

NEITHER DEAD DUCKS NOR WARM CORPSES: THE FRANCOPHONES OF DOVER TOWNSHIP (KENT COUNTY)

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Introduction

Francophones outside of Quebec have by now become accustomed to hearing all sorts of experts and pundits proclaim that they are dead, culturally speaking. René Lévesque dismissed them as “dead ducks” and the Québécois novelist, Yves Beauchemin, uttered the notorious remark that francophones outside of Quebec reminded him of a “still warm corpse.” Charles Castonguay, a mathematician and demographer at the University of Ottawa, when considering the federal government’s various attempts to stave off the imminent extinction of the francophone minorities outside Quebec, quipped: “It must be great to be the last of the Mohicans. Imagine the subsidies!”¹ This should give even the most casual observer some idea of just how irrevocably politicized the debate over the health of the francophone communities outside of Quebec has become.

The brutally pessimistic outlook of Castonguay, Beauchemin and others might seem justified, in view of the findings of a number of major demographic studies conducted during the past thirty-five years. In 1967, Richard Joy argued that two languages of unequal strength cannot coexist; the weaker one is destined to disappear. He predicted that the inevitable fate of Canada would be ever more pronounced linguistic segregation—French in Quebec, English outside of it—with a thin “bilingual belt” running from Moncton to Sault Ste. Marie. French,

¹ For a critical discussion of Beauchemin’s remarks, and the mind set they betray, see Lawrence Olivier and Guy Bédard, « Le nationalisme québécois, les Acadiens et les francophones du Canada, » *Société acadienne d’analyse politique* (downloaded from the Web, www.umoncton.ca/egalite/olivier.html). See also Michael O’Keefe, *Francophone Minorities: Assimilation and Community Vitality*, 2nd ed. (Ottawa: Department of Canadian Heritage, 2001), 33-40. For Castonguay’s comments, see his article, “Getting the Facts Straight on French: Reflections Following the 1996 Census,” *Inroads* 8 (1999), 69.

he contended, would “virtually disappear from Southern Ontario, the Atlantic Region and the Western Provinces.”² In the late 1970s the *Fédération des Francophones hors Québec* issued what it called a “manifesto of a vanishing people,” lamenting the galloping anglicization of francophones outside of Quebec and demanding a “comprehensive, coherent and specific development policy for communities of French language and culture” in order to prevent their extinction.³ More recently, Charles Castonguay has written that high rates of anglicization among Franco-Ontarians, combined with their low birth rates and high rates of exogamy (marriage outside their linguistic group), prefigure the ongoing, inevitable decline of this population (though he refrained from saying extinction).⁴

The research of Castonguay and others underscores the fact that the pace of assimilation of francophone communities outside of Quebec varies with a number of factors: proximity to Quebec, nature of the local economy, rates of exogamy and out-migration, and so on. Virtually all researchers agree that the francophone communities of western Canada and southwestern Ontario are in the most danger of disappearing. This paper examines one such community: the Francophones of Dover Township in Kent County in southwestern Ontario, a small farming community centred around the village of Pain Court. The title of the paper is intentionally hopeful, without being Panglossian: this tiny francophone island in an overwhelmingly anglophone environment is not dead—yet. That it has managed to survive to this day is testament to the tenacity of the French-speaking inhabitants of this region and to the important historical role played by the institutions of the parish and the local schools in preserving the language and culture of the francophone population. While the future health and

² Richard J. Joy, *Languages in Conflict* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972; Carleton Library no. 61). This study was initially published privately by the author in 1967. A subsequent study by the same author, *Canada's Official Languages: The Progress of Bilingualism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), reached much the same conclusion, though the language used by the author to present his findings tended to be a bit more muted than that in his earlier study.

³ La Fédération des Francophones hors Québec, *The Heirs of Lord Durham: Manifesto of a Vanishing People*, trans. Diane Norak (Ottawa: Burns and MacEachern Ltd., 1978), 20.

⁴ Charles Castonguay, “Évolution démographique des Franco-Ontariens entre 1971 et 1991, suivi d'un aperçu du recensement de 1996,” in Normand Labrie and Gilles Forlot, eds., *L'Enjeu de la langue en Ontario français* (Sudbury: Prise de parole, 1999), 15-32.

viability of this community are by no means guaranteed, it is certainly premature to be signing its death certificate with the air of triumphant certainty that some researchers seem to possess.

