Jewish life, members of the community they study and participants in the history they write. All combine passion with professional scholarship. All contribute to a body of work that highlights the distinctiveness of Canadian Jewry. *The Defining Decade* is a great read; Troper's story-telling style makes it indeed a page-turner. Its clarity and accessibility should assure this book a broad audience.

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Vaugeois, Denis. *Les Premiers Juifs d'Amérique, 1760-1860*. Sillery: Septentrion, 2011. 382 pp.

A genealogist's warning to would-be researchers of family history: be prepared, once you scratch below the surface, to find horse thieves and smugglers among your ancestors. Denis Vaugeois proves this point in his study, *Les Premiers Juifs d'Amérique*, a welcome change from the filio-pietistic tradition of ethnic history. His portrait of a venerated family is one of flesh and blood creatures, who are eminently fallible.

The Hart family has attracted a number of historians, notably David Rome, Mary and Sheldon Godfrey, and Raymond Douville, and it even inspired Charles Law's novel, *Aaron's Convenant*. To my knowledge, however, Vaugeois is the first who looks at the first two generations of Harts as a continuum, using them to illuminate the political, economic and social context in which they lived. He uses a wealth of sources, notably the Hart papers in the archives of the Trois Rivières Seminary, and the archives of the McCord museum in Montreal.

Patriarch Aaron Hart emigrated from Britain to Trois Rivières as a purveyor to Amherst's army during the Conquest of Québec in 1763. With a few other families the Harts founded a Jewish community in Lower Canada. Aaron Hart was a key figure in the development of the town of Trois Rivières: postmaster of the town, seigneur of Bécancour (a seigneurie across

the river from the town) and prominent businessman. His three sons, Moses, Ezekiel, and Benjamin share with him the focus of the book.

Despite his own success, Aaron warned Ezekiel against the folly of seeking public office, for, as he predicted, "your religion will count against you." Ezekiel, of course, has been the subject of the most widespread historical attention. Elected twice to public office as a member of the assembly in Lower Canada in 1807 and 1808, his seat was ultimately denied him, precisely on the grounds of his religion. His contesting this decision ultimately led to the passage of the Declaratory Act in 1832 eliminating all legal disabilities for Jews in the province, a law which preceded the legal emancipation of Jews in England by twenty-seven years.

Ezekiel's achievement is clearly of the greatest historical significance; in this book, however, Aaron's son Moses is the most colourful of the four portraits. He is a black sheep with a long list of sexual liaisons producing an impressive amount of illegitimate children (the burial of one of them in the Jewish cemetery in Montreal was hotly disputed by his brother Benjamin). His reputation for licentiousness (he was once accused of running a bawdy house) was only rivalled by his litigious nature. Vaugeois is fascinated as well by Moses' publication of a deistic tract which decries the obscurantism of Catholicism, and promoted a universal religion, *General Universal Religion*.

The youngest of the three sons, Benjamin, comes off as a curmudgeon. One of the founders of the Shearith Israel Congregation in Montreal (Spanish and Portuguese) he is infuriated by the invasion of the congregation by Ashkenazic Jews who didn't even know the Sepahardic rite. Not all the Hart descendants, however, shared Benjamin's preoccupation with Jewish life. The core of a tiny population of about 100 Jews in Quebec at the end of the 18th century, the family melted into Québec society during the next two generation, largely through métissage, by marrying French Canadian spouses.

One of the central tropes of this book is acceptance, the lack of anti-Jewish social discrimination in Lower Canada. That Aaron Hart should be able to accede to a seigneurie and a position of prominence, that the family could successfully blend in to the surrounding society, are proofs, Vaugeois tells us, of a lack of prejudice, in sharp contrast the reader infers, to the exclusionary attitudes and practices of the twentieth century in Québec.

Even the move to exclude Ezekiel Hart from the assembly, claims the author, was motivated by political tactical considerations, not by outright antisemitism, specifically to limit the number of pro-English, "bureaucratic" allies in the chamber. The proof of this contention, he says, is that French Canadians supported Hart's petition to explicitly allow Jews to hold public office twenty-four years later when circumstances had changed.

Despite the openly anti-French sentiments expressed by Moses and the harsh anti-patriote judgements of Benjamin, (a magistrate during the 1837 rebellions), there is barely a riposte, claims Vaugeois, against this group of Jews, even during the most violent days of the rebellions; barely an echo "dans le desert du silence crée par les executions des patriotes" [in the desert of silence created by the executions of the patriots] (328). This is a strange passage in what is otherwise a fairly objective work. Are we to see Jews as the winners in a contest of national prejudice? It is curious, because, as Vaugeois stated, Jews are on both sides of the conflict between pro and anti-rebellion forces.

This is because, according to Vaugeois, all doors were open to Jews, especially those of the Church. The only real problem they encountered is the absence of prejudice against them. If not for the arrival of new waves of immigrants in the middle of the nineteenth century, the author asserts, the first Jews of Québec would have become Franco-Catholic or Anglo-Protestant.

What message are we to draw from this last statement? Is it that as long as Jews barely existed as a corporate entity, as long as they blended into Quebec society, there existed no

deep-seated prejudices against them? If so, is this a virtue, or a deficiency?[1]

Vaugeois' strength lies not in moralizing, but in the wealth of context he provides for the daily lives of the Harts, both in Trois Rivières and in Montreal. The relationship of the family with the Ursulines of the Trois Rivières (who educated Aaron Hart's daughters) is complex and fascinating. Vaugeois gives us as well, an illustrated history of the beginnings of the sewage system in Montreal in the first half of the nineteenth century, a project in which the David family (related by marriage to the Harts) was key.

The illustrations in the book are copious and beautiful, even if their relevance to the text, particularly in the case of early Jewish memorabilia, is not always clear. In this regard, the author could easily have benefited from a closer collaboration with some of his Jewish informants.[2]

The book is very much a joint memoir, of both the Hart family and the search for documents about them. I found the continued presence of the detective/author in the narrative distracting at times, but others might find this charming and informative. The narrative (especially the analytical elements) is not always coherent, but this deficiency is compensated by a wealth of interesting detail that makes Vaugeois' subjects human and believable, and his depiction of the surrounding society rich and compelling.

Students of early Jewish history in Canada, and of the social history of Quebec in the century following the British conquest will find this book a welcome addition to their library.

Eve Lerner

Endnotes

[1] The Hart's ambiguous relationship to their social surroundings in Trois Rivières persisted after their death, though Vaugeois makes no mention of it here. In 1901, Aaron Hart's bones were disinterred and moved to make way for a new development, before their final burial in the Shearith Israel cemetery in Montreal.

[2] For example, Vaugeois has trouble explaining why Benjamin Hart was such a partisan of the Sephardic synagogue Shearith Israel, though he was an Ashkenazic Jew. A quick look at Gerald Tulchinsky's *Branching Out* (cited in his own bibliography) could have cleared up the question for him. A consultation of a Jewish informant might have given him the meaning of the frontispiece of his book (an iconography of the Jewish year), which he admits he is unable to give his readers.