebec.

While all cultures and groups display a wide spectrum of traditional expressiveness — ranging from verbal forms to rituals and beliefs to material culture — different regions seem to gravitate more strongly towards one kind of expression than another. For example, Newfoundlanders are especially adept at expressing themselves in music and song; the people of Saskatchewan are particularly fond of masquing and drama.[1] In the Eastern Townships, however, I found that the liveliest tradition seemed to

be narrative in form — more specifically, people were particularly comfortable and skilled in the performance of humorous or descriptive anecdotes, usually told within the context of casual conversation.

My observations in this matter, however, are based on a rather small sample, and as well, on a rather specific group of anglophones: most of those I interviewed were descendants of English-American and Dutch-American settlers who came to the Eastern Townships more than two hundred years ago. In addition, these people were mostly of the older generation, their birth years ranging from 1884 to 1931, with most born before 1910.[2] Their skill at storytelling, therefore, might be more a function of their anecdotage, than their ethnic or regional affiliation, and many did indeed engage in dramatics, dancing, singing and traditional occupations when they were younger. Yet whatever the reasons, their narrative abilities were considerable and noteworthy.

Their anecdotal repertoire was extensive, and taken as a whole, revealed much about their perceptions of their own history, their values, their sense of place, and their perceived relationships to other groups in the Eastern Townships. It is this last dimension upon which I will concentrate, for through their storytelling, they expressed much about the ethnic, social and geographical divisions in their community. Their sense of difference from one another created groups within groups — not only the "two solitudes" of francophone and anglophone — but also layers of social strata, based largely on attachments to the community, as well as on economic differences. Furthermore, their sense of locality and occupation created divisions based on relatively small geographical differences. Thus, while an outsider, such as myself, might see these anglophones as a rather homogeneous group, their own self-image was considerably complex, involving layers of identity which both separated and united individual anglophones in Brome and Missisquoi.

Indicative of the complexity of these conceptions of social difference is the following story: one woman explained to me that there were four kinds of people in Knowlton: the very rich summer people from Montreal, the not-so-rich summer people from Montreal, the middle-class residents (among which she placed herself), and the lower or working-class residents. As an afterthought, she added, "And then, of course, there are the French."[3]

The social division most obvious to both them and me, of course, was their distinctiveness from francophones. This distinction, though primarily based on ethnic background and language, was augmented or exacerbated by the fact that most anglophones

were Protestant, while the francophones were Catholic. More than once, I was told that religion — and from their perspective, the Catholic Church — was the main factor in separating these two communities; although on further probing, most of those I interviewed regretfully admitted that their own failure to learn and speak French widened the chasm. Their considerably ambivalent attitudes towards francophones — especially only one year after the Parti Québecois victory — is an entire study in itself, and I will not pursue it at length here.[4]

Yet the French-English division has revealed itself in the verbal traditions of these people for a very long time. The conflict of languages is at the heart of these traditions. As early as 1874, local performers put on *"Ici On Parle Français": A Farce in One Act* (Williams n.d.) at the Cowansville town hall,[5] and almost everyone recalled that, well into the present century, recitations of fractured Habitant English — especially the poetry of William Henry Drummond — were standard fare in schools, at concerts and at get-togethers.

Anecdotes about the French language or the francophone use of English show the people's concern over the "two solitudes" of the Eastern Townships. One of the younger women I interviewed told the following story, which is indicative:

> No, because my grandmother — it's really amusing — she always — when I talk to her on the phone — of course she's in a convalescent hospital. And quite a few of the nurses are French where they are. And she talks to me and she'll say — she always sort of whispers into the phone — and she said, "You know, they're mostly French here." Or when I'm there, she always goes like this [making a secretive posture] and tells me, "They don't talk English."

Stories of the francophone's English mistakes are common and hearken back to earlier dramatic traditions. One man told me of a local francophone:

> And he always told about — they weren't expecting this baby and they didn't have any clothes for it. So he told Mrs. Keeping they had to "dress it up naked." [laughter] That's the way he expressed it...He said he had "three children at once, and two twice" — two children twice — "and one many times." [laughter]

The humour here, of course, is not only at the expense of the man's use of English, but also of the large and poor families, which were a part of the common stereotype of the French

Catholic household.