Two points need to be made before beginning the analysis. First of all, Francophones outside of Quebec, over the past forty years or so, have become pawns in an increasingly bitter struggle between nationalists and federalists over the direction of language and constitutional policy in the country. Any research on the fate of the francophone minorities, therefore, will inevitably be controversial and serve as fodder for the polemics of one or another of these opposed camps. So it is that Charles Castonguay uses his analysis of census data on the major language groups in Canada to flay Ottawa for what he sees as its misguided policy of official bilingualism. There is a corresponding tendency on the part of the defenders of the federal language regime to accentuate the positive aspects of the data on assimilation of francophone minorities outside Quebec, to minimize or downplay the threats to the survival of these communities, or to engage in definitional hair-splitting in order to put the best spin possible on the data.⁵ One unfortunate by-product of this polarization is that the lived experiences of the minorities themselves sometimes receive short shrift; their voices often cannot be heard over the din produced by the national unity “debate” in Canada.

The second point is that I bring to the analysis in this paper my own history, my own perspective. I grew up in Chatham, Ontario, very conscious of my uncommon surname, which everyone, including my father’s family, pronounced “tang-gway”. Apart from the odd epithet (a *crisse de calvaire* or *torrieu*) uttered by my father, no French was spoken in the household (my mother is an American citizen from Detroit). My grandfather, Napoleon Tanguay, died when I was six or seven years old, and so I had very little contact with the francophone side of my family. When I was in high school in the early 1970s, two factors combined to make me want to rediscover my French roots, which can be traced back to Octave Tanguay, a young blacksmith who emigrated from Dorchester County in Quebec to the Pain Court region in 1881 or 1882. First of all, I came into contact with an inspirational French teacher who encouraged me to learn the language. Secondly, I took on a part-time job with two local furriers, the Charlebois brothers. Each of these brothers used to lament the fact that their children, who were

⁵ See Charles Castonguay, “Getting the Facts Straight on French,” 57-76. Castonguay attacks Victor Goldbloom, then Commissioner of Official Languages, for being unrealistically optimistic about the future prospects of the French-speaking minorities outside of Quebec and for wilfully ignoring the evidence contained in the most recent census.

close to my age, refused to speak French at home because it wasn't "cool" to do so. They encouraged me to be proud of the French fact in southwestern Ontario and to use French as often as I could. This was one of the reasons that I went on to university to do a double degree in French and Political Science.

This brief and hopefully not too cloying confession should serve to underscore the fact that I am no more neutral in the debate over the fate of the francophone minorities than is, for example, Charles Castonguay. I fully support any measures (within reason, of course), by whatever level of government, to preserve these vanishing minorities. This implies a qualified endorsement of at least some of the provisions of the *Official Languages Act* and of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which are anathema to those who sympathize with a hard-line approach to the preservation of French in Quebec.⁶

The remainder of the paper is divided into two parts. The first provides a brief historical overview of the settlement and later development of Dover Township. It attempts to shed some light on the factors—economic, socio-cultural, and political—that enabled this tiny francophone community to survive in an overwhelmingly anglophone environment. It also touches briefly on the attitudes of the dominant cultural group towards the francophone settlements, attitudes which have ranged from outright hostility (usually triggered by provincial or national events, such as the controversy surrounding the Ontario government's Regulation 17, passed in 1912) to indifference. In the second section, I draw on census data to assess the health of the French language in Dover Township. In addition, I try to demonstrate that the census data themselves do not provide a complete picture of the vitality or future prospects of Franco-Ontarian communities like Dover Township. In a brief conclusion, I offer some further reflections on why some Québécois nationalists seem to be so eager to sign the death certificate of the francophone minorities outside Quebec.

Settlement and Growth of Dover Township

The conclusion of the American War of Independence in 1783 provided the major impetus to white settlement of the Lower Thames Valley, as Loyalist and French squatters (the latter having served as volunteers in the War or as officers in the Indian Department) moved up from Le Détroit to occupy the lands along the Thames River. The

⁶Although certainly less militant than Castonguay, Linda Cardinal nonetheless sees the federal government's language policy as wrong-headed at best. See her article, "Linguistic Rights, Minority Rights, and National Rights: Some Clarifications," *Inroads* 8 (1999), 77-86.

forests of this region had until the mid-eighteenth century been the hunting grounds of the Chippewa. On May 19, 1790, Alexander McKee, Deputy Superintendent-General of Indian Affairs, negotiated on behalf of the King of England a treaty which ceded this territory to the Crown in exchange for £1,200, paid in merchandise. The treaty was signed by the chiefs of the Ottawa, Huron, Chippewa and Pottawatamie tribes.⁷

