

## On the Writing of *Le Choix Erroné*

I wanted to write a novel about the War Between the States told from the viewpoint of an outsider, a Canadian. An outsider would not be emotionally swayed by the outcomes of the battles, nor would his own biases interfere with his reporting of others' opinions.

I am an outsider; though born and raised in Montreal, Quebec, I've lived in the States most of my life. Thus, the natural starting point for my novel was Montreal, a city, many of whose buildings date back to pre-Civil War days. Among these are several buildings on the campus of McGill University where I went to school. So, voila, my protagonist would go to McGill, also.

Another obvious setting was New Orleans, where I also spent many years. Deep within the Confederacy (though captured early in the War by the Union), it had its beginnings too as part of France, and, again like Montreal, it has many buildings that date back to pre-Civil War days.

So my hero would go from Montreal to New Orleans by a route to be determined. From the latter city he would roam across the Southern States serving as a spy for the Union.

I chose the Southern States in which to set most of the action as, to be candid, the differences between residents of the Northern States and Canadians are subtle ones that collectively can be disorienting. Southerners, thankfully, are alien enough that one has few expectations and is less likely to be disappointed or shocked by their behavior, however different it may be from ours.

Alas, my plot soon ran afoul of history. While many individuals of Canadian descent did serve in the Union armies, these were men who already lived in New England and the other Northern States having

emigrated from Quebec (then known as Bas Canada) some years before. The Union made no effort to come to Canada to recruit.

The Confederacy did. In consequence, my plot provided that the protagonist would become a spy for the Confederacy. To justify this allegiance, I made him a French Canadian, one who would see in the revolt of the Southern States the possibility of a similar rebellion of his compatriots against their English conquerors. Has not this notion persisted in the minds of the Quebecois to the present day?

Also on the plus side, a Canadian with a French accent would be less likely to be shot as a spy as his cover story would be more plausible.

Still, he would have to speak English and he would have to be already estranged to some extent from his culture in order to be willing to leave home.

Very well, he would be one of the very few students of French descent enrolled at McGill (an English University) in 1861 and, thus, frequently shunned both by his fellow students and by his boyhood companions.

With my protagonist established, my next step was to lay out a chapter-by-chapter itinerary for him.

Montreal would be his starting point, New Orleans a future destination. But where else ought he travel? The first full-scale battle of the War Between the States was fought at Bull Run. Very well, his Confederate spymaster would dispatch him from Montreal to the Federal capital.

Once again consulting a history book, I discovered that his passage by train from Montreal to Washington would bring him to Baltimore just in time for the Baltimore rebellion. Husah! Another adventure.

The battle scenes in Baltimore, Bull Run and elsewhere are largely drawn from contemporary accounts. My only challenge as a

novelist was to ensure that the protagonist arrived at this battle scene and the ones to come on or just before the date the battle was to be fought.

Fortunately, much of army life consists of hurry up and wait. Jean-Paul, my protagonist could arrive early, as armies frequently did, and stand waiting till the generals made up their minds.

On several occasions in the novel, when our hero threatened to advance to the next battle scene ahead of schedule, I had him come down with a fever, a not uncommon event in civil war days when entire armies could be sidelined by disease.

The alternative, a wound received in battle, was not feasible. As the late General Jackson will testify, wounds are readily infected, sepsis is seldom practiced on the surgeon's table, and death is an almost inevitable sequel.

Jean-Paul couldn't arrive late for a battle, either. This did not prove to be a problem; the civil war was characterized by delays in transporting troops and supplies (the two often arriving at different places as well as times) as well as delays occasioned by backbiting generals unused to command.

The one exception was the Union capture of New Orleans. I had no way to get him from Shiloh to New Orleans on time. But I could and did make him witness to the Naval battle at Baton Rouge.

One unscripted element in my writing was the characters he encountered along the way. I'll swear they all arose directly from my subconscious. (The two exceptions are the balloonists Professor Lowe and the correspondent William Russell who are historical figures.)

Only after the novel was completed did it dawn on me that the changing reactions and motives of the protagonist came from my unconscious, also. I did not foresee the way he would react to the

carnage around him. I gave him free will and, as in my own case, he elected to make use of it.

After Mill Run, Shiloh, Baton Rouge, witnessing the devastating effects of the Union Navy's blockade, Chancellorsville, and a spell in the Point Lookout Prison, I could not make him stay for a further year and a half of war. Standing amidst the protestors at the New York draft riots, he found he did not much care for them either. And so he came home, a hider, till the war's end, when he returned for the girl he'd left behind.