

Petitions of Acadian Exiles, 1755-1785.

A Neglected Source

by N.E.S. GRIFFITHS*

There has been considerable agreement among those who have published in the field of Acadian history that the most important single matter for the Acadian people has been, and remains, the deportation of 1755. Yet the full story of what actually happened to the Acadians, both during and immediately after the deportation, has not yet been published. The subject has been treated either as part of a larger work, dealing with a much longer period of Acadian history, or written about in episodes, in books and articles dealing with the experiences of only some of the exiles. A. G. Doughty, for example, called his work *The Acadian Exiles*,¹ but centred his attention upon events leading up to the crisis of 1755, devoting nine of the ten chapters of his book to events before 1755 and only one to what happened when the ships left with the Acadians on board. Works in French have much the same order of priorities, although Emile Lauvrière attempted to relate what actually happened to the Acadians between 1755 and 1800 in the second volume of his *La tragédie d'un peuple — histoire du peuple acadien de ses origines à nos jours*.² Nearly a third of this volume is spent upon an account of Acadian experiences during and after the deportation but the account was built only partially upon primary sources. Works such as O. W. Winzerling's *Acadian Odyssey*,³ a book concerned with the passage of Acadians from France to Louisiana, Pierre Belliveau's *French Neutrals in Massachusetts*,⁴ or Ernest Martin's *Les exilés acadiens en France au XVIII^e siècle*⁵ are interesting examples of works which are concerned with what happened to some specific group of exiled Acadians. But little space in them is given to the events of 1755 as a whole, since the acknowledged interest of the writer is in the myriad details of the experiences of one particular group of Acadians.

The titles of the last three books contain, when considered together, one of the reasons why the definitive history of the actual deportation of the Acadians, rather than of the causes of the deportation, has yet to be written. The scholar setting out to discover what happened must look for the historical evidence in the places where the Acadians travelled. The

* Department of History, Carleton University.

¹ Sub-titled: *A chronicle of the Land of Evangeline*, (Toronto, 1920).

² (Paris: Éditions Bossard, 1922). It received the *Grand Prix Gobert de l'Académie française* and the *Prix d'histoire de la Société historique de Montréal*.

³ (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1955).

⁴ (Boston, 1972).

⁵ (Paris, 1936).

deportation of the Acadians began in 1755 and continued, though on a lesser scale, until 1763. By 1764, when Acadians were once more allowed to own land in Nova Scotia, groups of the exiles were to be found scattered not only from the banks of the St. Lawrence to the mouth of the Mississippi but also in England, in France, hovering off the Falklands, in Santo Domingo and on other islands in the Caribbean, in Louisiana and cast up as far south as French Guyana. The *Centre d'Études acadiennes* in Moncton, New Brunswick, has been trying, since 1953, to bring together, by microfilm, xerox, or in original, the documentary heritage of these voyagings.⁶ Though considerable progress has been made, the *Centre* does not hold copies of all extant documents relevant to the experiences of the Acadians in exile. Much has come from the principal archives in Ottawa, London, Paris, Madrid and Washington. Yet study of the Acadian wanderings in any detail means examination of the episcopal archives of Quebec, the provincial archives of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, the state archives of Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia and Louisiana, a number of French departmental archives, from Normandy to the Gironde, the Archivo General de Indias in Seville, as well as the Archivo Segreto Vaticano.

Almost everywhere the Acadians wandered during the years between 1755 and 1785, officials chronicled their passage. Census, commentary, plans for aid, plans for control, plans for disposal, volume after volume of official reaction to the exiles can be found today. Further, numbers of people, both government officials and private individuals, became involved in helping the Acadians endure and have left records concerning Acadians in diaries and letters, records still extant. Then, many local archive deposits, places such as the Boston Public Library, or the town halls of St. Servan, La Rochelle and Bordeaux, have numbers of documents concerning individual Acadians. There are also letters by Acadians, written to officials of one sort and another, to be found in larger archives. The most impressive documents, however, are the numbers of petitions made by groups of Acadians to varying authorities, such as the colonial authorities in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Georgia, as well as the Sick and Hurt Board of the Admiralty in London. Louis XV, Louis XVI, as well as the French revolutionary authorities, also received petitions, as did His Most Christian Majesty, Charles III of Spain, and the latter's Minister, the Count Aranda.