In 1792, Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe divided the newly created province of Upper Canada into counties. Essex County comprised the land south of the Thames River to Pointe aux Pins (what is now known as Rondeau Park) and Kent County included the land north of the Thames.⁸ Land Boards were set up to oversee settlement of the area, and the territory was surveyed between 1790 and 1800. Dover Township, which initially comprised two separate townships (Dover East and Dover West), is bounded on the west by Lake St. Clair, on the south by the Thames River, by the Gore of Chatham base line on the north, and by the Chatham Township line on the east. Much of the western portion of this land is marshy and swampy; in the early 1800s, floods were common because natural drainage was inadequate. Despite these drawbacks, the territory was coveted agricultural land because of the quality of the soil, which “secures to Dover the reputation of possessing as high an average of arable land as any of the townships adjoining.”⁹ Among the first settlers to this area were John Dolsen (an anglicized version of Van Dolzen) and his two sons, Matthew and Isaac, who hailed originally from the Susquehanna region of Pennsylvania. Dolsen, a Loyalist, had his farm and other property confiscated during the War of Independence. In 1802 he was given a patent to a farm lot fronting the Thames River in Dover Township, on which he had originally settled in 1792 or 1793. He eventually opened a grist mill and a distillery which manufactured “immense quantities of

⁷ Fred Coyne Hamil, *The Valley of the Lower Thames, 1640-1850* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951), 4. Other useful secondary sources on the early settlement of Kent County and Dover Township include Victor Lauriston, *Romantic Kent: More Than Three Centuries of History, 1626-1952* (Chatham: Corporation of the County of Kent, 1952), the *Illustrated Historical Atlas of the Counties of Essex and Kent* (Toronto: H. Belden and Co., 1880-1881), and R. Louis Gentilcore and C. Grant Head, *Ontario's History in Maps* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984; published for the Ontario Historical Studies Series).

⁸ Hamil, *Valley of the Lower Thames*, 20.

⁹ *Illustrated Historical Atlas*, 58.

whiskey” sold chiefly to the North-West Company.¹⁰

Settlement of what became known as the Pain Court Block began in 1815. This marked “the beginning of an influx that in time made Dover predominantly French.”¹¹ French squatters from Le Détroit first settled on the north bank of the Thames and then on the banks of what would later be known as Pain Court Creek. At the request of the squatters, Surveyor-General Charles Rankin was sent to survey the tract and the settlers were given patents for their holdings. Rankin’s sketches and the Dover Township land registry indicate that the first group of settlers in the Pain Court Block included Edmund Baby, Jean-Baptiste Faubert, Jean-Baptiste Martel, Pierre Réaume, Gabriel Bergeron, Isaac Charron, Michel Deloge, Louis Dézilet, André Charron, and Jean-Baptiste Primeau.¹²

Because of the constant flooding of this region, wheat crops often failed, and the situation of most of the inhabitants was one of dire poverty. This accounts for the unusual name of the best-known settlement in Dover Township, Pain Court, or “short bread.” The closest mill in the early 1800s was in Detroit, and the settlers were forced to subsist on bread made from hand-milled flour. Since grain was scarce, there was often not enough bread to supply a family for the entire year, let alone to offer to the Catholic missionaries who would arrive annually in the region to conduct a tour of inspection and to gather contributions to the Church. Either the missionary would be offered excuses for why there was no bread, or he would receive a small loaf from families which had managed to conserve enough flour to fashion this modest offering. Legend has it that when the missionaries from Sandwich would prepare to visit the parish in Dover Township, they would say: “Je m’en vais dans la mission du pain court, ou tout simplement, je m’en vais à Pain Court.”¹³

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Lauriston, *Romantic Kent*, 355.

¹² Lauriston, *Romantic Kent*, 355-56; *Illustrated Historical Atlas*, 58. Caroline Roy Laprise, *Mon Héritage, ma culture, mes souvenirs, 1898-1998* (published by Caroline Roy Laprise, 1999), 18-19.

¹³ Laprise, *Mon Héritage, ma culture, mes souvenirs*, 15. Lauriston, in *Romantic Kent*, p. 356, offers a slightly different explanation of the name: “With scant crops, flour was scarce and bread at times doled out sparingly. ‘Pain court’—a thrifty abbreviation of the saying, ‘le pain est court’ or ‘bread is scarce’—became, in a sense, the watchword of the frequently starving settlement.”

