

# The Rocket, the Riot, and the Revolution: Hockey in French Canada.

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The Rocket, the Riot, and the Revolution: Hockey in French Canada.  
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## **Abstract**

Hockey has historically occupied an important place in the lives of many Canadians, and this interest is particularly strong in French Canada. The Montreal Canadiens team aligned itself closely with the francophone community by utilizing primarily French-Canadian players and featuring a team name that reflected French-Canadian culture. The team, and the sport, were used to challenge the history of humiliation French Canadians had experienced at the hands of the English. During the Second World War, the team signed a new French-Canadian star. In his first full season, Maurice Richard led the Canadiens to the Stanley Cup championship. In his next season, he broke the goal-scoring record. Richard quickly became an icon and political symbol representing French-Canadian nationalism. League commissioner Clarence Campbell, an Oxford-educated, English Canadian, often disciplined the fiery Quebecer. To many French Quebecers, these interactions with Campbell represented another example of English Canada's dominance over French Canada. Despite their majority status, francophones in Quebec had higher levels of poverty and unemployment, and fewer management positions. In 1955, after an altercation with a referee, Richard was suspended by Commissioner Campbell. Riots erupted in the streets of Montreal, and Quebec society was changed forever.

The focus of this research is on hockey in Quebec from its earliest days until the 1960s when Rocket Richard had retired and the number of Quebec-born players on the Montreal Canadiens started to decline (Whitehouse 2010). The importance of hockey in Quebec will be viewed through the lens of English colonization, but also focusing on Quebec in the 1960s and the societal shifts that resulted in the Quiet Revolution and the separatist movement. While the relationship Quebec had with both hockey and the Montreal Canadiens changed after the 1960s, the passion Quebecers display for the game continued. However, hockey was no longer necessary to provide empowerment to a disempowered people.

**Keywords:** hockey, French Canadians, French Canadian identity, Montreal Canadiens, Rocket Richard

## Résumé

Le hockey a toujours occupé une place importante dans la vie de nombreux Canadiens, et cet intérêt est particulièrement fort au Canada français. L'équipe des Canadiens de Montréal s'est alignée sur la communauté francophone en utilisant principalement des joueurs canadiens-français et en présentant un nom d'équipe qui reflète la culture canadienne-française. L'équipe et le sport ont été utilisés pour défier l'histoire de l'humiliation que les Canadiens français avaient subie aux mains des Anglais. Pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale, l'équipe a signé une nouvelle étoile canadienne-française. À sa première saison complète, Maurice Richard a mené les Canadiens au championnat de la Coupe Stanley. La saison suivante, il bat le record de buts. Richard est rapidement devenu une icône et un symbole politique représentant le nationalisme canadien-français. Le commissaire de la Ligue, Clarence Campbell, un Canadien anglais éduqué à Oxford, a souvent discipliné le passionné Québécois. Pour de nombreux Québécois francophones, ces interactions avec Campbell représentaient un autre exemple de la domination du Canada anglais sur le Canada français. Malgré leur statut majoritaire, les francophones du Québec avaient des niveaux de pauvreté et de chômage plus élevés et moins de positions de gestion. En 1955, après une altercation avec un arbitre, Richard est suspendu par le commissaire Campbell. Des émeutes éclatent dans les rues de Montréal et la société québécoise est changée à jamais.

Cette recherche porte sur le hockey au Québec depuis ses débuts jusqu'aux années 1960, lorsque Rocket Richard a pris sa retraite et que le nombre de joueurs nés au Québec sur les Canadiens de Montréal a commencé à diminuer (Whitehouse 2010). L'importance du hockey au Québec sera vue à travers le prisme de la colonisation anglaise, mais aussi en se concentrant sur le Québec des années 1960 et les changements sociétaux qui ont abouti à la Révolution tranquille et au mouvement séparatiste. Alors que la relation du Québec avec le hockey et les Canadiens de Montréal a changé après les années 1960, la passion des Québécois pour le jeu s'est poursuivie. Cependant, le hockey n'était plus nécessaire pour donner du pouvoir à un peuple sans pouvoir.

**Mots-clés:** le hockey, canadiens français, identité canadienne-française, Canadiens de Montréal, Rocket Richard

The game of hockey is closely associated with Canada but is even more intensely popular in Quebec. One team in particular, the Montreal Canadiens, aligned itself closely with the French community by utilizing primarily French-Canadian players and featuring a team name that reflected French-Canadian culture. Soon the Montreal Canadiens became the sporting institution most intimately associated with French-Canadian identity. The team, and the sport, were used to challenge the history of humiliation French Canadians had experienced at the hands of the English since the Conquest in the eighteenth century. During the Second World War, at a time of heightened nationalism, and after a period of futility for the Canadiens, the team signed French-Canadian Maurice Richard. His skill and tenacity made him a legend while endearing him to scores of fans in the most important hockey city in North America. He became a powerful political symbol of identity and nationalism as he stood-up for all French Canadians. In his battles with league commissioner Clarence Campbell, Richard represented French Canadians challenging English authority. In 1955, after an altercation with a referee, Richard was suspended by Commissioner Campbell. Riots erupted in the streets of Montreal, and Quebec society was changed forever.

