CANADIAN SOCIETY IN THE FRENCH REGIME

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by

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THE GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF COLONIAL SOCIETIES IN AMERICA

During the French regime the structure of Canadian society differed in many respects from that of other North American colonies. At the same time Canadian society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had certain basic qualities which can also be found at that date in all the rest of the new continent. These similarities and differences derived from their European origin and from the geographical conditions in which they had developed.

EUROPEAN COLONIZATION

The four chief powers which colonized in North America, Spain, France, England and Holland, belong to a common civilization, that of the West. Shortly after the middle of the seventeenth century England eliminated Holland. There were left behind, however, 10,000 Dutch colonists, three times more than the population of Canada at that date; but, beset on all sides by British settlements, the Dutch colonists were destined to be gradually absorbed into the Anglo-Saxon majority. In the last quarter of the seventeenth century, then, the situation was as follows: the south of the continent was Spanish; the Atlantic seaboard was in English hands; and France held the valley of the St. Lawrence and, after having explored the Mississippi, was making preparations to establish herself there also.

These three great nations had certain points of resemblance. In the first place they were Christian; but each in its own way. While Spain had kept a jealous eye on the preservation of its Catholic faith, France had passed through the crucible of the Wars of Religion, and England had nationalized its ecclesiastical structure before it developed a doctrine different from that of Rome. On the political level, religious problems were to preserve their importance for some time. The same is true to an even greater degree in the colonies. Various Protestant sects took root in the English settlements; and until 1627 Canada welcomed Catholics and Calvinists alike and the latter exercised an important economic influence. However, when he founded the Company of New France, Richelieu laid it down that the hundred shareholders "should populate the colony with a French and Catholic stock". As this decision was reached when Canada had a very small population and French immigration did not develop until later, the population would inevitably become exclusively Catholic. The society of the country would be profoundly influenced by that fact.
The three metropolitan countries were monarchic as well as Christian, but each in its own way. The most noticeable differences were those between England and France. Both of them were shaken by political disturbances: after lasting for two centuries, absolute monarchy in England was broken down by the aristocracy, which substituted for the omnipotence of the King that of a Parliament under its control; whereas in France the monarchy of divine right triumphed, since in that country geographical considerations, and the risks which they implied, forbade political experiments of the kind that England could afford. These widely different developments reacted on the political institutions of the American colonies.

Here it is necessary to emphasize the fact that the mercantile system, the real source of imperialism, originated in England before the revolution of 1689. It was developed by the Navigation Act of 1660, the Staple Act of 1663, and the Plantation Duties Act of 1673. The fact is that society in France and in England assumed at approximately the same time a definitely capitalistic character, differing in this respect from Spain. This movement coincided with the rise of the upper middle class. In England, the leaders in commerce and finance ruled in close alliance with the territorial aristocracy, to which they were related by ties of family and of interest. In France, Colbert did all he could to favour the middle class, to which he belonged, by promoting industry and commerce and by making policy, as far as possible, to further economic activity. Towards 1680 many signs suggested that the industrial revolution would occur in France rather than in England. Saint-Simon bewailed the fact that the long reign of Louis XIV was that of “vile bourgeoisie”. As colonial societies have a tendency to model themselves on the mother country, the middle class was to play as important a role in Canada as in the British Colonies.

The social structures of Canada and of the British colonies differed in one important aspect: namely in their land law. In the eighteenth century, France still lived, theoretically, under a “feudal regime”; but if those vestiges of the middle ages, vassalage and fiefs, continued to exist, “it was only as legal forms which for some centuries had been practically void of substance”. A “seigneurial regime”, however, existed in fact as well as in law. The Canada of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was in no respect a feudal colony; but all land was held in seigneuries, a system of tenure by which various individuals shared, under different titles, a number of rights and dues connected with the same concession, the absolute anti-thesis of dominium plenum (freehold, in the modern sense). This principle brought about the existence in Canada of two classes of society which were practically unknown in the English colonies: the seigneurs and tenants.

