Quietly working among the scraps and remnants of a past age, Carl Brasseaux has produced the first comprehensive historical study of a people often forgotten and long misunderstood. In writing the story of these people—the Acadians, not incidentally, his people—Brasseaux would seem to qualify for hero status within his ethnic group. But that's the destiny of politicians and leaders, not scholars. Nor would Brasseaux, a specialist in Louisiana history, ever call himself a hero, because he doesn't believe in such creatures. And he says a belief in heroes is not an Acadian trait. "Acadians have been a very egalitarian people, and whenever they have encountered someone on a pedestal, they immediately attempt to pull it down," Brasseaux says.

He goes on to give a present-day example. "There's a little ditty about Evangeline written by a blue collar Acadian that goes something like this: 'Gabriel was my godfather, Evangeline was my godmother. Gabriel wasn't very good-looking, and Evangeline didn't look any better.' " For those who worship with the cult of Evangeline, of course, this is sacrilege. They'll probably tell you Evangeline was at least as beautiful as actress Dolores Del Rio, the model for the famous statue in St. Martinville.

Brasseaux, a professional historian, doesn't believe in the cult of Evangeline that has grown up around the Longfellow's popular but fictitious heroine. In fact, Brasseaux's scholarly work has managed to torpedo the myth of Evangeline, which until now has dominated outsiders' views of Acadian life. "History has always been my first love," says Brasseaux, who remembers spending his summers as a boy reading through his father's library. "My father was a sort of a renaissance man. He was a blue collar worker; he went to trade school in Crowley. He had eclectic interests and, history being one of them, he had a fairly large history library."

The young Brasseaux's affinity for history ruined him for school. "In high school, the first history course I took, the teacher dismissed me after a week and sent me to the library. She said she couldn't teach me anything."

Carl Brasseaux is a very private person. In conversation he stands or sits quietly, rarely gesturing. A tape recorder barely catches his quiet voice. He eats the idle chatter, choosing silence over nonsense. He exhibits the monk-like characteristics of the scholar that come from hard labor in the library: the low voice levels, the ability to sit for hours in small cubicles, the silence that accompanies serious study. One can imagine that he put the hours in the high school library to good use.

Brasseaux's historical consciousness began in his childhood and was shaped by his personal history and by the transformation of American cultural awareness during his youth. Born in Opelousas in 1915, he attended both church St. Ignatius in Grand Coteau) and public (Sunset High School) schools. When he entered school, the melting pot theory of American cultural unity was still intact. Acadian history didn't even show up as a dip on the national educational screen, and it was hardly mentioned in state history texts. "The Louisiana history book we used in the eighth grade only had two paragraphs on the Acadians. One of those two announced the demise of the culture," Brasseaux recalls.

But Acadian culture was not dead. In fact, it was alive and kicking in the lives of Brasseaux and his fellow eighth-graders. In the conclusion of The Founding of New Acadia, Brasseaux writes that "the legacy of the Acadian pioneers permeated the world of my youth, the insular world of south-central St. Landry Parish in the 1950s. "It was a closed society, and its culture was very much Acadian, whatever the history books said."

The friction created when his personal reality rubbed up against textbook melding pot indoctrination ignited a spark of social consciousness in the young Brasseaux. He could see every day in his own life that the reports of the death of Acadian culture were greatly exaggerated. "It was obvious that what was being depicted was not what we were experiencing. That planted a seed of curiosity that grew eventually into this book."

This is the place where cultural historians work, in the space created where the reality of one culture rubs up against its perception by another. Social historians look at groups of people—as opposed to individuals—and study how societies differentiate one from another.

As an ethn-historian, Brasseaux draws from social and cultural history and recreates the past of a semi-literate or illiterate ethnic minority (the Acadians, who left behind few written documents) by interpreting documents written by members of dominant social groups (mostly British, Spanish and French colonial administrators, American officials and clerics).

Given what another historian has called the "spurious complexity" of Acadian life, especially that of its Louisiana, especially that of its history, the task Brasseaux set before him was a monumental one. Historians are only as good as their sources, and Brasseaux credits the Colonial Records, Collection of LSU's Center for Louisiana Studies for providing him with significant primary source material.

From detailed inventories and probate records, Brasseaux reconstructed Acadian lifestyle, charting the adaptation of Acadian traditions in dress, cuisine and architecture to the Louisiana environment. From colonial administrative records, he pieced together settlement patterns of Acadian exiles. From missionary correspondence, he framed a picture of Acadian anticlericalism.

What emerges from Brasseaux's history is a view quite different from Longfellow's. The Acadian dispersal was an international phenomenon, yet despite their illiteracy, or perhaps semi-literacy, the Acadians were able to...
BRASSEXAUX continued from page 13

United States is a social science, and
history writing is supposed to be science,
[...]

brasseaux's work in acadian
history is “very, very good
work,” judges louisiana
historian allen begnaud, a
member of the usl history faculty and
the one who advised brasseaux on his
first major history research paper as a
student. “he’s taken the myth out of a
lot of this stuff.” (for a review of the
book itself, see page 14.)

begnaud figures it will take about 10
to 15 years for brasseaux’s original
research to influence classroom
teaching. “it’ll have an impact, but
it’ll take time,” he said. begnaud
already has incorporated brasseaux’s
findings on acadian morals into his
lectures on religion in colonial
america.

whether brasseaux’s acadian
history will ever make it into u.s.
history survey textbooks to counter-
balance longfellow’s continuing
legacy is something that is highly
doubtful, according to begnaud. u.s.
history seems stuck in an anglo-centric
worldview. “the history of colonial
america will probably always center
around the ‘first 13 colonies.’ they
just pretend there wasn’t another
america. history doesn’t have too, too
much time for losers. and the french
lost out in north america,” says
begnaud.

history as it is practiced in the

brasseaux cannot help but feel resent-
ment at how history has sometimes
treated the ethnic group to which he
belongs. it is very important to him
professionally that he keep this resent-
mint from coloring his historical
research.

therefore, this historian, this cool-
headed, rational scholar has created
what he calls his “safety valve.” under
a pseudonym, he writes fiction—
poetry and short stories—which gives
expression to his more emotional, non-
rational side.

“carl’s poetry is a poetry of circumstance.
he’s reacting to the cultural environ-
ment in which he lives,” says barry.

brasseaux uses french to write fic-
tion, and english to write history. is
there not some irony here? brasseaux,
always the rational historian, says he is
not bothered by that seeming con-
tradiction. “the vast majority of aca-
dians are literate only in english. it
would be in some ways a disservice to
the community had it been published in
french. it would have been out of
reach,” he argues.

no one can accuse carl brasseaux of
doing a disservice to louisiana’s aca-
dians. he has given them their first real
history. what a legacy.