This research will first briefly examine the tension that arose from the English colonization of the French, which predates Confederation and extends to present-day Canada. Quebec is the centre of French in Canada, and as a result, a cultural divide exists between Quebec and the rest of Canada. In the decades immediately after the Second World War, the francophone community in Quebec was economically and politically disadvantaged, subservient to the minority anglophone population. Contesting this position and fearing assimilation led to a French-Canadian nationalist movement that included the sport of hockey. The special role the game of hockey played in Quebec society will be analyzed, as will the important status the Montreal Canadiens hockey team occupied among French Canadians. This will include the role Maurice Richard played as an icon and representative of the working-class in Quebec. He became a symbol of the French-speaking oppressed majority in Quebec that rose up to fight for their rights. The paper will trace the development of hockey in Quebec and extend to the 1960s, with Richard's retirement and the decline of the French-Canadian presence on the Montreal

Canadiens (Whitehouse 2010). In 1972 a new professional hockey team arrived in Quebec and this too changed the relationship between French Quebec and the Montreal Canadiens (Gittersos 2011). The focus will then shift to examining Quebec society in the 1960s, with the advent of the Quiet Revolution, the rise of the separatist movement and the realization of more power for francophones in Quebec. Additionally, despite the decline in the French-Canadian presence on the Montreal Canadiens, this paper will demonstrate how important hockey, the Montreal Canadiens, and Maurice Richard, still are to Quebec. The relationship between the people and the team has changed. As French Canadians in Quebec have realized more power, the need to use hockey and the Canadiens for empowerment has declined. It is important to note that history is to be debated and as such, the role Richard played in Quebec society is contested. While he received intense media coverage as an icon in Quebec, adoration was not universal (Blake and Holman 2017a). Some members of the intelligentsia felt Richard was too parochial and not progressive enough to act as a symbol of modern Quebec, and were dismissive of hockey as well.

## **ENGLISH COLONIZATION**

The history of colonized Canada is a history of French-English conflict, beginning with the defeat of Montcalm's French forces by General Wolfe's English troops in 1759 on the Plains of Abraham. The Conquest left the French defeated, to be ruled by the English. At this time, more than ten thousand French Acadians were forcibly deported from present-day Atlantic Canada by British troops. The animosity between French and English continued with the rebellion of Lower Canada in 1837, where the French *Patriotes*, led by Louis-Joseph Papineau, revolted against the government. Lord Durham, tasked with solving this problem, recommended assimilating the French, a people he concluded had no history or culture. As a result, the Act of Union was passed in 1840, limiting French rights. After Confederation, French-Catholic, Metis leader Louis Riel, a hero in Quebec, was hanged for treason. His death ignited feelings of French-Canadian nationalism. The French had been opposed to Confederation, fearing a lesser role as a minority in an ocean of English. This fear was realized with the banning of French in schools in New Brunswick and Manitoba and regulations limiting the use of

French in Ontario schools. In Canada, French Canadians have often been victims of linguistic, social, and religious oppression.

This series of bitter defeats and humiliations are a central part of the French-Canadian historical experience. History has played a central role in the evolution of French-Canadian culture as demonstrated by a provincial motto *je me souviens*, which is interpreted by some as “I remember what the English did to the French” (Chang-Kredle 2008 22). The consequence of these defeats is a feeling of inferiority among French Canadians. “*Les personnages historiques qui sont alors vénérés finissent mal leurs parcours. On les vénère comme de grands vaincus. Nos héros de la commémoration, Montcalm, Papineau, Chénier, Riel et tant d'autres, incarnent la défaite courageuse*”<sup>1</sup> (Daoust 2005 47). Pellerin (1976) argues that French Canadians are a people starved of pride, autonomy, and liberty. Historian Lionel Groulx referred to French Canadians as *le petit peuple* (Cook 1977). With their culture and language threatened, the central theme among French Canadians became *la survivance*.

By the end of the Second World War, Quebec was 81 percent francophone, but English Canadians occupied most influential positions in the Quebec economy. French Canadians controlled less than 20 percent of the economy, and in Montreal, francophones accounted for only 17 percent of management jobs (Palmer 2009). Although francophones comprised 60 percent of Montreal's male labour force, they represented only 37 percent of those earning more than \$5,000 per year, and this proportion shrank as the salary level increased. Conversely, Anglophones, making up only 24 percent of the city's labour force, totalled 56 percent of Montreal's highest-paid workers (Levine 1990). The average income for francophones was 35 percent lower than the average income for English-speaking Canadians (Palmer 2009). Unilingual anglophones were Quebec's best-compensated workers, followed by bilingual anglophones, and then bilingual francophones, and the lowest end of the pay scale was occupied by unilingual francophones (Levine 1990). With little economic power Pierre Vallières referred to French Canadians as *Nègres blancs d'Amérique* (1969): exploited, second-class citizens, economically and culturally oppressed.

These feelings of humiliation and defeat have long-lasting consequences. A 2009 survey found that Quebecers still believe they are a vulnerable minority concerned about losing culture and language (Clark 2009). Another survey in 2014 found that Quebecers aged 15 to 25 still view their province's history as one of humiliation and defeat at the hands of anglophones (Létourneau 2014), and a survey in 2016 found the two defining character traits of Quebecers are victim and pride. Victimhood, after experiencing so many defeats and proud to have endured them (Léger et al., 2016).