On the cultural level, the evolution of Canada differs more clearly from that of the British colonies than the situation in France does
from that of England. A little like Spanish societies, Canada stood outside those new ideas, stemming from the scientific revolution, which essentially modified the intellectual outlook of the modern world and which, from the end of the seventeenth century, shook the very foundations of religious life. Quite early, rationalism, belief in progress, and humanitarian ideas made an appearance in newspapers, pamphlets and books published in English America. One finds nothing of the sort in Canada, where there was no press, where higher education was in its infancy, and where all instruction was in the hands of the clergy who were, however, fully competent for the task.

Thus, as is usually the case, the colonial societies in the New World developed, as far as possible, on the model of the mother country to which they owed their existence. Since they formed part of a common civilization, metropolitan societies generally revealed a fundamental unity; but, since they varied along national lines in their interpretation of this great culture, they emphasized its rich diversity.

THE AMERICAN MILIEU

To these national factors we must add the effect of geography. Climate and soil determined the form of agriculture which each colony developed. The South, both French and British, produced semi-tropical crops, rice, cotton, tobacco, and indigo, which lent themselves to large-scale cultivation; this necessitated huge plantations and a large supply of unskilled labour, a fact which favoured the introduction of slavery. Thus, as a result of his way of life, the Louisiana planter was more akin to the Carolinean than to the Canadian agriculturalist; while the latter had a closer affinity with the farmer of New England and, even more, with the farmer of New York.

Moreover, these same factors of climate and soil decided the status of agriculture in the economy of each colony. As the cereals of the North were marketed less easily in Europe than the exotic products of the South, the relative importance of agriculture was smaller there and the tendency towards industrialisation was more marked. The North tried to find in the fur trade and in the fisheries compensation for the economic deficiency of its agriculture. This was particularly true of Canada, which was compelled to send the bulk of its exports to France at a time when that country did not want Canadian wheat.

In the third place, the geographical situation of the colonies influenced the outlook of the societies which grew up there. Situated on the Atlantic seaboard, the English colonies looked towards the sea and were able to maintain uninterrupted communication with the mother country. Canada, on the other hand, spread up the valley of the St. Lawrence; it looked towards the interior of the continent and literally turned its back on the mother country, since its only seaport, Quebec, could not be used for half the year.
The full bloom of Canadian society came in the middle of the eighteenth century. It would be impossible, however, to grasp its real nature without first of all following its development from the beginning of the previous century.

When he founded Quebec in 1608, Samuel de Champlain laid the permanent basis of the future of Canada. Why did this sailor, after having explored the Atlantic coast almost to the very place where later on New York was to rise, inspire his financial backer, de Monts, to choose the river St. Lawrence, far away inland, as the site of a new colony? Because he hoped to find a water passage to Asia; and because he reckoned on the fur trade to provide the means by which his promoter might recover the money which he had lost in Acadia. A little later he was still banking on the fur trade to interest merchants in financing the peopling of Canada. The businessmen did indeed take the furs; but they did not send colonists. Champlain, while he opened up possibilities for an extensive commerce, strove unsuccessfully to form an agricultural colony. In 1626, according to the Jesuit Relations, if there were in the whole country some 18 to 20 arpents of cultivated land "that was all there was". The same document, however, underlines the importance of the fur trade, which totalled some 200,000 livres per annum. In 1628 there were only 76 persons settled in Canada and they all lived in Quebec, which was a trading post. The individual who counted in this little society was not the peasant, but the trader with his interpreters. In 1641 the colony reckoned 300 souls living around two trading posts, Quebec and Three Rivers.

During the following 25 years, Canada grew at a quickening pace. Two factors hastened its growth. In the first place, France experienced a wave of religious feeling which unleashed a great missionary effort. In Canada, the Orders realized that their efforts would be all the more efficacious if they were supported by a strong colony. The intelligent propaganda of the Jesuits encouraged population. Montreal, for example, was launched as an enterprise that was primarily religious. Second-ly, there was rapidly developing in the colony an upper class which devoted its time to the fur trade and occupied itself with public affairs. Profiting by the growing weakness of the Company of New France, it organized The Company of the Habitants in 1645 in order to seize the fur trade. The term "habitant" must not be confused with "paysan". "Habitant" is a word borrowed from the West Indies meaning a factor in charge of a colonial enterprise. These colonists formed an oligarchy which possessed seigneuries and which controlled the Councils that were associated with the Governor from 1647 on.

