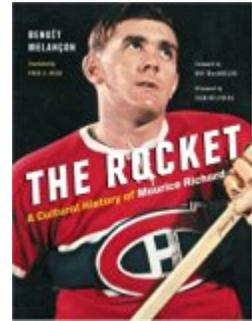


Benoît Melançon. *The Rocket: A Cultural History of Maurice Richard.* Translated by Fred A. Reed. Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2009. 304 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55365-336-3.

Reviewed by Jason Blake (University of Ljubljana)

Published on H-Canada (August, 2009)

Commissioned by Stephanie Bangarth



Two Hockey Solitudes in the Rocket: A Cultural History of Maurice Richard

During a conference coffee break in Graz, Austria, last year, three professors from three different countries recommended Benoît Melançon's 2006 *Les Yeux de Maurice Richard: Une histoire culturelle* to me (I was about to deliver a paper on ice hockey in Canadian culture). These three Quebec scholars were not in cahoots. Their enthusiasm reflected two things: the widespread and positive reception that Melançon's French original received in both academic and popular circles, and the equally widespread assumption that an Anglophone reader might not be aware of the book. In Quebec this was a hard book to miss; the rest of Canada managed to miss it almost entirely, despite the collective craving for anything to do with hockey.

Though no one would ever mistake me for a Quebec expert, the only review published in English was my own in the *British Journal of Canadian Studies*. There, I favorably compared Melançon's book to *Beyond a Boundary*, C. L. R. James's 1963 discussion of cricket's importance to cultural identity in the West Indies. Both are stylistic gems, both are readable even to those unfamiliar with the sport or culture concerned, and both show us how trivial pursuits can be crucial to a sense of community and to cultural history.

Fred A. Reed's translation of Melançon's book, *The Rocket*, fills a hole in critical studies of hockey, and to my mind this book is more valuable in English than in French because it flashes images of Richard, "the Rocket," to a new audience. Obviously, Anglophone hockey fans

will be familiar with Richard, and vaguely or even intensely aware of his stature as a hero of the Quebec people. In spite of this, the average Anglophone reader will surely learn even more than the average French-Canadian reader. This difference in perceptions and assumptions about Richard's role in hockey is crucial to *The Rocket*, because, although hockey is supposedly a binding Canadian narrative, Melançon makes it clear that there are at least two stories being told: "The Rocket of the Quebecers and that of the Canadians are not the same" (p. 230). Though he comes to the conclusion that Richard was not a myth in Anglophone Canada, Melançon does not privilege either the story or the myth. There is thus a laudable duality throughout *The Rocket*. More than any other hockey study in English or French, Melançon's book examines a hockey icon in a pan-Canadian context.

Melançon's book differs from the rest of the pack in other ways too. This is not just another Canadian hockey biography bursting with glossy pictures; yet neither is it a dry academic effort to de-mythologize a sporting icon. The glossy pictures are there, but only three are of Richard on the ice; the rest are representations of the Rocket in oil, wax, concrete, and bronze and in magazines and newspapers. A German academic recently wrote that there are no public monuments to athletes. Not so in the New World, and especially not so in Quebec, where there are at least three Richard statues. "Whichever way we turn," writes Melançon, "we'll find a Maurice Richard. Over time, the hockey player has become a myth. How and why did the transformation take place?" (p. 9). The

tone of the book is personal, but because Melançon is much too young to have seen Richard play, it is not reverential in the style of Roch Carrier's 2000 biography *Le Rocket* (translated by Sheila Fischman as *Our Life with the Rocket: The Maurice Richard Story*). This results in a critical distance; at times, Melançon has an aloofness that is rare in critical hockey studies, such as when he writes with supreme understatement that "it was necessary to overlook some of [Richard's] character traits and to rewrite several episodes of his career" in order to make him into a mythical figure (p. 104).

The Rocket is divided into three main sections: "The Icon," "The Riot," and "A Myth." The first part is the most fun, as Melançon examines Richard's rise to athletic greatness and marketing label. The second, dealing with the 1955 suspension of Richard by the National Hockey League president, Clarence Campbell, and the ensuing outrage in Montreal, is the most focused and traditionally academic. The third—which includes the subsection "The Rocket among the English"—is likely the freshest for Anglophone readers.

Melançon dispenses with the requisite list of Richard's on-ice accomplishments almost immediately. Such listing is as necessary as it is superfluous (this is, after all, a hockey book): trivia buffs will already know that Richard scored 626 goals over 18 seasons, and that he led the Montreal Canadiens to 5 consecutive Stanley Cups between 1955 and 1959, and everyone in Quebec will be aware that he piled up impressive statistics. But when it comes to myth, Melançon's main concern, what are mere numbers? Why is it that one cannot live in Quebec and not be aware of Richard?

