

# Deporting the Truth: Tracking the Impact of Longfellow and Deportation Literature in Quebec

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I am sometimes told I have Acadian facial features, and indeed, I am of French Acadian descent. Acadia is most famous for the deportation of 1755, where Acadian French settlers were uprooted from their homes. The story of the Acadian deportation has been told for many generations and inspired numerous literary works about the deportation, which I refer to as “deportation discourse.” This genre began with American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who, decades after the event, wrote a fictional account of the deportation with his famous 1847 poem *Evangeline*. After Longfellow, deportation discourse became popular among both well-known Canadian authors such as Bliss Carman and lesser-known writers like Carrie J. Harris. Despite the Acadian deportation’s fame in Canada, particularly in the Maritimes and Quebec, little academic research has been conducted concerning the literary representation of the event and how deportation discourse may have influenced how the deportation has been, and continues to be, presented in history. What impact did Longfellow have on deportation discourse? How has deportation discourse affected the presentation of the Acadian deportation in Quebec history? This essay will answer these questions by tracking Longfellow’s influence on an alarming trend in deportation discourse: a gradual exaggeration of narrative and statistics, an oversimplification of history, and an intensifying inflammatory rhetoric. By undertaking this research, I hope to discover what roles Longfellow and Quebec historical sources played in the aforementioned trend and what the outcomes may mean for how the Acadian deportation is understood.

Longfellow’s poem *Evangeline*, originally published in 1847, is one of the earliest literary works that add a personal narrative to the Acadian deportation. The poem follows the life of Evangeline, an Acadian who

is forced to separate from her true love, Gabriel Lajeunesse, due to the deportation. She eventually finds him again, years later, on his death bed, after her youth had been wasted away. One of the key elements of the poem is the “everyday narrative” used to elicit sympathy for the Acadian cause while discouraging critical thinking.<sup>1</sup> By personifying the deportation through Evangeline, Longfellow makes the reader feel they have a personal stake in the event. Indeed, the audience’s sorrow and sympathy are intensified through the portrayal of Evangeline, “the pride of the village.”<sup>2</sup> Longfellow specifically chose to use Evangeline, not only because she was a character who may have already had a little fame, but because a female protagonist would associate Acadians with stereotypical, weak, and sympathetic female attributes such as vulnerability and meekness, a common trope in colonial literature.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Evangeline is described as the “ideal” woman: selfless, forgiving, motherly, and even angelic. Her selflessness is demonstrated when she stays home and takes care of her seventy-year-old father and the household after her mother presumably passed away. She also works as a nurse after she is deported, spending her life taking care of others. Her forgiving nature is shown at the end of the poem when she finds Gabriel upon his deathbed, and instead of being angry with God, she thanks the Lord for letting her see her love one last time. Her motherly attributes are most apparent when the narrator ironically states that she “would bring to her husband’s house delight and abundance, filling it full of love and the ruddy faces of children.”<sup>4</sup> However, the most important description of Evangeline is found in an angelic motif that reflects her innocence and piety. Her very name consists of the word “angel.” Her physical appearance is delicate and suggests a heavenly beauty with a “celestial brightness—a more ethereal beauty—shone on

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<sup>1</sup>Mariana Souto-Manning, “Critical Narrative Analysis: The Interplay of Critical Discourse and Narrative Analyses,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 27 no. 2 (2012): 164, accessed February 13, 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2012.737046>; Souto-Manning, “Critical Narrative Analysis,” 167.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Evangeline* (London: Macmillan, 1928), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Watson, *The Politics and Poetics of Irish Children’s Literature* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2003), 23.

<sup>4</sup>Longfellow, *Evangeline*, 13; At the beginning of the poem the narrator knows that Evangeline will never be given the opportunity to be a wife and mother as she decides to wait for Gabriel, but the reader does not know this yet.

her face and encircled her form.”<sup>5</sup> Even her pet cow is described as angelic, and “proud of her snow-white hide.”<sup>6</sup> Just as angels are often depicted wearing white robes, the cow similarly wears its white (not spotted) hide like a holy garment. Evangeline’s lover, Gabriel, is also part of the angelic motif as he is presumably named after the biblical Archangel Gabriel. In short, Evangeline is portrayed as the “perfect” woman in order to make readers mourn the fact that such tragic circumstances could befall a good woman.