Such richness of documentation inspires a dream of a wide variety of historical methods for its assessment. Census data beckons towards the techniques of historical demography which have been developed, in recent years, on both sides of the Atlantic. The material left by individuals makes the tools of the genealogist and the biographer seem necessary acquisitions. The lengthy petitions signed by groups of Acadians cry out for the particular talents of the intellectual historian.

⁶ See their *Inventaire general des sources documentaires sur les Acadiens*, tome I (Moncton, 1975).

Wherever the Acadians wandered they were perceived as a distinct people. Partly, of course, this was due to the very circumstances of their deportation and exile. Colonel Lawrence, the Lieutenant-Governor of Nova Scotia who sent the Acadians into exile, did not inform his fellow colonial administrators of his intentions before he acted. As a result, the Acadians were landed, without warning, among peoples with different customs, a different language, a different religion from their own, and people who had no idea of whether to greet the new arrivals as prisoners-of-war, subjects of the British Crown temporarily removed from a battle zone, trustworthy if misunderstood neutrals, or "intestine Enemies".⁷ These circumstances alone would have been enough to distinguish the Acadians from their new neighbours. Such separateness was further marked, however, by the general physical condition of the Acadians as they were disembarked. From Boston to Savannah it was the same story: the Acadians landed in need of medicine, food and clothing.⁸ For the colonial authorities there was no doubt: the new arrivals were groups of people, to be called variously the "Neutrals", "the Neutral French" or "Acadians" and in need of aid on a large scale.

Neither the physical nor the cultural barriers diminished to any great extent for those exiles whose wanderings took them outside North America, to England, France and the Caribbean, where authorities would also call them "French neutrals", "*les français neutres*" and "Acadians". The thousand or so that landed in the British seaports in 1756 were described by officials as destitute and ravaged by sickness.⁹ The more than three thousand to be counted in the French Atlantic ports in 1768 were scarcely healthier and just as penurious.¹⁰ Those reported in the Caribbean at the same period were depicted as in equally difficult straits, partly from the "Effects of the Bad climate there"¹¹ and partly because of their physical distress, ill-health and lack of resources.¹² The cultural barriers between Acadians and their new surroundings in England and the Caribbean are obvious enough to need little emphasis in this paper, but it is worth remarking that French society was scarcely less foreign to the wanderers. The Acadians were very much outsiders in eighteenth-century France. Their reception was a complex matter of government aid, local hostility, and official exasperation. While they were paid pensions by the government one commentator considered that "they can be looked upon in no other light than as a chaos of indolence stupidity and nastiness".¹³ A

⁷ Dinwiddie to Shirley, 28 April 1756, printed in R. Brooks, ed., *Dinwiddie Papers* (Richmond: Virginia Historical Collections, 1899), II, p. 394.

⁸ 7 Nov. 1755, Hutchinson Papers, Vol. 23, Boston State House, *Minutes of the Provincial Council*, Colonial Record, VI, pp. 712-13, Pennsylvania.

⁹ Medical Board Out-Letters, 1756, *passim*. Adm. 98/5, P.R.O.

¹⁰ In particular see the collection of papers in Bordeaux Public Library known as the Le Moyne MSS. Copy P.A.C. and C.E.A.

¹¹ Comment of Barnard, Governor of Massachusetts, January 1765, *Council Records*, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Vol. XXV, p. 350.

¹² Letter of Gouessac to Bordeaux merchants, n.d., C4328, Archives départementales, Gironde.

¹³ Included in papers, commenting on the value of the Acadians to Belle-Isle: I.F. 2158, Archives départementales, Ille-et-Vilaine, Rennes. It should be noted that the man in charge of this establishment was the Irish Jacobite, Baron Richard Warren.

Breton lawyer who was interested in their plight remarked upon the difference between their work habits, in lumbering, spinning and weaving, and those of the French.¹⁴ Many of the local inhabitants near Poitiers, a district where an attempt was made to establish the Acadians in the 1770s, showed a bitter contempt for these favoured refugees.¹⁵ Common language and common religion were to prove only partial compensation for differences of dialect, ritual, social customs and traditions.