### **HOCKEY IN FRENCH QUEBEC**

The series of defeats resulted in increased French-Canadian nationalism in Quebec, including in the area of sport (Janson 2001). Sport could become an outlet for francophone discontent in Quebec, and could be used to resist English control. In Canada, organized sport emerged in Montreal, so not surprisingly, hockey was codified in Montreal with organized games and written rules appearing in the 1870s. The Amateur Hockey Association of Canada was founded in 1886 in Montreal, and the game played a prominent role in the Montreal Winter Carnivals, quickly becoming a game that represented the city. Hockey became one of Montreal's most popular pastimes, with ten rinks being constructed prior to 1895, and hockey receiving more media coverage than any other sport (Vigneault 1986).

Like most organized sports at that time, hockey was primarily played by English-speaking, upper class, white males. As the game grew in popularity among francophones, there was fear, particularly from the powerful Catholic Church, that the English-dominated sport would encourage assimilation (Carrier 2001; Harvey 2006). Despite this concern, hockey's popularity spread swiftly among francophones and soon became the leading winter entertainment for French Canadians and the national game in Quebec (Bélanger 1996; Guay 1990). Due to the historic conflict between French and English, hockey could be used in Quebec as a symbol of resistance. “French Canadians took up hockey and made it a symbol of their national identity, of their fight for survival and the survival of their culture, on an English-speaking continent and within a country dominated by English” (Harvey 2006, 34).



By 1910 Montreal had five professional hockey clubs, and teams from Montreal won eight of the first ten Stanley Cups. Years later, an article in *Sports Illustrated* referred to Montreal hockey fans as the most fanatical, supercharged fans in any sport (Wind 1954). A 1958 article in *Time* magazine recognized the passion of the fans: “[f]or sustained loyalty, raucous fanaticism and sheer madness, there are few sporting crowds in the world to equal the hockey fans of Montreal” (1958, 38). By the early 1960s, more than two million French Canadians watched hockey, a rate much higher than in English Canada (Rutherford 1990), and the Montreal Forum was consistently filled with fans. This passion can be seen more recently in 2010 when, despite Quebec having only one of the 30 teams in the NHL, Quebec media provided 23 percent of all NHL media coverage in North America (Influence Communication 2010).

Quebecers remain passionate consumers of hockey in many forms of French-Canadian popular culture. During the 1980s, *Lance et compte*, a show about a fictional hockey team, was the most popular television show in Quebec, attracting more than two million viewers (Ransom 2014). The most successful Quebec-made film series is *Les Boys*, about a French-Canadian hockey team. The three films were so successful they spawned a television series. One of the only films to achieve more success than *Les Boys* is another Quebec film about hockey, *Bon Cop Bad Cop*, which won the award for the best Canadian film of 2007. That year, another hockey movie, *The Rocket*, about the life of Maurice Richard, won nine Canadian film awards. These and other popular culture texts demonstrate the broad appeal the game of hockey has in Quebec. Academic works have recently joined popular culture to demonstrate the importance of hockey in French-Canadian culture. Works include *Same But Different: Hockey in Quebec* (Holman and Blake 2017b), *Hockey, PQ: Canada’s Game in Quebec’s Popular Culture* (Ransom 2014), *Le Canadien de Montréal: Une légende repeusée* (Laurin-Lamothe and Moreau 2011), and *La vraie dureté du mental: hockey et philosophie* (Baillargeon and Boissinot 2009). Today, there are many more sporting options to choose from, and multiculturalism has resulted in a much more diverse Canada, but hockey remains by far the most followed sport by francophones in Quebec, and interest in hockey is much greater among francophones than among anglophones or allophones in Quebec (ACS 2019).

## THE MONTREAL CANADIANS

French Canadians' passion for the game of hockey manifests in their love for the Montreal Canadiens hockey team. The Montreal Canadiens are more than a sports team or a business. In Quebec they are a cultural institution; a symbol of French-Canadian identity (Gosselin 1960). The team was formed in 1909 to represent French Canadians and create a rivalry with anglophone teams. The fact that the team represented a marginalized population in its struggles against the more powerful made the attachment even more important. Many attributes of the team were selected to appeal to French Canadians. The team name, Canadiens, was an appeal to patriotism, chosen as a term that refers to the descendants of the original French settlers to Canada. The team colours; red, white, and blue were based on the French flag. Even the nicknames evolved with nationalist connotations. *Les habitant* (or *habs*) refers to the first French settlers in New France. The team and the uniforms are so important, a nickname, *Sainte Flanelle*, evolved referring to the team uniform as hallowed, holy or revered. Theologian Olivier Bauer, has extended these religious metaphors to suggest that the passion some French Canadians have for the Canadiens constitutes a popular Québécois religion (2011). Other nicknames for the team include *les glorieux* (or *nos glorieux*) referring to 'The Glorious' or 'Our Glorious Ones,' emblematic of French-Canadian pride. Even one of the popular fan chants, "*les Canadiens sont là,*" challenges the idea that French Canadians, *le petit peuple*, will be overlooked. The success of the Montreal Canadiens, the most successful franchise in the league, helped disempowered French Canadians feel proud.