Another key element of Longfellow’s poem is an oversimplification and hyperbolizing of history. The distinction between the poem’s heroes and villains is clear: the innocent French Acadians are blessed by God, while the British are “tyrants of England” who “shall drive you way from your homesteads, burning your dwellings and barns, and stealing your farms and your cattle.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, one of the primary ways in which Longfellow oversimplifies the deportation is by not acknowledging the revolutionary zeitgeist of the era. Longfellow, writing almost one hundred years after the deportation occurred, assumed that the Acadians were deported because the British Crown ordered it, but he does not cite any sources, meaning there is no way to verify where he got his information. Moreover, there is no mention that only twenty years after the deportation at Grand-Pré, the American Revolution officially began, and by 1755 revolutionary American ideas and powerful revolutionaries such as Edward Holyoke had already been politically and socially active for some time.<sup>8</sup> Longfellow also fails to examine the role American revolutionaries could have played in the deportation.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, he does not give a satisfactory reason as to

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<sup>5</sup> Longfellow, *Evangeline*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Longfellow, *Evangeline*, 15.

<sup>7</sup> Longfellow, *Evangeline*, 37, 81.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, while at Harvard, Holyoke taught numerous revolutionary leaders including Samuel Adams, Thomas Cushing, Josiah Quincy Jr and James Otis. Holyoke. “The Holyoke Diaries, 1709-1856,” *Internet Archive*, 1911, accessed April 4th, 2018, <https://archive.org/details/holyokediaries1700dowg>; “Foreshadowing the American Revolution,” *The Belcher Foundation*, accessed July 15th, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Some documents seem to indicate that the deportation may have been a revolutionary act. For instance, American born and raised revolutionary sympathizer Governor J. Belcher asked “that the expulsion of the French Acadians be treated as a military expense.” “NORTH AMERICA: Colonies: Nova Scotia: Lieut Governor J Belcher: asks that cost of...,” *The National Archives*, accessed November 8th, 2013.

why the Crown would choose to deport the Acadians, people who were accepted by the Crown as “His Majesty’s ‘new subjects.’”<sup>10</sup> The only motive he can give is that it was “his Majesty’s pleasure.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, by simply assuming the guilt of the British Crown and not differentiating between English loyalists and American revolutionaries, Longfellow sets a trend for future deportation discourse: an oversimplified, unverified version of history presented as fact through an everyday narrative.

One of the most famous poets inspired by Longfellow is Canadian author Bliss Carman. His 1893 poem “Low Tide on Grand Pré” alludes to *Evangeline* as it states, “a grievous stream...goes wandering as if to know why one beloved face should be so long from home and Acadie.”<sup>12</sup> Referring to Acadia in its French name and stating, “one beloved face” is a clear reference to *Evangeline*.<sup>13</sup> Leaving *Evangeline* nameless creates the illusion of further separation between her and the shores of her home. The theme of separation is also emphasized through the setting of the poem as it takes place at low tide, highlighting the impossibility of the French settlers to return home since ships would be physically unable to reach the shore. Like Longfellow, Carman also uses personification to romanticize the deportation, making the reader feel a personal sense of loss for the Acadians. Carman personifies the sea at Grand-Pré, describing it as overcome with melancholy and grief as if it were one of the people exiled or separated from their Acadian family. The personification is meant to evoke sorrow as the audience witnesses the sea’s almost physical pain, the “aching barrens wide, a sigh like driven wind or foam; in grief the flood is bursting home.”<sup>14</sup> As Longfellow gave life to the deportation through two separated lovers, Carman gives it life through a different kind of separated love, the break of a familial love between

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<sup>10</sup> “The Royal Proclamation of 1763 and the Use of Languages,” University of Ottawa, accessed July 14th, 2017, [https://slmc.uottawa.ca/?q=royal\\_proclamation\\_1763](https://slmc.uottawa.ca/?q=royal_proclamation_1763).

<sup>11</sup> Longfellow, *Evangeline*, 36; On the other hand, American revolutionaries would have a clear motivation to deport the Acadians; it would be a clear act against the Crown and a good way to demonize the British in the eyes of the French.

<sup>12</sup> Bliss Carman, “Low Tide on Grand Pré: A Book of Lyrics,” *Early Canadiana Online* (1893): 12, accessed November 1st, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Carman, “Low Tide on Grand Pré,” 12.

<sup>14</sup> Carman, “Low Tide on Grand Pré,” 14.

the Acadians and their home, making it seem as if a crime against nature had been committed.

