

CHAPTER VIII

La Revanche des Berceaux

Although the expression itself is quite familiar to most English-speaking Canadians, the full significance that "*La Revanche des Berceaux*" has had for French-Canadians can only be grasped by reading eulogies such as the following, in which the local French-language newspaper praises the virtues of a man from Beauce County who left some 600 descendants when he finally died at the age of 96:

"The grandfather of Mr. Philippon met an honorable death at the *Battle of the Plains of Abraham*; his grandson has well revenged this death by adding, through his own (sic!) efforts, an entire parish to French Canada."

Even during the insurrections of 1837, the French-Canadians had little expectation of reconquering the colony through force of arms. Until quite recently, however, they did, most earnestly, hope that the high rate of natural increase of the French-speaking population would, eventually, bring it to political dominance.

To encourage this hope, they could point to the historical fact that, during the last half of the Nineteenth Century and the early decades of the present century, an outpouring of surplus population from the rural parishes had succeeded in reversing the language picture at Montreal and in almost submerging the English language in such regions as the Eastern Townships and the Ottawa Valley.

The severe decline in birth rates among Canadians of British origin after World War I and the virtual cessation of immigration after 1930 were both factors encouraging this French dream. By the late 1930's, demographers of both language groups were beginning to admit the possibility of a Canada in which those of French mother tongue would be in the majority.

Even today, the illusion is not quite dissipated that rural Quebec is an inexhaustible source of new French-Canadians and that time is on the

side of the French language. The cold statistics, however, show that the reverse is now true.

Contrary to popular belief, the birth rate among French-Canadians has never been really phenomenal. At its peak, it was no higher than that prevailing generally among all ethnic groups in North America a century or so ago; the only exceptional factor was that families of French origin were slower than others to adopt limitations on the number of children.

At present, the typical family size among French-Canadians living in Montreal is hardly different from that observed among persons of British origin living in Toronto. However, one-third of the French-Canadians are still living in rural areas where families (among those of all origins) are usually more numerous than in the cities; in these areas, too, the old propaganda of the French-Canadian "nationalists" still lingers and there is more social pressure toward large families than would be found elsewhere.

The following table gives a ratio obtained by dividing the number of women of child-bearing age into the number of children aged 0-14. Unlike some other indices, this takes into account the effects of the most prevalent family-control measure practised in French Canada, the postponement of marriage (in 1961, 32% of the French-origin women in Quebec aged 15 years or over were still single, as compared to only 20% for British-origin women of the same age in Ontario). The actual figures have no significance in themselves but they do permit a comparison to be made between different ethnic groups and census years.

Table 22

Ratio of Children (0-14) to Women (20-44) among Population of British Origin in Ontario vs. that among Population of French Origin in Quebec, by Rural and Urban, Censuses of 1931-1961

	1931	1941	1951	1961
Of British origin, Ontario —				
rural	1.82	1.59	1.97	2.45
urban	1.23	1.05	1.22	1.74
all	1.42	1.22	1.39	1.88
Of French origin, Quebec —				
rural	3.00	2.66	2.86	3.20
urban	1.81	1.45	1.53	1.90
all	2.22	1.85	1.92	2.20

In 1931 and 1941, there were, for each French-origin woman living in Quebec, 50% more children than for her British-origin counterpart living in Ontario. By 1951, the difference had begun to narrow and the latest Census showed a gap of only 17%, a gap which may well disappear as the population of Quebec becomes increasingly urban.

However, comparison of French Quebec with British Ontario gives only part of the story, since the latter province is heavily urbanized and has a lower birth rate than that found in many other parts of English-speaking Canada. In Newfoundland, for example, the population of British origin had a child/woman ratio of 3.03 in 1961, only slightly below that of even the rural French-Canadians. For Canada as a whole, the ratio for those of British origin was 2.01 as against 2.25 for those of French origin and "La Revanche" has now become only a discredited dream.

If we consider all those of English mother tongue (rather than merely those of British origin), then the heavy upturn in the non-French birth rate in recent years is reflected in the figures of the following table.

Table 23

Number of Children of English, of French and of Other Mother Tongues, Canada, Censuses of 1931-1961

	1931	1941	1951	1961
French	33.7%	36.0%	33.4%	29.6%
English	51.4	51.4	60.1	62.6
Others	14.9	12.6	6.5	7.8
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

In 1931, the proportion of French-Canadians among the children had been well above that for the adult population (24.0%) but the spread actually widened even further during the next ten years and, by 1941, the propagandists of La Revanche were preparing a victory celebration. This proved premature, as can be seen from the last two columns of the above table, and by 1961 the proportion of children who reported their mother tongue as French was only slightly higher than the 26.4% which their language group represented among the adult population.

The three factors which combined to wipe out the French gains of 1931-1941 were:

1. A substantial increase in the birth rate of those of other origins during recent years.
2. Resumption of immigration on a large scale in the postwar years, with the children of immigrants generally assimilating to the English-speaking community.
3. Assimilation, on an increasing scale, of the younger generation of French ethnics living outside the Soo-Moncton limits (if the above table had been on the basis of ethnic origins, rather than of mother tongues, the French figure would have been 33.4% in 1961 vs. 34.8% in 1931).

Weighing the relative values of these three factors, we can say that, among the children reporting their mother tongue as English in 1961, approximately 6% did so as a consequence of the assimilation of French-speaking ancestors and a further 29% would have been of origins other than British or French. This leaves 65% as the contribution of British-origin families and shows the important role played by the postwar rise in the average size of such families.

Turning now to the most recent trends, we must switch our base and examine current vital statistics by provinces, as there is no breakdown available by language groups. Although this introduces some inaccuracies, it does, at least, permit the drawing of some important inferences.

Despite recent declines observed everywhere in North America, the latest figures show that there had been 19.1 births for every 1,000 persons living in Canada outside Quebec, during the 12-month period ended September 30, 1967.

Inside Quebec, however, the birth rate for the same period was only 17.9, which represented an almost unbelievable drop from the 28.5 reported as recently as 1959 and from the 31.1 peak reached in 1947. After deducting deaths, Quebec's natural increase in population during the period was only 66,000, as compared to an average of over 104,000 during the years 1956-1960.

The entire pattern of family life in French Canada has changed during the past quarter century. Even outside the cities, television has introduced new concepts and new scales of values; no longer is the size of the family dictated by old rural ideals, and the younger generation of French-Canadians is increasingly eager to have a greater share of worldly goods.

There are, even today, a few "last-ditch" nationalists who still hope that present trends can be reversed and who have been asking the provincial legislature to institute payment of family allowances on an ascending scale, as is now done in France, to encourage an increase in family size.

The more realistic demographers, however, point out that urbanization is increasing, with over half the population of Quebec already living in the three metropolitan centres (Montreal, Quebec and Hull) and that this, in combination with greater emancipation of Quebec women and the rise in general educational levels, can only result in a further downward movement of the province's birth rate.

"La Revanche des Berceaux", therefore, has now passed into the realm of fantasy.