The most powerful attribute reinforcing the representational nature of the team to the community was the players. The players on the team generally shared a similar cultural and ethnic background as their fans allowing for an authentic representation of a French-Canadian national identity (Ransom 2014). This resulted in a powerful identification forming between the team and the francophone fans (Whitson and Gruneau 2006). Sport's representational character is heightened when the team is made up of players from the community it represents. Early in the team's history, the vast majority of players were French-Canadian. At one time, the team was granted exclusive control of French-Canadian players. Later the team developed a farm system that resulted in a constant supply of the best francophones (Black 1997). Until the 1960s, French representation on

the Canadiens was at least three times higher than on any other team (Di Felice 1999). The rivalry the Canadiens had with anglophone teams featuring very few francophones heightened the attachment French-Canadian fans had with their team. Research shows the team was most successful when the number of French-Canadian players was highest (Lapierre 2012). The link between the French-language and the Montreal Canadiens was so strong that some players were asked to feign a French accent (Germain 1990). The Canadiens soon became the national team of French Canada (Bérubé 1973). Even when the team played in Ottawa, French Canadians in the Ottawa region supported the Canadiens (Coleman 1966). According to sport sociologist Jean Harvey the team “both collectively and in the persons of their individual French-Canadian heroes served as representatives or *porte-étendards* of the aspirations of the French-Canadian people” (Harvey 2006, 39). By the 1940s, the Montreal Canadiens had become the only professional team in the NHL from Quebec, and support extended to anglophone hockey fans in Quebec (Normand 2004), although Melancon (2009) suggests for obvious reasons, the relationship could not be the same.

The media have always played an influential role in encouraging this attachment. In the 1930s, radio broadcasts of Montreal Canadiens games reached across the province, but only in French, further cementing the bond between the team and French-Canadian fans. This connection was demonstrated when in 1937, 50,000 people filed past the body of Canadien player Howie Morenz, as his body lay in state after he died from a hockey game injury. His funeral was broadcast on the radio, and an estimated 250,000 people lined the streets to view his cortège (Podnieks 2008). The passion Quebecers have for their Montreal Canadiens today is evident by an examination of media coverage. From 2001 to 2019 annual media surveys have found that more than 65 percent of all sports media coverage in Quebec has been devoted to the Montreal Canadiens (Influence Communication 2019).<sup>2</sup> In 2015, all ten of the top sports personalities receiving the most media coverage in Quebec were from the Montreal Canadiens (Influence Communication 2015) and in 2017, 14 of the top 25 personalities receiving the most media coverage in Quebec were members of the Montreal Canadiens (Influence Communication 2017). Richelieu and Korai found that young French Canadians still strongly identify with the

team (2012). So strong is the attachment, that one survey found that 94 percent of Quebecers support the Montreal Canadiens (Léger et al., 2016). This includes anglophones and allophones, as well as francophones.

The French aspect of the Montreal Canadiens was established with the creation of the club, continued until the 1960s, and was undeniably strong. The team represented the disempowered people in a fight for power and recognition. The expectation is that the Canadiens will represent the community by maintaining this French presence. This is not the expectation of other professional sports teams in Montreal. This demonstrates the special place hockey has in the French-Canadian culture. In 1955, when Canadiens' coach Dick Irvin was viewed as too English, he was forced out (Fischler and Richard 1971). Team captain Henri Richard spoke out against anglophone coach Al MacNeil, and he was replaced after guiding the team to a Stanley Cup victory in 1971 (Bérubé 1973). There have even been complaints from fans when there was not enough French music being played during home games (Dowbiggan 2008).

While the sport of hockey and the Montreal Canadiens are undoubtedly important to French Canadians, the historic legacy of colonialism and French Canadians as victim has affected hockey among francophones. The National Hockey League (NHL) is overwhelmingly an English league with the administration, referees, players, coaches, and owners predominantly made up of anglophones. Language and cultural barriers may make it more difficult for francophones to play on a team or in a league that operates in English. In some cases, French is not welcome in locker rooms or among teammates, and French players in the NHL have faced ethnic slurs (Gitersos 2011). Several researchers have uncovered support to suggest that French Canadians face discrimination in the NHL. Sometimes teams are reluctant to sign French Canadians, in other cases, francophone players are paid less than the market rate (Krashinsky and Krashinsky 1997; Lavoie 1989; Lavoie 1998; Lavoie, Grenier, and Coulombe 1992; Longley 2000; Longley 2003; Marple 1975; Sirois 2009). Succeeding in professional hockey can be a defiant act for francophones, so when a French Canadian achieves success despite the odds, this can be powerfully symbolic.

## **“THE ROCKET”**

The sport of hockey holds a special place in the hearts of many French Canadians, as does the storied Montreal Canadiens. Perhaps the player who personifies this the most is Maurice “the Rocket” Richard. Like so many of his fellow French Canadians, he came from a large family, married young, and had a large family of his own. Richard attended Catholic church each Sunday, had little education, and worked as a machinist in the off-season at the beginning of his pro hockey career. According to his biographer, these humble beginnings made it easier for French Canadians to identify with him (Pellerin 1976). Richard became a superstar in Quebec’s most important pastime. A hero when the people had so few.

When he started with the Montreal Canadiens, most Montrealers spoke French, yet the street signs were in English. In Quebec, English was the language of business, of banks, and of hockey. Richard spoke no English and had to have a teammate translate for him. He signed a contract written in English and was given an English nickname. The Canadiens had not won the Stanley Cup in more than a decade. During the previous five seasons, they had finished in the bottom half of the standings, and the team was rumoured to be moving to Cleveland due to its abysmal record (Di Felice 1999). In 1943-44, his first full season with the Canadiens, Richard led them to a first-place finish and a Stanley Cup championship. The next year he became the first player to score 50 goals in 50 games, a feat that would not be replicated for 36 years. Richard stated that he broke the record for all French Canadians (Carrier 2001), but also felt the pressure of representing his people, saying he was afraid to let the French people down (Rogin 1960). In just his fourth full season, he won the Hart Trophy as the most valuable player in the league. Attendance at the Montreal Forum doubled in just seven seasons, and the arena needed expanding to accommodate the demand for tickets.