Longfellow's impact on deportation literature can also be seen in lesser known authors, such as Canadian poet Carrie J. Harris, whose 1896 poem "Land of Evangeline" describes Acadia as "the land made known to fame by the pen [of] our beloved Longfellow."<sup>15</sup> Like Carman, Harris takes Longfellow's original story and intensifies the negative affects. However, unlike Carman, Harris hyperbolizes the deportation to the point where the story is almost unrecognizable. Instead of appealing to sorrow and pity, Harris appeals to hatred and anger, accusing the British of having committed "one of the most cruel struggles ever recorded in history."<sup>16</sup> Through inflammatory rhetoric, she dehumanizes the English, portraying the deportation like a massacre or a genocide: "those lovely fields stained red with human gore...the spirits of the departed Frenchmen were hovering around me."<sup>17</sup> She even mentions people digging up a French graveyard and selling bones to tourists, as if Acadians were being oppressed even in their deaths.<sup>18</sup> Deportation discourse prior to Harris focuses more on evoking pity and sympathy than demonizing the British, but through Harris' poetry, one can notice a change of focus to anger and hate, making the deportation a perfect tool for propaganda. Harris' work gives a glimpse of the huge impact Longfellow's *Evangeline* has had in terms of propaganda outside of literature, particularly in the Maritimes where "most everything is named Evangeline around here" including brands of "bicycles, oil, flour, butter, milk, hot sauce, chocolate, cola, mineral water, apples, bread, syrup, eggs, [and] toothpaste."<sup>19</sup> Despite not being as popular as Carman, Harris shows an important shift in deportation discourse from appealing to sympathy to hyperbolizing the deportation, using inflammatory rhetoric that dehumanizes English speakers. Though Harris' intent with her poem remains unclear, she may have been attempting to divulge political convictions through narrative to create a "false impression of the absence of political views

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<sup>15</sup> Carrie J Harris, "A Modern Evangeline," *Early Canadiana Online* (1896): 5, accessed November 1st, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Harris, "A Modern Evangeline," 5.

<sup>17</sup> Harris, "A Modern Evangeline," 5-6.

<sup>18</sup> Harris, "A Modern Evangeline," 8-9.

<sup>19</sup> Harris, "A Modern Evangeline," 8; "Évangéline: Histoire d'une collection."

and ideological concepts.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, this is a rhetorical tactic which Québécois historic sources rely on as well.

Longfellow was the first of many to portray the Acadian deportation through an appeal to emotions, simplification of history, and inflammatory rhetoric. He created a cultural icon, popularizing Evangeline and inspiring others to retell her story while they cried “bushels of tears which have been wasted over the sufferings of a person who never had any existence.”<sup>21</sup> Through Evangeline, Longfellow helped start a kind of discourse which portrays the Acadian deportation in a manner that makes it a powerful tool for propaganda. The portrayal of all English people as one solid, guilty, unit is a dangerous propaganda opportunity since blame is extended to any English speaker, adding fuel to the fiery feud between French and English Canadians. Indeed, the separation of “the French and English” Canadians is quite clear in deportation discourse.<sup>22</sup> As I will demonstrate, in Quebec, the deportation is used to further divide a population which was once united through their “determination not to be American.”<sup>23</sup> The rhetoric and dehumanization used in deportation discourse is key to the separation of Canadians. As shown by Harris, dehumanizing a population through an everyday narrative, encourages people to respond to history emotionally rather than critically as it creates the illusion of being non-political.<sup>24</sup>

Deportation discourse thus presents a golden opportunity for Quebec separatist propaganda. Twentieth century Quebec literature concerning the deportation often utilizes deportation discourse, using the same exaggerated narrative as Harris to create tension and disdain between French and English Canadians to advance apolitical agenda aimed at separation. One of the most evident works of Québécois deportation propaganda is the magazine *L'Oiseau Bleu*. This magazine dehumanizes the British and embellishes history to evoke negative affects. For example, several assumptions with no evidence are presented on the cover page of the June-July 1926 edition. Firstly, there

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<sup>20</sup> Souto-Manning, “Critical Narrative Analysis,” 165.

<sup>21</sup> Harris, “A Modern Evangeline,” 9.

<sup>22</sup> Carman, “Low Tide on Grand Pré,” 7.

<sup>23</sup> George Grant, *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* (Montreal: McGill's University Press, 2005), 69.

