



« *Le livre aimé du peuple* ».

Les almanachs québécois de 1777 à nos jours

Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink

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Katalin Kürtösi

University of Szeged, Hungary

Various Forms of Appropriation

Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink's « *Le livre aimé du peuple* ». *Les almanachs québécois de 1777 à nos jours* is a well-structured and beautifully illustrated book that deals with an interesting phenomenon of cultural history, namely, annually-published volumes targeted at various layers of Quebec society. The almanacs he examines are shown in a wide context, pointing at similarities or differences with regard to this type of publication on the American continent or in Europe. Lüsebrink blends aspects of cultural studies, the history of books and reading, as well as references to cultural anthropology. As he himself puts it in the preface, he relies on his training at a comparative literature scholar when he aims at tracking down the various forms of appropriation, imitation and transformation of European and Anglo-American models in the almanacs of Québec. These almanacs had an immense political and cultural influence since in thousands of households the almanacs were the only books, apart from the Bible, prayer books and the lives of the saints. For decades, the almanacs targeted a wide readership, thus bridging social classes and generations.

Nova Scotia Calendar, the very first almanac in Canada, was published in 1769, while in French the first ones were the *Calendrier pour Montréal* and the *Almanach encyclopédique*, both published by Fleury Mesplet in 1777. The titles clearly show that they can serve a given geographical unit, and wish to offer information in various domains, including general knowledge and practical advice alike. The almanacs were structured around four sections: the calendar, historical landmarks of the previous year, practical advice, and finally, anecdotes and other kinds of stories – this arrangement of contents was generally followed throughout the Western world. Chronologically, the peak period in Québec was between 1880 and 1930, with a sharp decline in the second half of the twentieth century. As time passed, the formats, sizes and target

groups of almanacs kept changing, but they were generally printed on cheap paper, meaning that the social and cultural elites often despised them (15). Still, circulation rocketed. For example, the *Almanach du peuple*, published by Librairie Beauchemin, reached figures of between 80,000 and 100,000 copies in the early decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, its editors encouraged readers to keep the copies year by year and thus to form a small library in the house. Lüsebrink re-evaluates the role of these editions by pointing out that the popular almanacs, instead of being a rather marginal, folkloric genre focusing greatly on weather forecasts and astrology (22), reflected the social and economic realities of French-Canadian society of the given period. This focus implied that safeguarding the French language and respecting religion and the Catholic Church had a privileged place among the missions of these annually published books – the greatest writers and church functionaries of a given epoch (like Louis Fréchette, Philippe Aubert de Gaspé, sr., Lionel Groulx, and even Félix Leclerc) regularly published, or re-published, stories in the almanacs. This emphasis on culture and religion marks a point of difference in comparison with the composition of similar volumes in English Canada: the latter served more as a practical guide, including a calendar, an address book and directory.

« *Le livre aimé du peuple* » devotes chapters to readership (women, workers), regionalism and interculturalism, the representation of aboriginal people, the issue of identity (regional, linguistic), as well as reflections about modernity. The increased role of advertising in all types of printed media was a remarkable ‘side effect’ of the spread of modernity in the late 19th century – this phenomenon is also touched upon at various points of the monograph, with Lüsebrink pointing out, among other things, that both English-Canadian and American companies used the almanacs to reach out to a wide range of prospective customers. At the same time, the almanacs gave advice about the correct pronunciation of English terms – and fought against the use of Anglicisms (229–230). These features underline the dual role of these annual publications: on the one hand, to defend the values of traditional rural society in Québec, and on the other hand to help readers find their way in the changes triggered by modernity (378, 380). Indeed, “[l]es contradictions entre nostalgie du passé et modernité renvoient ainsi aux clivages profonds de la culture québécoise du XX^e siècle, déchirée entre le monde rural et l’univers des villes, la nostalgie de la Nouvelle-France et l’attirance vers l’américanité, la société autosuffisante et agricole du passé et la société de consommation du futur” (381).

« *Le livre aimé du peuple* » offers a wide panorama of Québec society and culture, particularly of everyday culture. It is a joy to read – and not only for those who can still remember their childhood excitement at finding an old almanac on the grandparents’ mantelpiece in rural Quebec or rural Hungary.