



Book Review

Dictionary of French Family Names in North America. By MARC PICARD. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020. Pp. xxvi + 719. ISBN:1-5275-5853-3; ISBN13: 978-1-5275-5853-3. £80.99 (Paperback).

This new dictionary is an updated version of two previously published works by Picard, namely his *Dictionnaire des noms de famille du Canada français* (2010), the material of which is now available in English for the first time, and his *Dictionary of Americanized French-Canadian Names* (2013), a true companion to the first title, accounting for the numerous alterations French family names underwent as a result of the Great Quebec Exodus to English-speaking Canada and especially to New England and the American Midwest from about 1840 to the 1920s. Although the author does not provide statistics on the total number of entries in this new compilation, one can extrapolate from the average number per page and say with reasonable confidence that it contains more than 14,000 names and variants. As such, it represents a remarkable achievement, being the most extensive lexicographic account of French family names on the North American continent.

In the introduction, the author explains why the traditional approach to the anthroponymic treatment of these surnames would have proved challenging, given the multiple alterations they underwent since their transfer from Europe to the North American continent. In many cases where no link with the original European source could be established, it would have been necessary to leave the origin undetermined. Picard's unique solution to this problem has been to turn to the extensive French-Canadian genealogical data provided by two authoritative dictionaries (Jetté 1983; White 1999) as well as several internet sites, and to use this information to complete his anthroponymic findings.

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Using data from genealogy and anthroponymy, Picard was able to trace names back in time and link them to earlier known forms in Europe. For example, the name *Marleau* represents somewhat of a mystery as it cannot be found in European anthroponymic sources: it is found only in North America. Interestingly, genealogical research reveals that the name was recorded only around the end of the 18th century and that before then it was spelled *Merlot*, which can be traced back to the first bearer of the name, who came from Brittany. This unique blending of two disciplines related to the study of family names has revealed information not only on the etymology of the surnames but also on the identity of the first French-speaking migrants who brought them to the North American continent.

Most family names can be traced to the original stratum of settlers who came to Quebec and Acadia from France in the 17th and 18th centuries. After the British Conquest, this migration came to an abrupt end and both the speech of the settlers and their surnames then began to evolve on their own, separated from their original sources. The author illustrates the diverging results of this separation by comparing two recent statistical compilations of family names in Quebec (Duchesne 2006) and France (Fordant 2020) which reveals that the five most frequent family names in Quebec—*Tremblay*, *Gagnon*, *Roy*, *Côté*, *Bouchard*—and France—*Martin*, *Bernard*, *Thomas*, *Robert*, *Petit*—do not overlap. Furthermore, only seven out of the fifty most frequent surnames in France and Quebec are found on both lists—*Gauthier*, *Morin*, *Girard*, *Fourmier*, *Lefebvre/Lefèvre*, *Martin*, and *Richard*.

Combining anthroponymy with genealogy leads Picard to propose a novel and comprehensive typology of North American French family names, distinguishing between names of French origin, mostly from France but also in some cases from Belgium and Switzerland, and names not of French origin but from regions that are now part of France, namely Brittany, Alsace-Lorraine, and the Basque Country. Each of these groups is then subdivided into French names that have not undergone any changes in Canadian French (CF), French names that have undergone idiosyncratic changes or have been newly coined in CF, and names of foreign origin that underwent idiosyncratic changes in CF. The author does not deal with foreign names that came to America and remained unchanged, as they are deemed out of the domain of French anthroponymy.

This novel approach also allows Picard to scrutinize and rectify previous etymologies with newly added information stemming from the identity and place of origin of the first migrant bearer of the name. A case in point is the name *Gagnon*, previously thought to have originated in the Massif Central region of France. Traditional onomastic sources failed to see the apparent link between *Gagnon* and *Gagné*. Furthermore, genealogical research established that the first Gagnons and Gagnés both came from the Orne region in Normandy, some 600 km north of the Massif Central, confirming the likelihood that both names share the same origin. Another interesting case is that of the surname *Marinier*. The first bearer of the name arrived in Quebec around 1740. It would have been reasonable to speculate that his descendants perpetuated the name throughout North America, but careful genealogical research reveals that his lineage appears to have become extinct with the second generation. In fact, *Marinier* is more accurately traced back to another settler from Alsace, whose surname *Amringer* produced several variants: *Hammarrenger*, *Marenger*, *Maringer* and *Marinier*.