From the anglophone perspective, the French were outsiders, even though they lived together in the same communities and conducted business with each other. But the French were not the only outsiders, as the anecdotal record shows. The people I interviewed often made the distinction between themselves and those who were not permanent residents in the community. Transients and peddlers were especially singled out for mention. For example, I was surprised to hear stories about gypsies, who used to travel through the countryside. These tales were of an international character, concentrating on the clever and not-so-clever thieving of the gypsies.[6] Like the gypsies, itinerant peddlers and other travelers were also marginal to the community, and thus subject, not only to stories, but also to pranks and other forms of anti-social behaviour. Note the following Hallowe'en prank story concerning a local peddler who was a well-known transient in Brome County many years ago:

> A: What about old Pat Squibb's horse there?
>
> B: He had a white horse and he used to have a wagon that he peddled different stuff around to the farmers, you know. Dry goods and cooking utensils and everything like this. And he kept the horse in a barn over there by the Methodist Church. So the boys — he was all white, the horse was — the boys figured they were going to fix Pat's horse up. So they striped him with tar. And they took the hair pretty well all off the horse. Yeah, and there was pretty well some trouble over that.

The major group of outsiders, however, were the people who came to the community in the summertime. As the woman from Knowlton pointed out, these Montrealers represented another social class, or at least distinction, which made them as alien to the local anglophones, as were the French population. Those I interviewed almost unanimously stated that they had little to do with the summer people, other than through business transactions — similar in many ways to their relationships with local francophones. I collected several anecdotes in which these outsiders — these urban rich — were brought down a peg or two, made to look foolish or put into some kind of embarassing situation.

The following story concerns a local garage mechanic who was known for being covered in grease when on the job. When lying on a roller-board underneath a car, he would usually grab a centrepole in the garage to haul himself out when he had finished his work.

> Well this one day he was working on Mrs. Babstock's car. And they were quite monied people. They were the Babstock's Bakery in Montreal and it was a big outfit. Anyway, the old lady was waiting for to get the oil changed and Pritch changed it. And he reached out around like that [mimics action] to pull himself out, and he put his hand right around Mrs. Babstock's leg like that, and he pulled himself right out. You can imagine what his hands were like. [laughter]

These stories of francophones, itinerants and summer people have a common function for those who tell them: in a humorous way, outsiders are described according to those characteristics which define them as outsiders. Through these anecdotes, people are able to name and comment upon the social divisions in their region. One might go so far as to say that these anecdotes help to empower the tellers against those who in one way or another are threatening to them: mysterious strangers, rich urban people, and certainly the dominant Quebec culture represented by the local francophone population. As Diane Tye has expressed it, the local character anecdote "aid[s] in the construction and negotiation of personal and social identity." (Tye 1989: 196)

But anecdotes which name and comment upon those who are in one way or another different from the norm are not restricted in topic to those outside the local anglophone community. The larger function of such narratives is to examine all forms of abnormality or deviance in the community. Thus, I heard many stories which cast humorous aspersions on community insiders. Some of these insiders were certainly "local characters" in one way or another, but in a sense, through the telling of such stories, almost anyone in the community could become a local character. Such anecdotes are a kind of gossip — a kind of social commentary on the way everyone in the community — at one time or another — deviates from what is expected.[7]

While these stories deal with social deviance, they are certainly not intended to be taken as serious commentaries or as preludes to some form of ostracism. They are humorous tales, after all, and the butts of the humour remain a part of the community, despite their deviations from expected behaviour. There are those, for example, who suffer from some disability or some affliction, and thus are the natural victims of storytellers.