If the Acadians in exile were quickly recognised as an identifiable group by the authorities whose immediate responsibility they had become, they themselves reacted to their new circumstances with an observable solidarity. As has already been remarked, wherever the Acadians went one discovers a trail of petitions, beginning in 1755 and continuing until 1815, if not longer, presented by varying groups of Acadians to the authorities. There are also a considerable number of petitions from family men and women, writing on behalf of themselves, such as those presented by John Benoit to "his Excellency the Governor and to the Honourable, His Majesty's Council and the House of Representatives of this Province of the Massachusetts Bay", at Boston in February 1762,¹⁶ or that by Veuve Clemens, to the revolutionary authorities of St. Servan in France sometime in 1791.¹⁷ Individual petitions, however, are not the main interest of this paper, which is concerned with petitions presented in the name of more than one family of Acadians.

The petitions are of various kinds. Sometimes such petitions, often signed by many individuals, would restrict their demands for action to the needs of the Acadians in the immediate vicinity; sometimes, they would ambitiously embrace the needs of all Acadians, wherever they were to be found. Sometimes these petitions centre upon an immediate crisis, such as the attempt made by Massachusetts and Pennsylvania to bind out Acadian children as apprentices. This action seemed to the parents beyond the bounds of human suffering, as was stated in a petition presented in Massachusetts.¹⁸ The petition presented in Philadelphia said this action made the Acadians "the most unhappy People that ever appeared, if, after having lost what God had given us, for the Subsistence of our Families, we see ourselves forced to tear our Children from the Arms of our tender Wives".¹⁹ Sometimes the petition is for the removal of all the exiles to better circumstances, such as that presented in 1763 to the Sick and Hurt Board of the Admiralty by the Acadians then in the British seaports,²⁰

¹⁴ Lettre adressée à Guillot, Commissaire de la Marine à St-Malo, 10 mai, 1759, I.F. 2159, A.D., Ille-et-Vilaine.

¹⁵ See particularly papers collected in Carton 32, Nos. 27 à 39, A.D., Vienne, Poitiers.

¹⁶ GAUDET, "Acadian Genealogy and Notes", *Reports of the Public Archives of Canada*, 1905, II, p. 119.

¹⁷ Municipal Archives of St. Servan, Ille-et-Vilaine, France.

¹⁸ Hutchinson Papers, Vol. 23, Boston State House.

¹⁹ To the Hon. Mr. Norris, Chief of the Assembly of Philadelphia, *Votes of the Assembly*, 4509-4512, 1931, Pennsylvania.

²⁰ L.G. and J.B. to John Cleveland, 4 Jan. 1763, Medical Board Out-letters, Adm. 98/9, P.R.O.

or that sent to the Spanish minister at the court of Louis XVI in 1783.²¹ Sometimes the petition is for the payment of funds granted but not received, such as that by the Acadians in France in 1782,²² and sometimes it is a request for future funding such as that to the Spanish authorities in Louisiana in 1787.²³

If such petitions are considered singly, they become one piece of evidence in the experiences of a particular group of Acadians in a given area. Questions of provenance and textual criticism become of first importance. Was a particular petition written by the Acadians themselves, as would be suggested by the hand-writing, the French, and the style of that petition already mentioned concerning Acadian protests in Massachusetts over the binding out of their children or with considerable help, as the florid English of the petition, already quoted, presented by Acadians in Philadelphia on the same matter might suggest? If it was with help, was the help of a sort available to anyone seeking government aid in that milieu, or did the Acadians find friends and patrons not available to others in difficulties? If petition-making was a recognised political activity in the milieu, how did the Acadians become aware of it? How do Acadian petitions compare in style, argument, and content with others brought forward? Certainly, examination of petitions, in French archives, presented by those who went from the St. Lawrence to France after 1763, or those who returned to France from the Caribbean after 1793, makes the Acadian seem more competent in this art.