Richard led his team to the Stanley Cup finals in thirteen of his 18 seasons, including a record ten straight years, winning it eight times and earning recognition as a league All-Star on 14 occasions. He led the league in goal scoring five times and was the first player to score one-quarter of his team’s goals in a season. He was featured on the cover of French-Canada’s sports magazine *Sport revue* 13 times. He retired after the Canadiens broke a record by winning a fifth straight Stanley Cup. His incredible hockey skills, aligned with the media’s ability to create myths, combined with his ability to represent French Canada, transformed him into a powerful

symbol of a marginalized people. His success was consolation for the humiliations experienced by French Canadians.

Several legendary stories contributed to his mythical status among French Canadians (Melançon 2006). In 1944, Richard spent the day moving furniture into his family's new home. In the game that evening, despite being exhausted from the move, the Rocket scored five goals and added three assists to set a record.<sup>3</sup> In the playoffs that same season, Richard scored all five Canadien goals against Toronto and was named the first, second, and third star of the game while breaking another record. The next season he scored a goal while Detroit defenseman Earl Seibert was draped over his back. Commentator Michel Normandin exclaimed, "*les poètes chanteront ce but*"<sup>4</sup> (Margolis 2009). In 1952, after being knocked unconscious in a playoff game, Richard returned to the ice to score the series-winning goal propelling the Canadiens to the Stanley Cup finals. Together these stories, and many others, contribute to mythical qualities Richard is endowed with among hockey fans. In pre-television Canada, Canadien fans could not watch these moments. They were shaped in the imagination after reading about them or listening to descriptions. Some believed Richard's success could soothe the decades of humiliation suffered by the little people. Sports columnist Louis Chantignv wrote: "*Maurice Richard, c'est vous, c'est moi, c'est nous tous, Canadiens francais. Maurice Richard c'est la magistrale revanche des deboires et des defaites que nous essayons au courant de notre vie obscure. Maurice Richard, c'est l'hornme qui est devenu le symbole de toute une race. Lorsqu'il compte un but, il lave les humiliations de notre vie quotidieme*"<sup>5</sup> (cited in Pellerin 1976, 490-492).

He was also recognized outside Canada, representing French Canada on the world stage. Richard was feted in 1959 at the world hockey championships in Czechoslovakia, where he was received by thousands of fans and given a car (Carrier 2001). He was featured on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, *Time Magazine*, and *Sport*, and Nobel Prize winning novelist William Faulkner filed a ten-page feature in *Sports Illustrated* after covering one of his games. He appeared in *Babe Ruth Sports*, an American comic book about sports heroes, and was invited to the Parade of Champions in the United States, where he was celebrated along with boxer Jack Dempsey and baseball player Stan Musial. He even appeared on Ed Sullivan's show and met the Queen.

Richard proved to French Canadians that they could be among the best in the world and achieve international recognition.

### ***French (Richard) vs. English (Campbell) Conflict in Hockey***

Clarence Campbell, commissioner of the NHL, was an upper class, Oxford-educated, Protestant, war-hero, who had been decorated with the Order of the British Empire. Campbell was viewed by many in the league as the perfect commissioner; a yes-man who could be controlled by team owners, particularly by Conn Smythe of the Toronto Maple Leafs (Jenish 2008). Smythe, a war veteran, was known for his disdain of French Canadians (Di Felice 1999).

In 1945, Canadian novelist Hugh MacLennan authored *The Two Solitudes* about the divisive relationship between French and English Canada. In *Saturday Night* magazine, MacLennan wrote that Richard was routinely “tripped, slashed, held, boarded and verbally insulted.” Richard has “been prevented from playing hockey as well as he can because the referees have not enforced the rules properly.” Because French Canadians feel the English have persecuted him, he “has become more than a hero to millions of *Canadiens*. . . he has imperceptibly become the focus of the persecution-anxieties latent in a minority people” (MacLennan 1955, 38). Teams commonly used illegal tactics to slow Richard down, with the Maple Leafs being the worst culprits (Coleman 1966). Another strategy to put Richard off his game was the use of ethnic slurs. Richard said, “[q]uand on crache sur ma race, le sang me monte à la tête”<sup>6</sup> (Di Felice 1999, 140). He often retaliated, and one season led the league in penalty minutes.