> And at that time we had Barney Porter here for thirteen years. A great little worker. And he was mentally retarded. So anyway, we went out together one morning, and I said I wanted him to help, and I said, "All right, you can start digging a

> new well." Well he worked like a little cuss. He came down at noon and his face was longer than any horse you ever seen. I said, "How'd you get along?" Said, "The water's running in faster than I can dig it out." [laughter] I said, "That's what we want." He was discouraged as the devil.

Just as francophones were the victims of humour because of their English, anyone who had a speech problem or who used the language in a strange way became celebrated in anecdotes.

> We had this one fellow in town here, and he's telling the difference about the modern doctors and the old-time doctors back at that time, you see. He says, "Well you know in the old days, you go into the doctor there, and he'd look you over and examine you and all, and he'd go out in the back and he'd come back in with a hand full of pills. And it would be a dollar, you see. Office-call and pills and all, you see. Now perhaps those pills, they were nothing but a little bi-carburetor of soda, you see. Now you go to the doctor, and he look you over and he'll sit down there and he'll write you out a subscription. You'll have to take that subscription down to the druggist down there and have it repaired." [laughter]

Drunks, of course, were regular victims of the anecdote — especially stories of how their horses knew the route from the tavern to the drunk's home by heart and would drive their sleeping masters home after a night on the town. Laziness was also worth commenting upon, as in this anecdote:

> My grandfather had a great many apples, and there was a man in the neighbourhood who was noted for not being too amibitious. My grandfather thought that perhaps that his wife would be pleased to have some apples. So he said to him, "There are a great many apples there. You can have all the apples you like." And the lazy man said, "Are they bagged up?"

While the disabled, the confused, the drunk and the lazy were natural targets for the storyteller, so too were the worthies of the community — those who in one way or another had risen above the average through education, wealth or politics. Anecdotes about these people demonstrate the common social phenomenon, sometimes metaphorically referred to as "crab antics" — where, in a bucket full of crabs, the ones which manage to reach the top are pulled down again by those below (See Wilson 1973).[8] For example, a particular town councillor was known for being ostentatious and self-important. In a local minstrel show production, he

became the butt of the humour:

> They mentioned about him going up through the Pass there one day. He was going up through there and they said now here was a bull on one side of him and on the other side of him was a bear. So the interlocutor said, "Well now what do you suppose that Mr. Willicott did?" Well he said, "Naturally he shot the bear, because he could shoot the bull any time."

The authority of ministers, teachers and doctors was also tempered by humorous anecdotes, as in the following example:

> When I was born, the doctor named me after himself — Schuyler. And I had quite a joke on him one time, and I was in Cownasville getting my licence from Mrs. Houle. And she couldn't speak hardly any English and I couldn't speak no French. I was having a time to get that name so she'd spell it right on my licence. Doc came in. And I said, "Doc, you're just in time." He said, "Schuyler, what's wrong?" I said, "I'm trying to get this French woman to spell that name right." He said, "You know, you should feel yourself lucky. I named five boys after myself and you're the only one that lived." I said, "I don't blame the rest of them. They couldn't stand it."

Among those I talked with, geography and history were also topics of anecdotal commentary, as well as general discussion. Some discussed the events of the Fenian raids as though they had happened only a few years ago. One old man proudly told of his ancestor who, with only a cane as a weapon, captured three Hessian soldiers during the American Revolutionary War. The vibrancy of local history societies, and local history writing in the Eastern Townships speaks to the people's interest in their region. For example, I saw locally-made landscape paintings hanging in many homes, and such pictures often evoked discussion and anecdotes (see Taft 1978a).

While these shared interests have kept the region rather cohesive, they have also led to certain perceived divisions among the people. I was often told that those who lived just down the road were "different" in some way; usually this difference remained unspecified, although it was often implied that those "down the road" were less sophisticated, perhaps more folksy, perhaps more peculiar in their dialect, than whomever I was talking with at the moment. The heart of these geographical distinctions was the natural division between townspeople and farmers — and I collected many stories which described this division — but rivalries between one town and another were also a part of this perception of

geographical difference.

As a final example, let me quote from a man, who if living today, would be 107 years old. He had spent his entire life in Mystic — a village only a few kilometres from the town of Bedford in Missisquoi County.