The particular provenance of each document, however, becomes of less immediate importance when the high degree of complementarity among these group petitions is considered. Whether the petitions were written by the Acadians on their own, or whether they were written by those persuaded to help the Acadians, they were written with a considerable knowledge of Acadian history. Some petitions refer just to the immediate past, and events of the 1750s. Most, however, recall not only the events of the 1750s, but also earlier events as well, in particular happenings of the 1720s and the 1730s. Now and again, a precis of seventeenth-century Acadian history is also included. In South Carolina and Pennsylvania, for example, petitions placed an emphasis upon the Acadian oath-taking to the British Crown that was organised by Ensign Wroth in 1727.²⁴ In South Carolina the oath itself was written into the presentation that was made.²⁵ In Philadelphia in the petition signed by B. Galern and sundry others and presented to the Assembly, much is made of the Acadian "Oath of Fidelity to her late Majesty Queen Anne; which Oath was by us, about 27 years ago,

²¹ *A Monseigneur Le Comt d'Aranda...* 12 July 1783, Santo Domingo: 2475/395, Archivo General de Indias, Seville.

²² Sources aux Acadiens: États et Correspondance, F¹⁵ 3495, A. N.

²³ Santo Domingo 2611/Num 499 (33) A.G.I. Seville.

²⁴ Best account of this oath taking is to be found in J. B. BREBNER, *New England's Out-post* (New York, 1927), p. 90.

²⁵ 25 Nov. 1755, South Carolina Council Journals, p. 502, State Archives, Columbia, South Carolina.

renewed to his Majesty King George by General Phillipse".²⁶ Similarly, in the "Petition of the Neutrals to the King of Great Britain", despatched by the Acadians in Philadelphia with the help of that well-known Quaker abolitionist, Anthony Benezet, it is remarked that "It is not in our power sufficiently to trace back the conditions upon which our ancestors first settled in Nova Scotia"²⁷ and then, in spite of this disclaimer, to trace events from the 1730s. The petitions made to the Sick and Hurt Board of the Admiralty in 1763 survive now only in the form of précis in the papers of English and French officials.²⁸ In these versions references to the past are less specific and rendered by words such as "Ancient Rights and Privileges".²⁹

It is difficult to select among the wealth of petitions presented in France, especially since in these Acadian history has a very prominent place. The attempt to settle the Acadians on Belle-Isle-en-Mer, for example, produced a considerable number of pleas, signed by several Acadians, asking for better conditions. In October, 1763, a lengthy document sent to the Duc d'Aiguillon, asked for a better fate for the Acadians than to be settled on Belle-Isle, just off the coast of southern Brittany, since past experience had shown them that living on a border between two warring powers was less than comfortable.³⁰ Precisely the same appeal to the immediate past experience was brought forward by those Acadians who had reached Louisiana and who, in March, 1767, insisted that they had no wish to settle once more where they would be exposed to fighting.³¹

Many of the petitions presented by the Acadians in France in the 1760s bore the imprint of the Abbé Le Loutre. He never hesitated to include references to Acadian history as something showing that "*Jamais nation n'a tant souffert pour son Roy et N'a faire plus généreux sacrifice a la Patrie et a la Religion.*"³² The French officials who received this opinion became a little sceptical especially when attempt after attempt to settle the Acadians resulted only in petitions from them commenting unfavourably on what was proposed and emphasizing that their history of past faithfulness deserved better.³³ By 1783, when the attempt to settle the Acadians near Poitiers had ended more or less in failure, a number of

²⁶ "A relation of the Misfortunes of the French Neutrals...", printed in N.E.S. GRIFFITHS, ed., *The Acadian Deportation: Deliberate Perfidy or Cruel Necessity?* (Toronto, 1969), pp. 150-152.

²⁷ Printed in the Appendix to Roth, D.L.: *Acadia and the Acadians* (Philadelphia, 1890).

²⁸ Correspondence in the Medical Board Out-Letters, Admiralty, 98/9, P.R.O. and in reports of the French negotiator in London in 1763 which are printed in the *Report of the Public Archives of Canada*, 1905, II, Appx. G. p. 150 et seq.

²⁹ Printed in N.E.S. Griffiths, ed., "Acadians in Exile: The Experiences of the Acadians in the British Seaports," *Acadiensis*, IV (Autumn, 1974), p. 74.

³⁰ In C5058, p. 266, Rennes, A. D., Ille-et-Vilaine.

³¹ Pierre Joseph PURNAS, *Correspondencia de varios Autoridades estrangeras...* Cuba 187B, A.G.I., Seville.