The upper class was not wanting in ambition. In his Histoire véritable et naturelle . . . de la Nouvelle-France (Paris, 1664), the Governor
of Three Rivers, Pierre Boucher, noted the work of the English in America. He wrote, "They are building many vessels of all kinds, they are opening up iron mines, they have fine cities, they have stage and mail connections from one colony to another, they have carriages as in France; those who invested in these places are now getting their money back. Yet that country is not different from ours; what can be done there can be done here". Boucher did not urge his contemporaries to confine themselves to agriculture; he suggested that they should adopt the British colonies as models.

The census of 1666 provides interesting details of Canadian society. The population had now grown to 3,418 inhabitants, of whom 1,600 lived in the towns of Quebec (555), Three Rivers (461) and Montreal (584). Thus almost half of the colonists were townspeople. The clergy (parish priest, regular clergy, and nuns) were numerous; almost a hundred individuals. The well-to-do middle class, higher civil servants and big business men, accounted for some sixty or seventy families, perhaps a little more than three hundred persons. Minor officials, employed by the state or by the Company of the West Indies (which had been founded in 1664), were to be found in about twenty families. At the bottom of the social scale were 400 indentured servants, most of them in the service of the clergy or of the well-to-do middle class. This leaves a populace of workers and peasants which totalled about 2,500.

At this time Jean Talon began his work. The Intendant was most vigorous and active in peopling the country; it had 7,833 inhabitants by 1675, three years after he had left. He distributed rewards and seigneuries to many officers of the Carignan regiment, which the King had used to pacify the Iroquois. He thus set up beside the first group of colonists, another element to which the bourgeoisie was reluctant to open its ranks. Along with these officers, some hundreds of soldiers were settled on the land. Furthermore, a good number of immigrants came also. At the same time as he populated the country, Talon began a rapid development of its economy. He directed the country dwellers towards the cultivation of non-food crops (like hemp), established manufactures and in every way encouraged trade: in agricultural and forest products as well as in furs, the Company having lost its monopoly. He saw quite clearly that commerce was the only activity which would keep in the colony a middle class which had little interest in agriculture.

When Talon left, his work perished. Frontenac's political egotism provoked a long crisis. Not content with fighting against the clergy, who could not approve the brandy trade, the new governor also attacked the well-to-do and middle class. To compete with them for the fur trade, he built a fort higher up than Montreal, Fort Frontenac, today
called Kingston. He protected and did business with unlicensed traders, and obtained for La Salle, a brilliant adventurer but a poor businessman, the monopoly of the Mississippi. La Salle went bankrupt; while such traders as La Chesnaye, Le Moyne, Le Ber and several others saw themselves ousted from the fur trade. It is not surprising, then, that the “Beaver” aristocracy, whose members dominated the Sovereign Council, quarrelled with the representative of the King. As soon as the first period of Frontenac’s governorship ended in 1682, fourteen big traders launched the Company of the North to exploit Hudson Bay. A contemporary document describes the associates as “the chief habitants and merchants of the country”. French shareholders were joined with this group and in 1693 they held the greater part of the capital of the Company. Thus it soon became a Canadian enterprise owned by the financiers of the mother country.

In 1689, a conflict which was evident since 1686 brought Canada into a war with the English colonies which, excluding a truce for several years after the Peace of Ryswick in 1697, lasted until 1713. The cause of this war cannot be understood unless it is realized what was included in New France. New France was not Canada alone. It was a great political and economic unity embracing, before the Treaty of Utrecht, the French portion of Newfoundland, Acadia, Hudson Bay, Canada, and Louisiana. If Canada should fall, New France would disintegrate: on the other hand, torn away from the framework of New France, Canada was not likely to live. Up to the end of the seventeenth century Canada had developed slowly, protected by the distances which separated the valley of the St. Lawrence from the English colonies. This isolation had come to an end when the Intendant Talon, realizing what was necessary for the further development of the fur trade, drew up the plan to connect the St. Lawrence valley with the rest of America, a plan which Pierre Le Moyne d’Iberville carved out, sword in hand, between 1686 and 1710 in Hudson Bay, in Acadia, in Newfoundland, and on the Mississippi. It was not from choice that Canada headed this movement for expansion. Two compelling factors forced it upon her. The first was economic: her prosperity depended on the export of furs. The second was social: her governing class, unable to live on the produce of the seigneuries, was supported by the network of trading posts and forts which commanded the trade routes of New France.