The French media felt Richard, like other French-Canadian players, was discriminated against by the NHL (Pellerin 1976). Richard was fined more than any other player in the NHL (Duperreault 1981), but such was the adoration for Richard that in a defiant act of resistance against the English, his fans often paid his fines (Gosselin 1960). French-Canadian fans could point to examples of perceived discrimination against Richard. In 1946 after a fight with John Mariucci, Richard received a five-minute penalty and Mariucci two minutes. In his weekly *Samedi Dimanche* newspaper column, Richard raised concerns about discrimination against French Canadians. Teammate Bernie Geoffrion was suspended for seven games when the opposing player was the

instigator but was only given a four-game suspension. Richard wrote that Campbell cheered against the Canadiens, was biased against the team, and discriminated against French Canadians (cited in Pellerin 1976). Richard called Campbell a *Mange-Canayen* (one who eats French Canadians) and criticized him for not acting after the Canadiens' Jean Beliveau was injured by questionable play, and when Gordie Howe seriously injured Dollard St. Laurent of the Canadiens. Another column insinuated that English players were incorrectly credited with scoring assists to help them win the scoring title. It had been more than three decades since a French Canadian had won the title. In one column, Richard called Campbell a dictator and claimed the Montreal Canadiens were persecuted more than any other team (Pellerin 1976). This demonstrated to French Canadians that Richard would stand up to the English, further endearing him to his people. However, it also heightened the tension between French-Canadian fans and anglophones. For airing his opinions, Richard was forced by the league to give up writing his column, retract his words in a letter of apology to Campbell, and post a \$1,000 good behaviour bond to the league. For many Quebecers, Richard's struggles with Campbell were about more than just hockey. The clashes demonstrated what it was like to be French-speaking in an Anglo-dominated country.

## **THE RIOT**

The event that best demonstrates French-Canadian passion for hockey and the Montreal Canadiens is *L'Affaire Richard*. With four games remaining in the 1955 season, and the Canadiens in first place enjoying an eleven-game undefeated streak, Richard was leading the league in scoring. Richard had finished second in the scoring race on five occasions, but he had never won the Art Ross trophy as the league's top point-getter. During a game in Boston, Richard was involved in an altercation and hit a referee. In an unprecedented response, Campbell suspended Richard for the rest of the season and the playoffs. The suspension would compromise Richard's bid for the scoring title, the accompanying \$2000 bonus, and the Hart Trophy as league MVP, and damage the Canadiens chance for the Stanley Cup. Many French Canadians took the suspension personally, viewing it as another example of humiliation at the hands of Campbell and the English. The



suspension was even raised in the House of Commons. The English controlled the destiny of French Canada's favourite athlete, on their favourite team, in the most popular sport.

Like so many issues in Canada, views of the suspension broke down on linguistic lines. The French media supported Richard while the English media supported Campbell (Di Felice 1999). The *Globe & Mail* printed an editorial entitled "Toronto Approves Campbell's Decision" while the French paper *Parlons Sports* featured the headline "*Une insulte à la race Canadienne française.*" The next morning French-language newspaper *Montreal-Matin* printed a cartoon showing Campbell's severed head dripping blood. Campbell received death threats, and there were threats made to blow up NHL headquarters.

Four days after the suspension, the Canadiens played a game in Montreal. Protesters arrived hours before game time with signs that read "*Injustice au Canada français,*" "*À bas Campbell,*" and "*Vive Richard.*" Campbell arrived at the game and was accosted by fans while some threw debris at him. A tear-gas bomb exploded resulting in the evacuation of the Forum. Thousands of fans spilled into the streets already filled with protestors. In the ensuing riot that went on for hours, English-owned businesses were looted, fires were set, police cars were overturned, and more than \$100,000 damage was done.<sup>7</sup> Twelve policemen and 25 civilians suffered injuries, and 70 rioters were arrested (Ramos and Gosine 2002). According to Jean Harvey, "the anger unleashed by his suspension surely showed that French Canadians in the Quebec of the 1950s resented very keenly their status as a subordinate group, dominated and discriminated against by a wealthy and powerful English minority" (2006, 38). Famed novelist Hugh MacLennan, who was at the game, suggested that to understand the feelings of the crowd was to understand the social conditions French Canadians lived in (Carrier 2001).

Just days later, *Le Devoir* journalist André Laurendeau published an article entitled, "*Suspension de Rocket: On a tué mon frère Richard.*" Laurendeau compared Richard to Louis Riel, the iconic French-speaking Catholic leader of an oppressed people, executed by the government for treason. As Foran (2011) suggests, comparing a political leader executed for treason with the suspension of a hockey player seems absurd, but such was the importance of hockey and Maurice Richard to French Canadians. Like the suspension, the Riel hanging

demonstrated the power anglophones had over francophones. Laurendeau wrote about hockey's importance to French Canadians, and how hockey acted as a tool of resistance. Hockey had become an instrument for the articulation of French-Canadian nationalism and was being used by a frustrated people reacting to injustice. Laurendeau concluded French Canadians would no longer passively accept their fate. Daoust agreed: "*le sens de l'émeute du Forum en 1955 se traduit comme ceci: nous, Canadiens français, n'accepterons plus d'être citoyens de seconde zone dans notre territoire québécoise*"<sup>8</sup> (2006, 18).

The Canadiens lost the Stanley Cup in the final game of the series. In addition, Richard lost the scoring title to teammate Bernie Geoffrion, who received death threats for stealing the title from Richard (Brown 2003). Montreal coach Dick Irvin stepped down after the season, and Richard threatened to quit if a French-speaking coach was not hired. Richard's old linemate, Toe Blake, who spoke French, became coach. The Montreal Canadiens increased the number of French Canadians on the team and won the Stanley Cup five times in a row. Each time they won, Commissioner Campbell presented the trophy to Captain Maurice Richard, congratulating him in English. After Richard retired in 1960 the Quebec presence on the Canadiens started to decline (Whitehouse 2010).