³² Le Loutre à de Boynes, 26 août 1768: Recueil des Pièces, Bordeaux MSS, Bordeaux Public Library and C.E.A.

³³ Recueil des Pièces, *passim*, in particular, juillet 1773, f. 255.

them resident in Nantes petitioned the Spanish Ambassador for help. In this petition the Acadian past is presented not only as something where they were the victims of injustice but a time when "*nous avons été expulsé de l'acadie et perdu nos biens pour avoir pris les armes pour le Roi de france contre les anglois*".³⁴ The twist in this presentation of the past, from the Acadians seen as totally passive victims, to Acadians as active participants, is such as to make one wish to turn to the question of the Acadian interpretation of their own history during exile. The temptation is particularly strong when one comes to the petitions presented during the Revolution. All references to loyalty to the King are excised from their petitions and loyalty to the *patrie* is stressed.³⁵

The petitions have more in common than the use of the past, however variously interpreted, to bolster arguments for present wishes. From British North America to Louisiana the tone of these documents is one of confidence rather than one of supplication. To cite, for example, the petition presented to the Assembly in Philadelphia, one which was presented in person by "sundry of the Neutral French", one has sentences such as "Be pleased to tell us whether we are Subjects, Prisoners, Slaves or Freemen?" a question that is answered by the assertion that they should be freemen but suspect they are prisoners. In addressing the Admiralty, the Acadians in England assert that "they should be sent back to their own land and compensated for the losses they have suffered".³⁶ In France the tone of the petitions becomes so peremptory that one official wonders on what the eulogies of Acadian character had ever been based.³⁷ In Louisiana, the Acadian demand for help was so immoderate that an official recommended the cessation of all further aid to them, since it was having a most deleterious effect upon their characters.³⁸

This firmness of tone in general argument is matched by soundness of their reactions to propositions put before the Acadians. The view of the Acadians to the binding out of their children has already been mentioned. One finds an equally vigorous reaction when it is proposed that the Acadians settle on lands they considered unfit. In 1763 the suggestion made by the French that the Acadians should be settled in the Caribbean was rejected out of hand by the Acadians, who pointed out how injurious the climate would be for them.³⁹ The reaction of the more than a hundred Acadians sent to Guiana was bitter and forceful and resulted in their repatriation to France.⁴⁰ Other attempts to organise Acadians into settling

³⁴ *A Monseigneur Le Comte D'Aranda... olivier terria Simon Mazerolle, Marin Gautreau, etc., Santo Domingo 2475/395, A.G.I., Seville.*

³⁵ See in particular papers, 1791, in series F¹⁵ 3432, A. N., and petition presented in Nantes 19 frémiaire, l'an 2 de la République, ADLA/L837.

³⁶ In L.G. and J.B. to John Cleveland, 4 Jan. 1763, Adm. 98/9, P.R.O.

³⁷ Le Moyne, 24 juillet 1773, Recueil des documents, f. 255, Bordeaux.

³⁸ C. M. to the Marquis de Sonora, 4 June 1787, Santo Domingo, 2611/Num. 499 (22), A.G.I., Seville.

³⁹ Nivernois à Praslin, 17 février, 1763, A.A.E., Corres. d'Angleterre, 499, f. 345.

⁴⁰ O. W. WINZERLING, *Acadian Odyssey* (Baton Rouge, 1955), p. 59.

in Corsica⁴¹ and in the Falklands⁴² also came to grief on Acadian sense of what was possible.

If one gathers from these petitions that the Acadians in exile could present a coherent vision of their past, a firm belief in their own worth, a strong sense of what was due from the authorities whose charge they had become, one also gains a tremendous impression of the Acadian sense of community. This comes in part because of the concern of the petitions presented in many of the British North American colonies with the fate of the children. But it is a concern that is present even in those petitions centred upon other problems. In the précis of the Acadian petition to French officials contained in a *Mémoire* written in February 1763, it is remarked that the Acadians dream of being once more together on their old lands.⁴³ In the petitions presented to de Warren, concerning the settlement of seventy-seven Acadian families on Belle Isle, the same note is struck, as the Acadians talk of the difficulties of the old, the widowed and their families, the sick and the very young.⁴⁴ When the Acadians left France for Louisiana, one of the most difficult problems with which the Spanish had to cope was the French wish to bar Frenchmen from sailing with Acadian wives. The Acadians immediately set to writing petitions to prevent the break-up of their complex family life and to ensure that they might "join their relatives in Louisiana"⁴⁵.