Construction of drainage systems in Dover Township during the course of the nineteenth century alleviated the problem of annual flooding and contributed to the growing prosperity of the community. Pain Court, the authors of the *Illustrated Historical Atlas of the Counties of Essex and Kent* wrote in 1881, “is flanked by some as fair and fertile fields as ever lay exposed to the sunshine, producing the best barley grown in Western Canada, besides excellent crops and grades of all other cereals.” By 1881, Dover Township was a thriving community of some 4,500 inhabitants, the majority of whom were of French ethnic origin. The size and ethnic composition of the region stayed essentially the same until the beginning of the twentieth century (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
Ethnic Origins of Dover Township,
1881 - 1901

	1881		1901	
	(N)	(%)	(N)	(%)
British	1,753	39.4	1,855	41.6
French	2,289	51.5	2,321	52.0
Other	405	9.1	288	6.4
Total	4,447	100.0	4,464	100.0

Source: 1881 - Census, Volume 1, Table 3, “Origins of the People”
1901 - Census, Volume 1, Table XI, “Origins of the People”

What factors contributed to the survival of this French beachhead in the overwhelmingly English region of southwestern Ontario, from its founding in 1815 to the present day (leaving aside for the moment its future prospects)? Lauriston remarks that “[f]eeling for their race, their language and their faith deeply coloured [the] lives” of the French settlers to the region.¹⁴ Clearly, a version of the ideology of *la survivance* was at work in this tiny francophone outpost, and the same mechanisms that guaranteed the inter-generational transmission of the French culture and language in Quebec operated in Dover Township as well. Since the 1830s, the economy of Dover Township has been based overwhelmingly on agriculture. In the nineteenth century barley was one

¹⁴ Lauriston, *Romantic Kent*, 356.

of the most important crops grown in the area; in the early to mid-twentieth century, sugar beets were grown to supply the Canada & Dominion Co. sugar factory in Chatham. More recently, industrial hemp has become an important crop, and corn is grown to supply both the needs of the local population and the ethanol plant in Chatham. Like many self-contained agricultural communities, until the past three decades or so, there have been limited opportunities in Dover Township for interaction between the two major cultural groups. Attachment to the land, to the Catholic faith, and to the family—all features of the agricultural messianism that characterized the ideology of *la survivance* in Quebec at this time—were until the 1960s the dominant elements of the cultural mind set in Pain Court. Migration into or out of the community was a comparatively rare phenomenon, except at times of economic crisis, such as during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Birth rates among francophones remained high enough to more than compensate for any losses to the population from death and out-migration.

As in Quebec, until the 1960s or 1970s the most important institution for defending and promoting the French language and Catholic faith of the settlers in Dover Township was the Church. In the pre-1850 days of the settlement, the religious needs of the settlers were served periodically by visits from the missionaries based in Sandwich. The local population would also travel down the Thames River to attend services at St. Peter's Church in the township of Tilbury East. In 1852, a small chapel was built in Pain Court. Two years later, L'Église de l'Immaculée Conception was consecrated in Pain Court. Successive parish priests played a key role in defending the French language and culture in Dover Township, and none was more active in this endeavour than Father Alfred-David Emery, who served in Pain Court from 1911 to 1928. In addition to his clerical duties, Emery acted as an amateur historian of the region, and his research has been incorporated into both Victor Lauriston's book on Kent County and Caroline Roy Laprise's recently published memoirs.

French-language or bilingual schools have been the second key institution in the defense of Dover Township's francophone heritage. In Kent and Essex counties, as in the eastern part of the province (Prescott and Russell counties), bilingual schools were the cause of intense cultural conflict in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth. Certain elements in Ontario society, like the Orange Order, feared that these schools were serving as incubators of an "alien people," that they were the stalking horses of the "Romish" Church and the papacy, and that heavy francophone immigration from Quebec into some parts of the province would eventually eliminate any trace of English culture. This francophobia was often combined with a condescending attitude towards the intellectual achievements of the

French people in Canada, as in this editorial from *The Mail*, published on November 24, 1886:

The system in vogue in the schools renders it quite impossible for the young generation to rise above the intellectual level of the average Lower Canadian habitant; and, if it be allowed to continue, the Eastern counties are doomed before many years to be as dark a spot on the map of intelligence as any portion of Quebec.¹⁵

Prescott and Russell counties in eastern Ontario were the sites of the most intense English-French conflict over schooling between 1885 and 1925, since they were the only two counties during this period with a majority of francophones. Kent and Essex counties were not immune to the controversy, however. One figure, Bishop Michael Fallon of the diocese of London (installed in 1910), did much to inflame English-French animosity by waging a personal campaign against bilingual schools in his district. Fallon ostensibly targeted the bilingual schools because of their poor pedagogical practices, the questionable qualifications of their teaching personnel, and their lamentable record in promoting their students, although Irish Catholics like Fallon clearly stood to benefit from any diminution of the scope and number of bilingual schools in the province:

The French-Canadian parishes of Belle River, Big Point, French Settlement, McGregor, Ruscombe, Staples, Stoney Point, Paincourt [sic] and Tilbury, with 18 separate schools and upwards of 2000 children on the rolls passed a total of 10 pupils at the recent entrance examinations....One would almost be inclined to believe in the existence of a well contrived conspiracy among the enemies of the French-Canadian people to keep them in a position of self-perpetuating intellectual inferiority.¹⁶

¹⁵ Quoted in Robert Choquette, *Language and Religion: A History of English-French Conflict in Ontario* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1975), 56. Additional sources on the schools controversy in Ontario include Sheila McLeod Arnopoulos, *Voices from French Ontario* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1982), ch. 4 and Chad Gaffield, *Language, Schooling, and Cultural Conflict* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987).

