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Impressions: Quebec

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 21, 2013 NCR Today

In the U.S. some people fight to keep the government from taking their guns. Here in Quebec, the people turn to their government in the fight to preserve their language. The Quebecois are surrounded by English-speakers, so it is not like the language can protect itself. And, a culture that loses its language is a culture that will soon die; Language is the blood that circulates through the body of culture. This culture is worth preserving and the Quebecois know it.

I did not have long to explore the city yesterday. Apart from the fact that I did not have a lot of time, it was cold and snowing and after an hour or so of walking through the old city, I retired to a lovely bar in the Chateau Frontenac Hotel. The hotel and its neighbor, the fort, illustrate why Quebec was chosen as the capital of New France: It holds a commanding position atop the cliffs that line the St. Lawrence River. Yesterday afternoon, a low cloud cover hung over the city and the river, which was still mostly ice-filled but not impassable as it would be in the dead of winter. The scene was haunting in the various shades of grey one could see in a glance, the stone buildings, the ice in the river, the low clouds, the slushy snow, like a post-impressionist painting done only in grey, haunting and beautiful.

Outside the hotel is a promenade with a toboggan chute at the end. From here you can look over and up to the fort, and down the steep cliff to the lower town. Memories of history books featuring Montcalm and Wolfe returned, prompted by a cenotaph that bears both their names. Here, too, Benedict Arnold began his military career in service to the united colonies, leading a failed attempt to capture the city from the British. Quebecois, incidentally, still refer to the British defeat of the French in the Seven Years? War as ?the conquest.?

Of course, when visiting a city, my favorite thing to do is see the churches. I was out of luck as they were all closed by the time of my late afternoon arrival. The Cathedral in the center of the city is smaller than I had imagined from the pictures, and its outside more austere. Like most buildings here, it is of stone, not brick, but all three doors were locked so I could investigate no further. Next door, is the old seminary which is now part of Laval University?s Architecture School. Up the hill is the Anglican Cathedral, modeled after St. Martin?s in the Field?s but, again, in stone. There is a pretty little Presbyterian church in the heart of the city also.

Much of the old city had large pieces of scaffolding in various states of disassembly. A few weeks ago, the scaffolding held up and ice cross track that ran from the large statue of Samuel Champlain in front of the Frontenac hotel, down through the upper town, over the cliff, and into the heart of the lower town, ending in front of the beautiful little church, Notre Dame des Victoires. Ice cross is like roller derby, only on ice skates and down a course instead of around a ring. Every winter, they construct this huge course through the city and thousands flock to watch the racers. The bartender says it was fun and I should come next time. So does my host when he arrives to take me to dinner. Indeed, walking past the many pubs and bars in the old town, it is hard not to think that the Quebecois like to have fun. A lot. Again, a culture with little in the way of Calvinism is going to be a happier culture.

Notre Dame des Victoires is located in the center of the lower city which has been beautifully restored and boasts, among other things, the first street in North America and manhy of the earliest buildings. In the early

settlements in what became the U.S., they built with wood, not stone, and few seventeenth century buildings survive. Here, many seventeenth century buildings are still in use! You must be in good shape to re-climb the steps from the lower town to the upper and my Quebecois host left me panting for breath by the time we regained the promenade.

After dinner, back to the campus and to bed. I learned that Laval University has 40,000 students ? I had no idea it was so large ? and that, apart from the Theology Faculty, it is no longer a Catholic school, which of course makes me sad. This morning I will give my lecture and then head back to the states. But, I saw enough of Quebec to know I want to come back and come back soon.

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