

Le Carnaval de Québec : La Grande Fête de L'hiver (*The Carnival of Quebec: The Great Winter Festival*). By Jean Provencher. (Québec : Éditions MultiMondes and Commission de la Capitale Nationale, 2003, Pp. 127.)

Yves LABERGE

Institut québécois des hautes études internationales, Quebec City

Every winter for half a century, the Winter Carnival of Quebec City has provided a unique celebration of snow, ice, and freezing temperatures; it is the most famous winter festival in Canada and one of the most important in the world. Usually beginning on the last weekend of January, the coldest period of the year, the carnival lasts around sixteen days. *Le Carnaval de Québec* is the first book ever dedicated to this event; its author, Jean Provencher, is an important historian who has published extensively about popular history and everyday life in Quebec.

During this two-week carnival, many outdoor activities are organized in order to attract people from abroad and entice them to go outside, even though the temperature is very chilly, often below 0° F. Visitors can go into a giant ice palace for free. There are night parades, masked balls, hockey games and competitions for teenagers, dog races, canoe races, ice sculpture contests, an effigy, and the well-known theme song, "La chanson du Carnaval." One of the main attractions of this popular festival is the famous "Bonhomme Carnaval," a living and smiling snowman with a red belt, a gentle giant who can talk and dance. He has served as the symbol of the Canadian winter in Quebec City since 1955. The celebration is deeply rooted in old forms of Mardi Gras that came from France, and it brings together many folkloric elements in clothing, cooking, folksongs, dances, and contests.

Written in French, *Le Carnaval de Québec* presents the history of the event. The *carnaval* began in 1880 and lasted a few years, probably until 1896. Those initial celebrations were different from the contemporary ones, with competitions in curling, which today has been replaced by hockey. After that first period, winter carnivals occurred only sporadically, in 1901, 1908, 1912, and on some occasions during the 1920s (p. 13). The annual modern version of today's winter carnival began in 1955 and has continued uninterrupted since then. This book celebrates the fiftieth year of that carnival.

The author examines the evolution of the carnival and the many ways the organizers tried to find a balance between tradition and change. For instance, there used to be a "Queen of the Carnival," and seven duchesses were selected every year. That tradition stopped in 1997 after four decades, because of the protests made by some feminist groups. During the 1960s, the Winter Carnival of Quebec City attracted many celebrities, such as Grace Kelly, who at the time was the princess of Monaco.

With its many photographs, this lavish book is a real treat, even for those who cannot read French. Sources are varied and sometimes original: selected pages from the personal diary of one of the young women who was elected a "duchess" in 1968 (p. 82), correspondence involving the carnival, and the articles from nineteenth-century newspapers and various public archives. This book illustrates the strong spirit of one of the oldest cities in North America, and it will be inspiring for scholars in Canadian studies, popular culture, francophone studies, regional history, ethnology, comparative studies, and every reader who has an interest in festivals.