¹⁶ Quoted in Choquette, *Language and Religion*, 96-7. On the French-Irish rivalry within the Catholic hierarchy, see also Marilyn Barber, "The Ontario Bilingual Schools Issue: Sources of Conflict," in Craig Brown, ed., *Minorities*,

This anti-French agitation on the part of the Orange Order and prominent clerics like Bishop Fallon culminated in the proclamation of Regulation 17 by the Conservative government of Ontario in June 1912. This directive from the Department of Education decreed that French as a language of instruction would be restricted to the first form (Grades 1 and 2) in elementary school and as a subject of study it would be confined to one hour a day, “from authorized textbooks, ‘in schools where French has hitherto been a subject of study.’”¹⁷

Resolution of the schools controversy in Ontario was only achieved in 1927, ironically when the ultra-Orangeman, G.H. Ferguson, was Conservative premier of the province. French was recognized as a valid and legal language of instruction in primary schools; French-Canadian school inspectors were to be hired to supervise French-language teachers, and University of Ottawa’s Normal School, for training bilingual teachers in the province, was approved.¹⁸ One year later, a private bilingual high school was opened in Pain Court, the students of which served as a pool of prospective teachers (once they had finished at Normal School) for local francophone schools. This high school was taken over by the public board of education in the 1960s, which tended to treat it as more of “an expense than an asset.”¹⁹ The high school became part of the Catholic board in 1985, a year after Bill Davis’s Conservative government had made its decision to extend full funding of Catholic high schools to Grade 13. The shift from the public to the Catholic board worked wonders for the high school, which saw its student population increase slowly but steadily, from some 110 students in 1978 (when Mr. Emery retired as principal) to around 300 today.

This brief historical overview of the evolution of the school system in Pain Court is relevant to this paper because it suggests a possible reason why some Québécois nationalists are so quick to dismiss the francophone minorities outside Quebec as folkloric traces in English Canada doomed to utter extinction. These communities are fragments

Schools, and Politics (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 63-84.

¹⁷ C.B. Sissons, *Church and State in Canadian Education* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1959), 86.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ In the words of a former principal of the school, Amedée Emery, who retired in 1978. I am grateful to Mr. Emery for sharing his knowledge of the schools in Dover Township with me.

of Quebec's past. If they have survived, it is because of their resistance against modernization. Lawrence Olivier and Guy Bédard speculate that Québécois nationalists, who are seeking to portray their brand of nationalism as civic, modern, inclusive and open to the world, view the francophone minorities as the antitheses of their own idealized vision of Quebec.²⁰ In the next section of the paper, I will suggest that there is another reason for the nationalists' negation of the francophone minorities outside Quebec.

Census Data on Language Retention in Dover Township

In his recent study of the demographic evolution of Franco-Ontarians between 1971 and 1991, Charles Castonguay marshals data on their age pyramid (which shows an increasingly aging population), fertility rates (which are plunging), rates of exogamy (very high) and the rate of replacement of the population by francophones moving to Ontario from outside the province (very low). All of these indicators, along with the responses to the census questions on mother tongue and home language, paint a stark and depressing picture: the Franco-Ontarian population is declining ineluctably, and there are no reasons to suspect that this trend will change in the near future. Castonguay concludes that:

Un déclin des effectifs de langue maternelle française est à prévoir pour bientôt. La tendance est déjà engagée en ce qui concerne la langue d'usage. Après avoir connu une expansion démographique plus que séculaire, le français en Ontario se trouve à un point tournant de son histoire, *du moins en tant que langue première*.²¹

Castonguay's qualification that he is speaking about French as a *first* language in the home is an important one, and I will return to this distinction below.

An examination of the census data on language use in Dover Township from 1981 to 1996 (see Table 2) reveals that rates of anglicization in the region are somewhat higher than those for the province as a whole. Castonguay calculates the *net rate of anglicization* of Francophones by subtracting the number of individuals whose first

²⁰ Olivier and Bédard, "Le nationalisme, les Acadiens et les francophones du Canada."

