Honoré BEAUGRAND (1848-1906)

Honoré Beaugrand was born in 1848 in Lanoraie, Québec, about fifty kilometers downstream from Montreal, in a region settled at the beginning of the French regime in Canada. In 1848, the place was nothing more than a large agricultural village. Beaugrand, who had the advantage of coming from an affluent family, studied for four years under the Clerics of St. Viateur in Joliette, then later joined that order as a novice. In 1865, after basic military training in Montréal, he sailed to Mexico where he fought alongside the French occupation army. Like Faucher de Saint-Maurice and other Quebecers from that time who were interested in writing, Beaugrand saw the Mexican affair as a grandiose epic novel, a kind of liberating adventure far from family influence and social morality. Captivated by anti-clericalism and republicanism, Beaugrand spent two years in France, from 1867 to 1869, where he was introduced to the most liberal ideological movements of his time. In just a few years, Beaugrand found himself at odds with an isolated, conservative Québec which viewed all new social and cultural ideas as suspicious.

In 1869, he went to New Orleans then back to Mexico again. In 1871, he became a building painter in Fall River, Massachusetts, where he married an eighteen-year old Protestant named Eliza Walker in a Methodist church in 1873. To top it all off, the Catholic-born Beaugrand then joined a Masonic lodge. The situation was further complicated by the fact that, since the Civil War, a significant population of French-speaking migrants from Québec had settled in Fall River and founded two flourishing Catholic parishes: Sainte-Anne in 1869 and Notre-Dame-de-Lourdes in 1872. In the following years, like thousands other Québécois emigrants, Beaugrand profited from the wave of prosperity in the Northeastern United States. In 1874, he was named Justice of the Peace, and around the same time, he became president of the Chamber of Commerce of Fall River,
a city dominated by textile industries that were attracting a large immigrant labor force from Québec. Beginning in 1875, Beaugrand successively founded and managed several Franco-American newspapers in various cities, including *La République* in Fall River, which would publish his only novel in serial format: *Jeanne la fileuse*. The feverish pitch of the newsrooms must have awakened the dormant pamphleteer in Beaugrand, for in 1876-1877, he became involved in one of the most violent controversies in the history of Franco-American journalism. On that occasion, his opponent was none other than Ferdinand Gagnon, a journalist based in Worcester, Massachusetts, who was founder of *Le Travailleur*. The quarrel was so bad, and Beaugrand’s anti-Catholic reputation so difficult to sustain in New England, that our author fled to Ottawa then to Montréal, where he founded *La Patrie*, one of the most liberal and reformist Québécois newspapers of the era, in 1879.

In 1878, *Jeanne la fileuse* was finally published as a book in Ottawa. The work is important in at least one way: it is the first truly Franco-American novel to have been published. Like all the literature written at that time by Franco-Americans or Québécois emigrants in the United States, *Jeanne la fileuse* was heavily influenced by its journalistic context. A true incubator of writers and poets of merit, Franco-American newspapers at the turn of the century were the only reasonable venue for anyone who hoped to make a living by the pen and publish a work, no matter the genre. Beaugrand, therefore, created a novel deeply rooted in the political debates of his time and centered around a thesis, namely, that the United States offered French Canadians, humiliated by the military and political defeats of previous decades, a springboard from which to return, rich with new experiences, and invest in the St. Lawrence Valley to their advantage.

According to Roger Le Moine, Beaugrand was the first Quebecer to write a bourgeois novel, a work that, despite a certain rootedness in Québec, depicts characters who aspire to a
certain social mobility and desire to lead easier lives in an urban context. A second edition of *Jeanne la fileuse* was published in Montréal in 1888, when the author was pursuing a political career in Québec. In 1885, then again the following year, Beaugrand had been elected Mayor of Montréal, much to the chagrin of Québec’s conservatives and the ultramontanes.

The novel must have been somewhat popular since its publication coincided with the great emigration to the United States, which prompted politicians to worry about the impact of mass departures on Francophone society in the St. Lawrence Valley and elites to discuss the possibility of the United States simply annexing Québec.

Beaugrand definitively left the Franco-American scene after the publication of *Jeanne la fileuse* in 1888. Very attached to Québec, the author also dabbled as a folklorist, and we are indebted to him for recording many typically Québécois legends, including the famous one of the Chasse-Galerie.

Decorated as a chevalier of the French Legion of Honor in 1885 and made an officer in 1889, Beaugrand finished his career by taking long trips to Europe, Asia, and America, often for official business. An ardent Francophile, Beaugrand worked at the end of his life to improve cultural and commercial relations between Québec and France. He was also elected president of the Montréal section of the Alliance Française in 1902. Weakened by disease but still staunchly liberal, Beaugrand had to deal with pressure from Montréal’s Catholic clergy, who spared nothing to try to obtain “his conversion” in his final hours. He died in 1906 in Westmount, a suburb of Montréal, faithful to his youthful convictions.

Pierre ANCTIL

WORKS


- *De Montréal à Victoria par le Transcontinental canadien*. Montréal, 1887. 52 p. This text was republished in *Mélanges* (cf. infra).


**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


Excellent bibliography of Beaugrand’s works.


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