It is easy to find examples of Maurice Richard's importance. He retired in 1960, and the required waiting time to vote him into the Hockey Hall of Fame was immediately waved. In addition, his number 9 was retired permanently by the Canadiens. In 1967 when the Order of Canada was created, he was among the inaugural recipients. In a 1984 poll, *La Presse* readers jointly chose Richard and folksinger Félix Leclerc as Quebec's most important citizens. Richard has been honoured with the naming of a hockey arena, a junior hockey team, a lake, a bay, parks, squares, and streets. There are at least three statues of Maurice Richard in Quebec. Long after he left the ice, Maurice Richard lived-on as a heroic figure in the creative imagination of Canadian artists, carvers, filmmakers, authors, poets, playwrights, and songwriters. The Maurice award is given annually to the French-Canadian Athlete of the Year. The Maurice Richard trophy is given annually to the highest goal scorer in the NHL. Certainly, Maurice Richard was an important figure in Quebec. Important enough to cause a riot which was a catalyst in the rise of French-Canadian nationalism in Quebec. So important was the riot to Quebec

that 40 years later a retrospective appeared in *la Presse*, and ten years later, on the 50th anniversary, *la Presse*, *le Journal de Montréal* and *le Devoir*, all devoted comprehensive features to the riot.

## **THE REVOLUTION**

Richard's career coincided with a time in Quebec referred to as *la Grand Noirceur*, (the Great Darkness), characterized by rural Catholic values, insular traditionalism, and conservatism. When Richard retired in 1960, Jean Lesage was elected Premier in Quebec. What followed was referred to as the Quiet Revolution, a period marked by intense social change including secularization, and urbanization, with much of the traditionalism replaced by modern liberal attitudes. Traditional demographic tendencies, associated with a traditional rural way of life were rapidly reversed. The state played a significant role in this transformation, leading the way with education and health care reform, and economic interventions. The Quebec government became a powerful agent to advance the interest of French Quebecers. Electricity and energy were nationalized to end control by English-speaking business interests. The *Caisse de dépôt et de placement* was created to encourage French-Canadian businesses. The strong French-Canadian nationalism characterized in the previous era continued. Societal change was accompanied by a questioning of the role of French Canadians in Canada that resulted in redefining Quebec's role in Canada, a shift from French Canadians being viewed as a minority in Canada to being viewed as a majority in Quebec.

While the Richard riot of 1955 and the election of Lesage in 1960 may have marked the start of social change in Quebec, the process of modernization was well under-way prior to these events. The publication of the manifesto *Le Refus globale* by 15 French-Canadian artists in 1948 challenged Quebec's traditional values while advocating for social change. Central to this process of change was the rise of influentials advocating for a liberalization of Quebec society, including historians, the newspaper *Le Devoir*, and the *citélibristes* led by Pierre Trudeau (Cook 1996). In 1953, in an assertion of Quebec autonomy, the Tremblay Commission was created to examine Quebec's relationship with the federal government. It stressed French-Canadian survival as well as Quebec autonomy. There were a series of strikes that demonstrated French Canadians challenging

authority. The asbestos strike of 1949 was an important event contributing to this change, as was the railway strike of 1950, the Louiseville textile strike in 1952, the Murdochville and Alcan strikes in 1957, the *la Presse* newspaper strike of 1958, and the 1959 Radio Canada strike. On the 1949 Asbestos strike, Pierre Trudeau wrote of “[a] people which has been defeated, occupied, decapitated, pushed out of commerce, driven from the cities, reduced little by little to a minority, and diminished in influence” (Trudeau 1974, 7). These outbreaks of nationalistic passion, including the Richard riot of 1955, displayed discontented French Canadians demanding change and contributed to the social change that resulted in the Quiet Revolution, a major turning point in Quebec society. In an attempt to quell rising nationalistic sentiment in Quebec, Prime Minister Pearson created the Bilingualism and Biculturalism Commission in 1963, to encourage an equal partnership between the French and English in Canada.

A further social change taking place in Quebec at this time was the rise of the separatist movement. Shortly after the Richard riot, the separatist *L'Alliance Laurentienne* was founded in 1957. The federal elections of 1957 and 1958 taught Quebecers that English Canada could choose the federal government with little influence or input from Quebec. In the Spring of 1959, a second independence group was formed; the *Action socialiste pour l'indépendance du Québec*, which was followed by the founding of *Rassemblement pour l'indépendance nationale* (RIN) in 1960. These groups were fighting for Quebec to be a distinctive national community. In 1963, three members of the RIN formed the revolutionary *Front de Libération du Québec* (FLQ). The *Ralliement national* (RN) was a political party formed in 1966 advocating independence. Rene Levesque created the *Mouvement Souveraineté-Association* (MSA) in 1967 as another group working for Quebec sovereignty. In 1968, the Maurice Richard arena was the site of the founding convention of the *Parti Québécois*, which rose to power in Quebec and organized two referenda on sovereignty.