²¹ Castonguay, "Évolution démographique des Franco-Ontariens," 31 (my emphasis).

language in the home is French from the number whose mother tongue is French, and expressing the result as a percentage. This is a rough-and-ready indicator of the rate of assimilation of Francophones, since it measures the number of individuals born into French-speaking households who no longer use French as their primary language in the home. In Ontario, this rate of anglicization of Francophones has increased from 27% in 1971 to approximately 43% in 1996.²² In Dover Township, the rate of anglicization has accelerated from just under 33% in 1981 to 46% in 1996. Even more depressing are the absolute numbers of Francophones living in Dover Township: in 1996, out of a total population of just over 4,000, only 655 individuals indicated that their mother tongue was French, and a mere 370 used French as their first language in the home. Thus just over 9% of the population of Dover Township uses French as the primary language of communication in the household; 16% of the population indicates that French is their mother tongue. The Township still qualifies as one of the 23 areas designated under the *French Language Services Act*, however. A person living in Dover Township, therefore, has the right "to communicate in French with, and to receive available services in French from, any head or central office of a government agency or institution of the Legislature."²³

²² The figures for 1971 are taken from Castonguay, "Évolution démographique des Franco-Ontariens," Table 3. Those for 1996 are taken from Castonguay, "Getting the Facts Straight on French," Table 2, which breaks down the rate of anglicization by age cohort, but does not show the data for those aged 45 and older. I have calculated a net of anglicization of Francophones in Ontario of 42.5% in 1996, based on census data.

²³ Ontario, *Statutes*, ch. 45 ("An Act to provide for French Language Services in the Government of Ontario"). The Act was assented to on November 18, 1986 and amended in 1990. See also Ontario, Office of Francophone Affairs, "Who We Are."

<<http://www.ofa.gov.on.ca/english/23region.htm>>.

Table 2
Census Statistics on Language Characteristics of
Dover Township (Kent County), 1981-1996

	1981		1991*		1996*	
	(N)	(%)	(N)	(%)	(N)	(%)
Total Population	4,202		4,029		4,040	
Mother Tongue						
English	2,720	64.7%	2,860	71.0%	3,090	76.5%
French	1,230	29.3%	760	18.9%	655	16.2%
English & French			200	5.0%	60	1.5%
Home Language						
English	2,670	63.5%	3,415	84.8%	3,560	88.1%
French	825	19.6%	510	12.7%	370	9.2%
Knowledge of Official Languages						
English Only	2,485	59.1%	2,730	67.8%	2,640	65.3%
French Only	105	2.5%	20	0.5%	25	0.6%

Both English & French	1,610	38.3%	1,290	32.0%	1,340	33.2%
Neither English nor French	10	0.2%	–	–	35	0.9%
Net Rate of Anglicization**		32.9%		40.7%		46.0%

*Those who responded “English and French” to the mother tongue question in 1991 and 1996 were divided equally between English

**net rate of anglicization of francophones is calculated by the following formula: (French mother tongue - French home language) / French mother tongue, expressed as a percentage. Again, this follows Castonguay’s practice.

Source: Statistics Canada, Catalogues 95-988, 95-337, and 95-187-XPB.

Do these statistics confirm that the Francophones of Dover Township are indeed dead ducks, warm corpses, or the last of the Mohicans? It would be foolhardy to deny that Franco-Ontarian communities like Dover Township face a bleak and difficult future, *especially if the protective infrastructure provided under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Ontario French Language Services Act were to be removed*. It must be said, however, that Québécois nationalists like Charles Castonguay are only too eager to consign the Francophones of Dover Township—and in similar communities everywhere in English Canada (apart from the special case of New Brunswick)—to the dustbin of history because, in their view, minority language groups *cannot*, indeed, *must not* survive in a dominant English environment.²⁴ Francophone minorities outside Quebec are useful to Québécois nationalists as cautionary tales: this is what will happen to Quebec if we relax the language regime in the province even one tiny little bit. Or, by implication, this is the inevitable fate of the Québécois unless sovereignty is achieved and the noxious influence of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms is removed from Quebec. Thus the most pessimistic interpretation of census language data, not only for English Canada but for Quebec itself, must always be advanced. Castonguay

²⁴ It is interesting to note that Castonguay himself was born in Ottawa “d’une famille mixte, [et] n’a appris le français qu’à l’âge de 24ans ... Installé sur la rive québécoise de la rivière des Outaouais, M.Castonguay prêche maintenant avec la foi du converti, estiment les promoteurs du bilinguisme et les défenseurs modérés de la cause franco-ontarienne.” See Centre Mauricie, “Les francophones passent” <http://www.centremauricie.com/nouvelles/shownews.asp?refnews=490>.

writes: "All of Canada's francophone populations are demographically at bay. The prospects are disquieting in Quebec and New Brunswick, and disastrous in the remaining provinces."²⁵

Leaving aside Castonguay's highly tendentious claim that the francophone population of Quebec is "demographically at bay,"²⁶ we can question whether it is premature to be signing the death certificate of the francophone communities like the one in Dover Township just yet. O'Keefe and others have argued that the census data provide only a partial and somewhat distorted picture of the health and viability of Franco-Ontarian populations. Focussing exclusively on the census figures also feeds the smug triumphalism of the "undertakers who want to bury us alive, ... [the] statistical vultures, kill-joys, [and] obituary seekers"²⁷ who so gleefully predict the imminent extinction of these minorities. This is precisely what O'Keefe attempted to do in his study of francophone minorities—to dig below the numbers. And it was this attempt that prompted Castonguay's sneering quip about the last of the Mohicans.