As one can well imagine, some 400 years of evolution away from French European sources resulted in considerable changes to the original surnames. Again, genealogy allows Picard to follow family names over time and to distinguish between names that began to change before emigration, such as *Coderre* and *Vaillancourt*, and those that underwent phonological and orthographic changes after arriving in the New World. The latter names constitute the greater part of the name list. Given that the rules of French orthography were far from settled during French colonial times and that most migrants were illiterate, it is not surprising that, over the years, an impressive number of variants were recorded. Consider, for instance, the name *Devau*, where the final “o” vowel sound could have been spelled at least eleven different ways, as in *Devau*, *Devaud*, *Devaut*, *Devault*, *Devaux*, *Deveau*, *Deveaud*, *Deveault*, *Deveaut*, *Deveaux*, and *Devost*.

At times, the dictionary immerses the reader in the dizzying trajectories of family names through time. Some of the alterations are quite impressive, if not baffling, especially those related to the above-mentioned Quebec Exodus. So great was the concentration of French-Canadians in New England at the turn of the last century that an industrial city like Manchester, NH was ranked the sixth largest French-speaking city on the North American continent. Eager to assimilate into their new milieu, new migrants often translated their names, as in *Lévesque* > *Bishop*; *Boulangier* > *Baker*; *Poisson* > *Fish*; *Boivin* > *Drinkwine*; *Léveillé* > *Wideawake*; *Villeneuve* > *Newtown*. In other instances, American clerks and officials transcribed French names as they understood them, with surprising results, as in *Gervais* > *Jarvis*; *Aclair* > *O'Clair*; *Mercur*e > *McCure*; *Hébert* > *Abair*; *Vadeboncoeur* > *Verbunker*. For some names, these transcriptions resulted in a profusion of different spellings. For the name *Gendron* alone, the dictionary lists no less than thirteen variants: *Gandron*, *Gandrow*, *Gendro*, *Gendrow*, *Jandrew*, *Jandro*, *Jeandron*, *Jendro*, *Johndro*, *Johnrow*, *Johndroe*, *Jondro*, and *Jondrow*.

A typical entry begins with the key name and gives its etymology according to dependable sources, followed by data on the surname and place of origin of the first settler, his parents, the name of any spouse with whom he had any children, and the place and date of their marriage. All these components are not

always available and sometimes the entry can provide only the region where the surname originated. For instance, there is little available information for such names as *Donatien*, *Magloire*, or *Dieujuste*, all of Haitian origin. And where reliable sources cannot determine the origin of a name, the author avoids speculation and wisely indicates that no origin can be established. Variants are cross-referenced for ease of consultation, even if in a few instances this results in pages containing almost nothing but cross-references.

Comparing the author's first dictionary (Picard 2010) to the current one under review reveals that considerable new material has been added. A cursory examination of the letter "D" alone reveals 355 new entries with numerous variants added or, more interestingly, reassigned to different names. In some cases, homographs have been identified where none existed previously. A case in point is the name *Didier*, which now has two entries, the first stemming from the Latin name *Désiderius* and originating from Haute-Marne and the second an alteration of the name *Didierlaurent*, a form that can be traced back to Alsace in eastern France.

In an epigraph taken from Samuel Johnson who once wrote, "Dictionaries are like watches: the worst is better than none and the best cannot be expected to go quite true," the author reminds us that no dictionary is perfect. As expected, there are a few names missing, such as *Racan*, but exhaustiveness in lexicography is an illusion as dictionaries are only as thorough as the sources that feed them. In fact, there is more information in this dictionary on the surnames of French-speaking migrants who came to North America over the past 400 years than in any previously published anthroponymic reference tool. There is, however, one area of improvement that could enhance the practicality of the volume. In these days of computer-processed publications, it is surprising that this dictionary which is in excess of 700 pages, is currently available only in paperback form. Electronic versions make consultation more efficient and facilitate handling, while at the same time allowing for timely updates and corrections. Hopefully, Cambridge Scholars Publishing will add such a version to its already impressive catalogue of titles.

In conclusion, it is no exaggeration to say that the publication of this dictionary constitutes a major milestone in onomastics. Picard's critical reliance on the best available sources and his merger of anthroponymic and genealogical data have produced a research instrument that will be appreciated by numerous scholars in the humanities and social sciences, as well as the public at large. More crucially, by combining two well-established approaches to the study of family names, it establishes a new standard for onomastic lexicography based on interdisciplinarity. Finally, this dictionary represents a significant contribution to North American francophone anthroponymy in its own right that will instruct and enrich the cultural legacy of the French presence in the New World.

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