If it had been self-supporting, a small agricultural Canada, restricted to the middle St. Lawrence, could have existed beside the English colonies. But New France could not maintain itself without expansion and could not expand without coming into collision with British North America. Despite its ephemeral victory in 1697 (Ryswick), New France was dismembered in 1713 (Utrecht). Newfoundland, Acadia and Hudson Bay were lost. At the same time Great Britain secured the protectorate over the Iroquois, a status upon which she would call to prevent
Canada expanding south of the Great Lakes and so effecting a junction with Louisiana. This move, implicit in Article XV of the Treaty of Utrecht, would permit the English to cut New France in two and would reduce it to two modest agricultural colonies: Louisiana at the mouth of the Mississippi and Canada on a section of the St. Lawrence. In 1713, one policy was imperative for the Canadians, to annul the effects of the treaty of Utrecht. For fifty years they sought to anchor their country at Cape Breton, to extend it towards the west and to block the British advance into the continent. This meant that they must hold the line of the Ohio.

Why did Canada succeed in postponing for half a century the effects of the defeat of 1712? Because it benefited from two conditions which were to disappear between 1760 and 1763: it remained within the orbit of French colonization and it preserved its upper middle class.

It should not be assumed that France embarked on a policy of colonization on a grand scale immediately after the Treaty of Utrecht. She was passing through a serious economic crisis which also affected the colony. For example, the war had necessitated huge supplies which the Government had partly obtained locally by issuing paper money. The decline of the state's credit led to the depreciation of this money. In 1714 the Government of France agreed to redeem it, but only at three-eighths of its value. This state of bankruptcy followed closely the failure of the Company of the Colony, which the Canadians had established in 1710 to reorganize the fur trade. Certain administrative mistakes, and even more the war and the saturation of the French market, had hastened the collapse of this ambitious project. Far from coming to its aid, the Court compelled the Company's supporters to seek the aid of French bankers who took over the lion's share of the assets. The colony might well have received better treatment.

However, it was not abandoned. France always assumed the heaviest part of the cost of the administration of Canada, and a big part of these monies came into the hands of the Canadians. The home government also built up the frontier defences of the colony. Niagara was rebuilt (1720-1727), St. Frederick was erected (1731) and, most important of all, Cape Breton was occupied. In 1718 the construction of Louisbourg was begun. A military base, Louisbourg became one of the busiest ports in America. Before long it was only surpassed by Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. The money which was spent in fortifying Île Royale (Cape Breton) had a good effect on the metropolitan economy, and also, indirectly, on the Canadian economy. One can say as much and even more of the capital spent in the building of forts like Niagara and St. Frederick, since that money went into the pockets of local contractors and purveyors and thus came to nourish the trade of the colony.
While French aid to Canada was often only indirect, the contribution of the upper middle class to the well-being of the country was also made for reasons of self interest. For the upper class pursued its own interests with single-minded devotion. Hard hit by the failure of the Company of the Colony and by the financial crisis of 1714, it yielded to the temptation to put the screws on the tenants; but Versailles quickly compelled the colonial administration to put a stop to such measures. The Court was less successful, however, when it attempted to suppress the contraband trade with the Albany merchants which the fur traders had organized. According to the Intendant, Bégon, who wrote in 1715, 50,000 pounds’ weight of beaver fur went every year to the English, to the great loss of the trade of Metropolitan France, but “to the great profit of the business men of Montreal” who thus evaded the 25% tax on beaver fur, and at the same time obtained prices higher than those on the French market. By this means the middle class was able to recoup its losses. It also revived the lumber industry and shipbuilding, which had been neglected since the time of Talon; but only with limited success. As for the tillers of the soil, they were experiencing hard times, particularly because of the inadequacy of the domestic market and because of the lack of an export trade. Moreover, as everyone was to some extent a trader, especially those in the Montreal district, everyone suffered from the instability of the fur trade.