> Mystic had a wonderful ball team. They could beat anything. But Bedford just wasn't in it. I can remember the last game that I knew of that we played was up in the Fuller pasture. And Bedford said that they were going to beat Mystic. So they sent over to St. Alban's [Vermont] and hired a Negro who was supposed to be a very good pitcher. Well it went all right until he hit the ball, went sliding into the base and broke his leg. Well anyway, Mystic beat Bedford. I can remember Pete Wagner, who was considerable of a character here in Mystic at that time. He was walking along and the Bedford people came along and they called out to him in what they thought was an insulting way, "Go on home and milk your cow!" "By God," Pete said, "I can do that too!" [laughs]

The implication here is that Pete, the farmer from Mystic, could beat Bedford at baseball as easily as he could milk his cow, but the local distinction between town and farm, urban and rural, is also a part of this anecdotal commentary.

I do not want to leave the impression that life in the Eastern Townships was particularly fractious. All communities and regions contain humorous apsersions among their repertoire of anecdotes; all peoples construct layers of difference in their view of society. My point, however, is that the kinds of narratives told in the Eastern Townships give us an insight into how this process works in the area under study — how the people of this region see themselves and how they discuss what they see.

## NOTES

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1. Understanding how specific geographical regions define themselves through their distinctive use of creative traditions has been central to folkloristic analysis since the earliest years of the discipline. Benjamin Botkin was one of the first North American folklorists to apply regionalism in a conscious way to folklore (see Hirsch 1987); for an overview of folklore and regionalism, see

Lightfoot 1983. The vitality of folksong performance in Newfoundland is evident from the work of Mercer 1979; while Saskatchewan's masking traditions have been investigated by Hunter 1983 and Taft 1989.

2. I interviewed a total of twenty-four people (seventeen in Brome County and seven in Missisquoi County) between 2 February and 10 April 1978. Of these, sixteen were men born in the following years: 1884, 1890, 1893, 1898, 1900, 1901, 1902, 1904 (two men), 1907, 1909 (two men), 1910, 1914, 1915 and 1929; eight were women born in the following years: 1901, 1908 (two women), 1909, c. 1910 (two women), 1915 and 1931.

3. All quotes are from Taft 1978b; all names have been changed, according to the general wishes of those I interviewed. I have somewhat altered these quotations for the sake of readability, removing false starts and other "accidents" of conversational speech, and supplying the noun for some pronouns for the sake of clarity.

4. As I discuss in my report (Taft 1978b: 10-24), attitudes towards francophones which I uncovered were not uniform, and many individuals exhibited ambivalent feelings towards francophones. While some maintained good social relations with francophones, others kept apart; some were accomodating towards the asperations of the francophone population, while others resented any change in the social dominance of anglophones in the Eastern Townships. Many blamed "outside forces" for the changing social structure in their region. Some considered that relations between the two language groups were closer in the past; for example, many noted that, when young, they often played with francophone children. The overall impression which I received was that business relations (and children's socializing) were the major points of contact between those I interviewed and their francophone neighbours, while other forms of contact were minimal.

5. In the copy of this book in the Brome County Historical Society collection, the Cowansville performances are noted in pencil on the title page.

6. In the two stories which I collected, the gypsies steal turnips and chickens. The ethnic stereotype of gypsies as thieves is ancient (see Roback 1944: 271) and has long been the subject of tales and ballads (see Sinclair 1906).

7. In a previous study (Taft 1979), I delved further into the local character anecdote in the Eastern Townships as a commentary on

everyday social deviations from normal behaviour. While most research on the local character anecdote examines its relationship to the extremes of social deviance (see Tye 1989 for a recent study), I prefer to place these stories within the wider context of general social legislation.

8. While Wilson applies this term to a study of a specific African-Carribean culture, wherein he investigates "the dialectal relation between the two principles, respectability and reputation" (p. 9), he makes clear in his introduction that his crab antics metaphor might be applied to any culture.

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