<sup>24</sup> Souto-Manning, “Critical Narrative Analysis,” 165.

are two enormous ships and a lot of smoke rising in the distance over the sea as if unseen ships were on fire, implying a huge number of Acadians being deported. Secondly, the soldier on the cover is wearing a red coat, once more convicting the British of the deportation without question. Within the magazine, Acadian exiles are said to be killed by “any Anglophone or savage.”<sup>25</sup> The author oversimplifies the narrative by grouping loyalists and revolutionaries into one group. Moreover, the rhetoric dehumanizes Anglophones, making them sound like uncivilized animals. Like many before him, De Salvail also uses inflammatory rhetoric to fuel anger, claiming that deported Acadian families were split up and that the fathers were forced into slavery or sent to jail, having their children taken away.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps most alarming, however, is how the author makes these claims without citing any of his work. Clearly, the author’s intent is not to show a critical account of history but simply to use history to evoke negative emotions within the audience. As people tend to simply adopt narratives which are presented to them, the damage is already done through the accusations alone; the French masses are furious and they will remember their disdain when they vote at referendums.<sup>27</sup> Twentieth century separatist propaganda exploits deportation discourse tropes and goes uncontested as the truth becomes increasingly buried within the past through layer upon layer of oversimplified history and negative affects.

Quebec separatist propaganda involving the Acadian deportation has even found its way into history books. Léandre Bergeron’s 1971 *The History of Quebec: a Patriote’s Handbook* is a prime example of how history has become entangled with propaganda using the affect, oversimplification and rhetoric found in deportation discourse. Bergeron completely ignores the revolutionary presence at the time of the deportation, presuming the guilt of the British. Like *L’Oiseau Bleu*, Bergeron also chooses to incorporate and omit information depending on his need. Additionally, he does not cite any information in his passage on the deportation of the Acadians. Once more, the truths of his statements are irrelevant; his goal is not to critically engage readers, but to infuriate French Canadians by making them feel oppressed.

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<sup>25</sup> Elie De Salvail, “L’Oiseau Bleu” (Montréal: Société St-Jean Baptiste de Montréal, Juin-Juillet, 1926), 2, accessed July 15th, <http://collections.banq.qc.ca/ark:/52327/2225708>.

<sup>26</sup> De Salvail, “L’Oiseau Bleu,” 3.

<sup>27</sup> Souto-Manning, “Critical Narrative Analysis,” 167.

Bergeron's inflammatory rhetoric consists of dehumanizing Anglophones, claiming "it was hoped that by flooding the colony with English immigrants the French could be made to disappear," doing a "housecleaning" of Nova Scotia.<sup>28</sup> He uses rhetoric, as Harris does, not only to create disdain among French Canadians but also among English Canadians who feel offended at being dehumanized. Indeed, Bergeron dehumanizes all English speakers, claiming they "wanted to get rid of the Acadians."<sup>29</sup> As demonstrated, there is an alarming trend surrounding the Acadian deportation in Quebec; it appears that writers were more concerned with driving a wedge between French and English Canadians than presenting historical truths. The result is that separatist Quebec propaganda becomes confused with history.

Moreover, the embellishment of history is also shown through statistics. According to Longfellow in 1847, "more than a thousand persons" were deported.<sup>30</sup> However, according to Bergeron in 1971, the number increases to seven thousand.<sup>31</sup> Decades later, in 2007, the *Chamber's Dictionary of World History* reported that ten thousand Acadians were deported.<sup>32</sup> The further we get from 1755, the more Acadians are claimed to have been deported.

Whether he was aware of it or not, Longfellow set into motion a new niche genre of literature, deportation discourse. It became popular among authors and readers because of the powerful emotions it elicits through an everyday narrative, historic simplification, and inflammatory rhetoric. Due to its emotion rather than logic invoking characteristics, deportation discourse influenced Quebec separatist propaganda, which uses the deportation to push its agenda, and it is this propaganda that is being purposefully mistaken for history by writers and institutions in Quebec. Deportation discourse gives insight into the origins of the political convictions deportation propaganda instils within readers. However, history is not as simple as deportation discourse makes it

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<sup>28</sup> Léandre Bergeron, *The History of Quebec: A Patriote's Handbook* (Toronto: Union Labour, 1971), 36.

<sup>29</sup> Bergeron, *The History of Quebec*, 36.

<sup>30</sup> Longfellow, *Evangeline*, xlv; Keeping in mind that Longfellow was writing about the deportation almost 100 years after it happened, it is likely that a thousand may also be an exaggeration from the original number.

<sup>31</sup> Bergeron, *The History of Quebec*, 36.

<sup>32</sup> "Acadia," *Chambers Dictionary of World History*. (Edinburgh: Chambers Harrap Publishers, 2007), 5.

seem. More in-depth interdisciplinary research needs to be conducted to verify why the Acadians were deported. Indeed, as we are living in a post-truth era, it is more important than ever to be able to analyze propaganda, narrative, and discourse critically.

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