By 1730, by dint of hard work, the crisis was overcome. For the next fifteen years, prosperity was general. The opening of the market of Louisbourg began a period of expansion in agriculture. The acreage of cultivated land doubled in ten years: it rose from 61,000 arpents in 1720 to more than 130,000 in 1730. The figures of population are proof of the fact that external trade caused this progress. The 24,951 inhabitants in Canada in 1721 had only increased to 33,682 by 1730. The Richelieu region took a new lease of life. Seven wealthy concessionaires, almost all high officials and big traders, undertook with success to open La Beauce to colonization. The country profited by these favourable circumstances to improve its network of roads.

Because of state aid, industry expanded more than agriculture. Yielding to the entreaties of the Intendant, Hocquart, the Court built warships at Quebec. These contracts made it possible to increase the equipment of the naval dockyards. Subsequently, some protégés of Bigot set the royal yards to work for their private profit, built a small merchant fleet, and made themselves masters of sea transport and of the longshore business, both of them essential industries in wartime and, in consequence, very profitable. Like the story of naval construction, that of the St. Maurice Forge is typical of industrial enterprises operating in the colonial economy. Some business men formed a com-
pany, obtained capital from the French government, laid the founda-
tion of a big enterprise and lived a gay life while the company ran so
much into debt that the state had to take it over in 1741. There were
other industries started as well, but none of them were as important
as shipbuilding and iron smelting.

Agriculture and industry can only advance along with trade. Tables
of imports and exports furnish an index of prosperity. In 1730 imports
balanced exports. In 1731 the former out-weighed the latter. If in 1733
the colony consumed more than it sent out, from 1739 to 1742 the ex-
cess of its sales over its purchases amounted to more than a quarter of a
million livres. In 1745 the favourable balance was more than 330,000
livres. Year after year, furs accounted for about two-thirds of Canadian
exports. On the average, a million and a quarter livres' worth were sent
out annually, apart from the illegal trade through Albany and through
Louisbourg. The sale of agricultural products thus occupied only a
modest place in the colonial economy by contrast with the situation in
the centrally located British colonies and even in New England, where
nine-tenths of the population lived on the farms. But this modest place
was more important now than in the previous period when Canada had
subsistence farming only. That the commercial situation now exercised
a profound influence on agriculture was proved in 1745, when wheat
fell suddenly to half its price in the Quebec market upon receipt of
news that the English had entered Louisbourg.

This brief review of the development of Canada from the founding
of Quebec shows that in time of peace as in time of war, in prosperity
as in depression, one factor dominated economic life as well as politi-
cal, namely, big business. The trade curve coincides with that of the
general well-being of the country. Its interests dictated local politics
and promoted territorial expansion. Its leaders were at the head of
Canadian society.

CANADIAN SOCIETY AROUND 1750

After having seen how it developed, it is now possible to describe
the society of Canada around the middle of the eighteenth century.

One point strikes the observer: the Canadian population was not
numerous. This numerical weakness stemmed from two causes. Eco-
nomic and social conditions in France did not promote emigration to
the colonies; and the Canadian climate and the economic activity with
which it was identified did not allow the absorption of a large popula-
tion. The census of 1754 only credits the colony with a population of
55,009 inhabitants. This figure is certainly inaccurate; but even if one
added five or six thousand, it would still be small. Moreover, as nothing
suggests that the census was taken better in the towns than in the
country, it will do to establish proportions.
Of the 55,000 inhabitants, about 42,000 lived in the country. Their living standards appear to have been high. La Hontan, early in the century, and Montcalm, fifty years later, compared them with "the minor gentry of France". Hocquart wrote that they "do not have the rude and rustic air of our French peasants", a fact upon which Charlevoix had already commented. Such would not have been the case if they had not enjoyed more than a subsistence level economy. Whence came the surplus? It is explained first of all by the fact that the seigneurial regime benefited the tenant more directly than the seigneur. In the eighteenth century, moreover, the system became more and more liberal. Besides receiving his land free and usually paying only small dues, the peasant paid no personal tax. The sale of his agricultural products allowed him to make a limited profit, small enough since the domestic market was restricted to a quarter of the population (that part which lived in the towns) and since the produce of the farms made up at most but a third of the colony's exports. What really helped the peasant to ease his lot was the fur trade which gave regular employment to almost 4,000 men.