The cultural history begins in earnest as Melançon unpacks the name "le Rocket," considering it as a label that "anchored the Canadian concept of the harmonious coexistence of the two (soon to become) official languages"—somewhat ironically, given Richard's role as an idol of the Quebec people (p. 39). There follows, in the subsection "Buying the Rocket" a far more revealing and entertaining epic list of the many products to which Richard lent his name. There were Maurice Richard skates and jackets, but there were also Rocket ashtrays, Rocket transistor radios, and Rocket Richard Condensed Tomato Soup. Moreover, these products changed throughout history. "The principal impact of the trade in Richard ... has been the transformation of Maurice Richard into a product, then into a label, and ultimately into a myth" (p. 58). A few years after he retired, the Rocket was in danger of being forgotten, replaced by

younger Montreal Canadiens stars.

Section 2 examines the 1955 St. Patrick's Day riot over some seventy pages. If this seems long, it is appropriate for a "cultural history" because the riot has become the key event in turning Richard from a mere hockey player to a symbol of political resistance (even if Richard himself was publicly apolitical and, according to this book, definitely not for an independent Quebec). After Richard attacked an opposing player and a referee in a late-season game, Campbell, who was widely and accurately regarded as being anti-Quebec and anti-Richard, banned the Rocket for the rest of the season. When Campbell showed up at the Montreal Forum to watch a Canadiens game, fans peppered him with insults and various vegetables. The game was stopped, the arena emptied, and the St. Patrick's Day riot begun. According to this popular narrative, for the first time the people of Quebec stood up for themselves; especially English Canada delights in anachronistically announcing that this was the beginning of the 1960s Quiet Revolution. "Had there been no Riot," affirms Melançon, "it is doubtful there would ever have been a Maurice Richard myth" (p. 115).

The title of the final main section—"A Myth"—could apply to the book as a whole. Here we are reminded of the element of chance in creating the Richard myth: what if Richard had chosen another sport, one with less cultural resonance in Quebec? What if he had been born a few years earlier? What if he had been "preceded, like several modern hockey players ... by an advertising campaign that transformed him into a savior before the fact"? (p. 196). These are not barren questions, even if they cannot be answered definitively. Rather, they show that hockey and Richard are not inevitable—something that is too often forgotten in Canada.

Perhaps the best example of the malleability of myth appears in "The Rocket among the English," which is a *mise en abîme* of sorts for the Anglophone reader (or at least like hearing gossip about oneself). There, Melançon writes laconically, "Few would criticize Montreal-born novelist and essayist Mordecai Richler for excessive sympathy for Quebec nationalism.... But that did not stop him from being a fervent Maurice Richard fan" (p. 240). The Rocket appears in much of Richler's fiction and non-fiction, but never as a symbol of resistance against perceived Anglophone oppression. Very near the conclusion of *The Rocket* we learn, "For French speakers he could embody French-Canadian, then Québec nationalism and Canadian federalism; in the Rest of Canada, the Rocket

had no such luck” (p. 253).

Melançon’s original was readable and accessible even for those not on top of Quebec culture or history (while reading the French version, I wondered if Melançon also had a French or Belgian audience in mind). Reed’s few additions will be welcome for those of us who do not know Dollard des Ormeaux Day—“the Quebec holiday that coincides with Victoria Day in English Canada” (p. 8). In any event, Melançon is descriptive in explaining characters as well known as former premier Maurice Duplessis and strongman Louis Cyr, or the governor general of Canada: “he or she who occupies the position that symbolizes British royalty in a country that long was, but is no longer, a British colony” (p. 180).

Sometimes, these explanations border on the comi-

cal, such as when one reads that “frog” is “the deprecatory epithet used to designate French Canadians” (p. 17). This puzzled me when I read the original because I assume most Francophones know this. Reading the English translation, I was reminded that “when Richard played in the National Hockey League, it consisted of six teams, four American (Boston, Chicago, Detroit and New York) and two Canadian (Montreal and Toronto)” (p. 239). Any Anglophone who picks up this book will be familiar with the halcyon days of the Original Six. This seemingly pedantic explanation is, in fact, a reminder that Anglophone hockey fans have our own myths. As *The Rocket* shows, Hugh MacLennan’s “Two Solitudes” of an English and a French Canada persist even in the communal national pastime. The sport is well worth examining in a cross-cultural manner.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-canada>

Citation: Jason Blake. Review of Melançon, Benoît, *The Rocket: A Cultural History of Maurice Richard*. H-Canada, H-Net Reviews. August, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24872>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.