One impression that does not come through these documents with any particular eloquence is a sense of Acadian love for their former homeland. The emphasis is rather upon the disturbance of family life and the loss of property. In the petition presented in Philadelphia to the Assembly it is stated bluntly that "We have abandoned our Possessions only from the View of keeping our Children" and one has the sense in this petition of property and family being weighed one against the other. In the petition to Aranda it is stated that the Acadians have "*perdu nos biens*" and that "*jusqu'a present on ne nous a offert que des terres stériles en france, et des lieux mal sain dans l'île de Corse*". In a petition brought together in 1791 as part of a general settlement of Acadian affairs near Poitiers it is remarked that "*Louis XIV fonda, en Acadie, une colonie... [état] très florissant*"⁴⁶ but nothing is said of its loveliness. Celebrations of the Acadian homeland are in the official commentaries on the Acadians and in the works of people like the Abbé Raynal but not in the petitions.

The reference to this sort of evidence brings this paper back to its opening theme, that the history of the Acadian deportation has not yet been fully told and its telling demands considerable resources. However,

⁴¹ IF2161, A.D., Ille-et-Vilaine, Rennes.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ In Nivernois à Praslin, 17 févr., 1763, A.A.E., Corres. d'Angleterre, 499, f. 345.

⁴⁴ Morlaix, 31 oct. 1763, C. 5058, A.D. Ille-et-Vilaine, Rennes.

⁴⁵ Acadians to Count de Vergennes, Nantes, 14 Apr. 1784, Cuba 197, carta 6, A.G.I., Seville; WINZERLING, *Acadian Odyssey* also cites Corres. politique Espagne, DCXII, f. 287-8, A.A.E. finances, F¹⁵ 3495, A.N.

⁴⁶ General PAPUCHON, "La colonie Acadienne en Poitou", *Bulletin de la Société des Antiquaires de l'Ouest* (1908), p. 322.

even a quick sketch of one aspect of one part of the available evidence reveals the task possible, because it is a task enlivened and illuminated at every turn by the characters of the exiles themselves. Their situation scarcely, if ever, seems to have made the Acadians just the puppets of officialdom. As one tries to sort out the major realities of their experiences one reads a French official remarking that in Normandy: "*on constate que les administrateurs étoient bien disposé à l'Égard des Acadiens qu'ils étoient touchés de leurs souffrances, très portés à croire qu'ils avoient de nombre qualités.*"⁴⁷ This comment has to be modified, however, by the remark of another official about the eight Acadian families who deserted France for England in 1773, which action the official concluded besmirched the honour of the government.⁴⁸ The questions raised about the deportation of the Acadians concern those who were quick and the documents make an urgent plea to be heard. Even the precise census made of the civil status of those Acadians who had arrived in France by 1768 yields images of people facing this exile with courage, family solidarity and grief. Let the last word be with the declaration of a twenty-two years old man:⁴⁹

Félix Boudrot, fils mineur de feu Jean et de Marguerite Como, orig. de l'Acadie par. de l'Assomption t^x à Morlaix depuis plus d'un ans, paroisse de St. Martin, sous l'autorité du Félix Boudreau, son cousin germane, a remontré qu'il a atteint l'age de 22 ans, dont il est mineur depuis 18 ans et qu'il est depuis environs le 9 ans sans avoir reçu nouvelles de sa mère en Angleterre avec les autres prisonniers de guerre, sans qu'il sache ni qu'il ait pu savoir depuis tout ce temps si elle y est encore, ou si elle est vivante ou morte.

⁴⁷ Jugement de Guillot à St. Malo: 17F (ancien 1F), 2160, pp. 219-23, A.D., Ille-et-Vilaine, Rennes.

⁴⁸ Le Moyne au Bertin, 18 avril 1773: 17F, 2160, pp. 304, 328, A.D., Ille-et-Vilaine, Rennes.

⁴⁹ Morlais, 17F, 2159, A.D., Ille-et-Vilaine, Rennes.