

# Concordia project to explore history of English-speaking Quebec

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Two Concordia University historians are attempting to create an overarching “people’s history of English-speaking Quebec” and are seeking input from members of the English-speaking community and anglophone community organizations across the province.

Patrick Donovan and Lorraine O’Donnell, co-directors of the People’s History of English-Speaking Quebec project, are research associates at the Quebec English-speaking Communities Research Network (QUESCREN). They presented the project at a virtual seminar on Dec. 16.

The concept of “people’s history” as distinct from the way history is usually taught in schools originated in the 1930s in the United Kingdom and was popularized in North America by the American leftist historian Howard Zinn, who

wrote *A People’s History of the United States*. It describes “the most important turning points of history, from the point of view of ordinary people, in a clear and jargon-free style,” O’Donnell explained. “Borrowing from the ‘people’s history’ pioneers ... our focus will be on ordinary people as active agents [in their stories], and on collective action in the face of challenges.

“A lot of research shows that the English-speaking communities of Quebec are experiencing declining vitality, in terms of demographics and of institutions,” O’Donnell said, adding that studies have indicated a link between community vitality and history. “Low knowledge of the history of English-speaking Quebec is a vitality issue. There is also an identified lack of knowledge of the history of the English-speaking community among the [francophone] majority population, notably when we look at the high school history curriculum.”

The project aims to close some of the gaps in the general public’s knowledge of the history of English-speaking Quebec by “captur[ing] voices of ordinary English-speaking Quebecers working with community groups.” Some of the groups O’Donnell and her colleagues have already looked into include one of British North America’s first organized labour groups (started by Irish dockworkers in Quebec City); the “artist-activists” of the Black Rock Group cultural and political collective in Montreal; and the Coasters Association, which develops, delivers and monitors services to the scattered English-speaking communities along the Lower North Shore (between the end of Route 138 and the Quebec-Labrador border).

“The project will [capture these voices] in order to preserve and share Quebec English-speakers’ history, promote their vitality and amend the dominant narrative,” said O’Donnell. “We want to make this history preserved and

available, enrich the scholarly literature and contribute to the vitality, self-knowledge and well-being of English-speaking Quebec.” The book aims to explore the history of English-speaking communities around the province, with an emphasis on cultural, geographic and gender diversity. She added that in the popular understanding of Quebec history, there tends to be a lot of focus on a tiny anglophone economic elite which “dominated both English- and French-speaking Quebec ... but the narrative tends to stop there, and not give the full picture of what English-speaking Quebec ever was, never mind where it is today. Our aim is to enrich and add complexity to that story.”

O’Donnell and Donovan clarified that they are not only interested in political or advocacy organizations. “If there are interesting stories coming out of [social] groups, they would be interesting for us too,” said Donovan.

The project will take the



Photos courtesy of Concordia University



Historians Lorraine O’Donnell and Patrick Donovan are co-directors of the People’s History of English-speaking Quebec project.

form of a book based on extensive research and interviews, with publication expected about five years from now; an open online research library, which will be launched in March 2022 and added to over time; and the creation of an advisory committee.

“Individuals who have worked with community organizations and have piles of documents in their basements, we can talk to you about whether that material can be included,” said O’Donnell, adding that “PowerPoints,

reports, annual reports and newsletters” could be useful. She added that 25 community organizations around the province have already partnered with the library.

If you have stories or documents that you are interested in contributing to this project, contact Patrick Donovan ([patrick.donovan1@concordia.ca](mailto:patrick.donovan1@concordia.ca)).

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