One aspect of the Franco-Ontarian reality that receives scant attention in Castonguay's research is the role of the educational system—French-language schools operating under the protection of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms—in forging a new identity among some members of the various francophone communities, especially among the young. Many individuals who attend the francophone schools come from mixed marriages and do not necessarily speak French as the first language in the home. They would be classified as assimilated or anglicized using the criteria developed by Castonguay and other demographers. And yet, many of these same individuals are increasingly proud of their knowledge of *both* French and English and feel comfortable using either language in social or economic settings (even if English is used most frequently).

²⁵ Castonguay, "Getting the Facts Straight on French," 59 (my emphasis).

²⁶ Even the Parti Québécois government has reluctantly admitted, at least on a few occasions, that the French language in Quebec has never been healthier. See the report commissioned by Louise Beaudoin, the Minister responsible for the Charter of the French Language: Québec, Ministère de la Culture et des Communications. *Le Français, langue commune: enjeu de la société québécoise*. Rapport du Comité interministériel sur la situation de la langue française. (Québec, 1996). I have written about this issue in "The Politics of Language in Quebec: Keeping the Conflict Alive," in *The Challenge of Cultural Pluralism: Essays in Honour of Kenneth D. McRae*, Stephen Brooks, ed. (Westport CT: Praeger, 2002).

²⁷ Jacqueline Pelletier, quoted in O'Keefe, *Francophone Minorities*, 36.

Jurgen Erfurt, in a thought-provoking 1994 study of the Franco-Ontarian community in Welland, which updates an earlier investigation conducted in 1978, finds an increased consciousness of the value of French among young Francophones in Welland during the sixteen-year span covered. An increased percentage of those interviewed—31% in 1994 as opposed to 23% in 1978—intend to school their own children exclusively or primarily in French. An increasing percentage of students prefer to work and to study exclusively or primarily in French. Erfurt writes that these findings are remarkable, especially considering the rate of anglicization of Franco-Ontarians. His conclusions, necessarily speculative, are worth quoting at length:

On a vu le taux de maintien du français extrêmement bas dans certaines situations. Inversement, on constate une estimation très élevée du côté des étudiants pour le français comme langue de travail, des études, etc. À mon avis, afin d'expliquer ces divergences paradoxales, il faudrait mettre l'accent sur un autre phénomène, qui est la création en Ontario d'un espace discursif francophone fort politisé. Les réponses en faveur du français et du bilinguisme français-anglais reflètent plutôt le débat politique et idéologique sur les droits de la minorité francophone et sur le maintien du français en dehors du Québec ainsi que sur l'identité culturelle des Franco-Ontariens.²⁸

The hypothesis that bilingualism is becoming an increasingly important component of the Franco-Ontarian identity warrants further testing in communities like Dover Township. If there is one tiny, hopeful sign in the census data contained in Table 2, it is that there has been a very slight increase in knowledge of both official languages among the population, from 32% in 1991 to 33.2% in 1996 (but this is down from 38.3% in 1981). This is admittedly a very slim reed on which to pin the hopes of the survival of a community. Nonetheless, as the *Official Languages Act* changes its focus from bilingualizing the federal civil service to protecting minority language education rights, and as a new generation of Franco-Ontarians rediscovers its language, takes pride in its bilingualism, and defends the institutions which promote this identity, the health of francophone communities such as the ones in Welland, Dover Township, Windsor and elsewhere *may* be improved. There is no guarantee that this will occur, but it is at least a possibility, one which seems to be foreclosed by Castonguay and other Québécois nationalists, who appear to reject the possibility of multiple linguistic

²⁸ Jürgen Erfurt, "Le changement de l'identité linguistique chez les franco-Ontariens," in Normand Labrie and Gilles Forlot, eds., *L'Enjeu de la langue en Ontario français* (Sudbury: Prise de parole, 1999), 75.

identities.