### **THE DEATH OF A LEGEND**

In 1996, just months after the second referendum on sovereignty, the Montreal Forum was celebrating its final night as a hockey shrine. Maurice Richard was introduced and received a lengthy standing ovation that left

him in tears. The majority of the people in the stands had never seen him play but knew of him and his mythical status. This reaction, almost four decades after he had played his last game, demonstrated his importance to the people. Four years later, Maurice Richard died of cancer at the age of 78. Upon his death, several Quebec TV and radio stations switched from regular programming to devote all of their coverage to Richard, continuing the coverage into the next day (Wyatt 2000). *Le journal de Montreal* devoted 50 pages to Richard in the edition after his death, and *la Presse* had a featured insert. More than 115,000 people paid their respects as his body lay in state. Richard's funeral, only the fifth state funeral in Quebec's history, was shown live on many Quebec television stations. To the English media, the funeral was for a hockey player, but to the French, it was for a mythic hero (Lapierre 2012; Ramos and Gosine 2002). Thousands of Quebecers lined the traditional Stanley Cup parade route as his body was taken to its final resting place.

Quebec remains devoted to Maurice Richard. In a 2004 poll to choose the greatest hockey player, Wayne Gretzky was chosen first in every region of the country except in Quebec, where Maurice Richard received twice as many votes as Gretzky (Sutherland 2004). That year, forty-four years after his last game, a Quebec poll cited him as one of the top ten most admired Quebecers in history (Yakabuski 1998) and the Canadian Museum of Civilization<sup>9</sup> devoted an exhibit to Richard. Associated with the museum exhibit was a conference examining the cultural importance of Richard's life. After his death, 289 of his personal items were auctioned off, including trophies, programs, pictures, and equipment. The federal government intervened and for \$600,000 purchased 47 items deemed culturally important. The items, including game sweaters, pucks, and sticks, were given a heritage designation meaning they must stay in Quebec and could not be sold. When asked to list the ten most important items in the entire museum collection, Canadian Museum of History Vice President Moira McCaffrey included Rocket Richard's game-worn hockey sweater (Kirby 2012).

## **CONCLUSION**

A brief examination of French-English relations provides insight to the view of French Canadians as victims. Tracing the history of hockey in Quebec until the 1960s demonstrates the importance French

Quebecers gave to the game of hockey as a symbol of empowerment after experiencing generations of humiliation. Hockey is the national sport of Quebec, and this devotion to the game manifests in widespread passion for the Montreal Canadiens. As has been demonstrated in this paper, by the 1960s the sport and the team established a presence that continues to affect Quebec society to the present day. However, the strong association with French Canada has declined (Blake and Holman 2017b; Harvey 2006; Patoine 2009). Even great French-Canadian players like Patrick Roy or Mario Lemieux could not have captivated Quebec as Maurice Richard did. This decline has transpired for a number of reasons including the decrease in the number of French-Canadian players, the arrival of another professional hockey team in Quebec from 1972 to 1995, and an increase in the diversity of the Quebec sporting culture. In addition, hockey, and the Canadiens were important for the political and cultural empowerment of French Quebec. In the 1960s, as the attitude of French Canadians in Quebec started to shift from being viewed as a minority in Canada, to being viewed as a majority in Quebec, the Québécois gained more power. They were no longer the victims that needed to look to hockey for heroes and national pride.

The initial stirrings of the Quiet Revolution can be found in the Richard riot. Without hockey, *the Habs*, and the Rocket, there would have been no riot. Furthermore, without the riot, Richard would not be as powerful a myth. The riot was a catalyst in the evolution of French-Canadian nationalism and represented the pinnacle of the association of Quebec nationalism with the Montreal Canadiens. It was undoubtedly a contributing factor to the social change that resulted in the Quiet Revolution and the separatist movement. Today, with the decrease in Quebec nationalism, hockey is not the same symbol of resistance in Quebec.

Historian Margaret MacMillan suggests that history provides fuel for nationalism. History “creates the collective memories that help bring the nation into being. The shared celebration of the nation’s great achievements—and the shared sorrow at its defeats—sustain and foster it” (MacMillan 2008, 87). The history that fuels this nationalism is often constructed as myths. Foran (2011) submits that Rocket Richard was a stirring, motivational myth, important to Quebec's nationalist project. He was much more than a good hockey player, representing their team, in their national sport. French Canadians invested him with national meaning (Rompré

and Saint-Pierre 1972). He is the ultimate icon, and his importance to French Canadians was demonstrated through not only the riot but also the reverence people had for him. He was the pride of a nation and became a symbol of resistance. As Roch Carrier (2001) writes, there have been better hockey players, but no hockey player was a more important historical figure in Canada.

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<sup>1</sup> “Our revered historical figures suffer a tragic demise. We worship the vanquished. Our heroes: Montcalm, Papineau, Chénier, Riel as well as many others are defeated.”

<sup>2</sup> This figure was calculated referring to Influence Communication annual reports from 2001 to 2019. [influencecommunication.com](http://influencecommunication.com)

<sup>3</sup> This feat would become iconized as a Canadian Heritage Minute.

<sup>4</sup> “The poets will sing of this goal.”

<sup>5</sup> “Maurice Richard, he’s you, he’s me, he’s all of us, French-Canadians. Maurice Richard is the masterful revenge of the setbacks and defeats that we endure in the course of our dark life. Maurice Richard is the man who has become the symbol of an entire race. When he scores a goal, it washes away the humiliations of our daily life.”

<sup>6</sup> “When they spit on my race, blood rushes to my head.”

<sup>7</sup> \$1 million in 2020 dollars.

<sup>8</sup> “The 1955 riot’s meaning translates as follows: we, French-Canadians, will no longer accept being second-class citizens in Quebec.”

<sup>9</sup> Now called the Canadian Museum of History.

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