Anecdotal evidence suggesting that bilingualism is becoming a key feature of the Franco-Ontarian identity was gleaned from two conversations I had during the writing of this paper with young women (in their early 20s) born in Pain Court.²⁹ One, “Emily,” was born into a mixed family (mother is francophone, father an immigrant from northern Europe) in which English was most often spoken in the home. Emily received all of her elementary and secondary schooling in French-language schools, and then attended the University of Ottawa for one year, before transferring to another university in southwestern Ontario. While in high school, Emily noticed that her peers tended to wear their bilingualism as a badge of honour, so to speak: it was something that set them apart from other students. They felt that knowing two languages gave them an advantage over other students, made them special—a notion that was reinforced by their teachers. At the University of Ottawa, however, she noticed a clear hierarchy of linguistic capabilities: her French was inferior to that spoken by students from Northern Ontario (Sudbury, Timmins) which in turn was inferior to the French of the Québécois who attended the university. For the past year or so, conscious of the need to keep up her French, Emily has been working part-time as a tutor in a French-language high school in London.

The second woman, “Danielle,” was born into a francophone family, but her parents divorced when she was young. She lived with her father, who married an Anglophone, and English was spoken in the household. She received her elementary education in a French-language school, but attended an English high school (taking core French). She is now attending a university in southwestern Ontario, majoring in French and History. Her level of bilingualism is impressive, as is her desire to improve and practise her French.³⁰

²⁹ Obviously I am not making any claims about the representativeness of these women or about the “scientific” nature of my study. I am simply trying to argue that in order to get a complete picture of the status of Franco-Ontarian communities we will need to supplement the census data of Castonguay with the rich ethnographic detail that can only be provided by the kind of “conversations” described here. To conclude with the traditional social scientific caveat: this hypothesis about bilingualism and Franco-Ontarians requires further research.

³⁰ Both Emily and Danielle adverted to an issue that will probably become more politicized in the French-language schools in Ontario: who has access to these schools. On the basis of anecdotal evidence, it appears that some parents (affluent Anglophones, primarily) who do not qualify for minority French-language instruction under section 23 of the Charter, nonetheless are

The likelihood that Danielle and Emily will return to Dover Township to raise families is small. Nevertheless, if these two women do settle in Ontario, it is entirely possible that their children will attend French-language schools and will grow up to be proud of their bilingual identity. There are thousands of Emilies and Danielles currently living in Ontario, making the same kinds of choices and facing the same kinds of dilemmas in trying to preserve their francophone heritage. This fact alone should give pause to the demographic Cassandras who foretell the inevitable extinction of these communities.³¹

Conclusion

This paper has examined the small Franco-Ontarian community in Dover Township, Kent County. In the first section of the paper I attempted to trace the economic, socio-cultural and political factors that enabled this tiny francophone outpost to survive for almost two centuries in an overwhelmingly anglophone environment. I argued that until the 1970s, Dover Township managed to retain its French face because it recapitulated the conservative ideology of *la survivance* that had existed in Quebec until the Quiet Revolution. Attachment to the land, Church, and the Catholic faith, along with the role of the parish and schools in transmitting the French culture from one generation to another, helped defend this francophone community against the forces of assimilation. So too did limited contact between the dominant and minority cultures, just as had been the case in Quebec until the 1950s. Following Olivier and Bédard, I speculated that this was perhaps one explanation of the distaste some Québécois nationalists seem to exhibit for communities like Dover Township: their very existence and survival remind them of the Quebec of *la grande noirceur*, a Quebec that is antithetical to the modern, progressive and inclusive form of nationalism that they are trying to cultivate.

In the second part of the paper, I examined more recent census data on language use in Dover Township, and acknowledged that rates of anglicization in the community are even higher than the already disturbing rates found by Castonguay for the province as a whole. Nevertheless, following O'Keefe and others, I contended that the census figures do not tell the entire story, and present an unnecessarily pessimistic view of the viability of communities like Dover Township.

sending their children to these schools. Again, this is an issue that will require further research.

³¹ On the whole, my conclusions echo those of O'Keefe, in "Francophone Minorities," 87-90.

One increasingly important aspect of the Franco-Ontarian existence, ignored by Castonguay and the demographic doomsayers, is the role played by minority French-language schools in fostering a new, *bilingual* (and therefore multiple) identity among Franco-Ontarians. I hypothesized, following Erfurt and others, that the apparent resurgence in pride among bilingual Franco-Ontarians, in Dover Township and elsewhere, *might* slow down the rate of assimilation of these communities, though I acknowledge that much more research needs to be done on this subject. One thing remains painfully clear, however: Quebec nationalists are unalterably opposed to the Charter, the Official Languages Act, and every feature of the Trudeau legacy. Thus the situation of francophone minorities outside Quebec, like the one in Dover Township, will remain highly politicized for the foreseeable future.