This prosperity was not without consequences. It showed itself in the "insubordination" and "independence" of character which the French officials denounced with one accord. It was related also to the relatively high level of elementary education. Peter Kalm, who visited Canada in 1749, noted that every church was flanked by a presbytery and "a school for boys and girls". These latter seemed better taught than the former, whence came, no doubt, the influence of women in the home. A French official, Louis Franquet, believed that the education of girls was carried too far and saw in it "a slow poison tending to depopulate the countryside".

As a matter of fact, the town exerted so strong a pull on the rural population that, in 1749, the Intendant took rigorous measures to prevent peasants from settling down in Quebec. In 1758 an official document deplored the fact that "the towns had been allowed to grow faster in population than the country". In 1759, Quebec had 7,995 inhabitants, Montreal 4,432 and Three Rivers about 800. One Canadian out of four was a townsman.

Quebec, the capital of Canada and all of New France, was a political centre and the seat of culture. It was the home of the public authorities. As in the mother country, the political regime in Canada was authoritarian. This was simply a matter of French practice and local necessity. Unity of command would permit the colony to offer a prolonged resistance to the superior, if uncoordinated, forces of the British colonies. That is why Canada was, in many respects, organized on military lines. The Governor-General, at the head of affairs, was above all things a soldier. The officers who formed his court, while still seeking to make their fortunes, were almost all from good families. They
commanded the colony’s regulars and, on expeditions, the militia also. The first were recruited in France and the second in the Canadian parishes. In the organization of the armed forces, the captain of the militia, a simple habitant, served as a modest helper to the regular officers. The officials who were subordinate to the Intendant, the civil administrator, formed two groups, one group exercising judicial power and the other controlling the finances. The latter usually came from France; the former, which included the members of the Superior Council, belonged generally to the commercial middle class of the colony.

As the centre of culture, Quebec had the Jesuit College, founded in 1645. Like the houses which that Order controlled in France, the Quebec college met the needs of both upper and middle classes. It would be a mistake to think that it was especially devoted to the instruction of young men proceeding to theology. For that purpose there existed, from 1668, a small seminary whose boarders took courses at the college. It is a case of there being two distinct institutions: the chief one was for the use of laymen, the other served a particular need of the Church; and both were maintained by the clergy. With its great political figures, its ecclesiastical dignitaries, its magistrates, and its officials, Quebec society was the most brilliant in New France.

Montreal had a society that was less fashionable than that of the capital. When Bigot first announced that he was going to pay a visit, the townsmen and their wives hastened to take dancing lessons. But these townsmen were keen men of business. As early as 1718 the Chief Surveyor, Lanouiller, said that they “had possessed almost all the trade of the colony . . . and Quebec must only be regarded as a warehouse”. Situated at the cross-roads of the routes of communication of the continent, the city built up its fortunes on trade. When the export of agricultural products was added to that of furs, Montreal took for itself a large part of the profits, for, as the Governor and Intendant wrote in 1737, “this area had always been the granary of the colony”.

In the light of present information, it is harder to describe the living conditions of the workers than it is to describe those of the peasants. It is known that, owing to the shortage of skilled craftsmen, workers had high wages. A carpenter was better paid than a member of the Superior Council. Being well paid, they had to do as they were told. One day when the naval dockyard workers in Quebec decided to go on strike, Hocquart threw them all into prison, the proper way, in his opinion, to deal with a strike.

Quite different were the social conditions of the merchants. They constituted the only class which was organized during the French regime. In 1717, they obtained from the metropolitan government the right to meet daily at Montreal and Quebec to discuss business, and the right to choose two “syndies” to represent them before the authorities.
Here is an interesting development. On occasions the syndics spoke in the name of the whole community. This was natural because the businessmen were the most important element.

It is not easy to draw precisely the line which separated the middle class from the upper middle class, or that which divided the latter from the aristocracy. As a matter of fact, the last two groups were really only one. In the seventeenth century, the King gave Charles Le Moyne patents of nobility; but after becoming a noble Le Moyne continued to engage in trade. In the colony, nobility lent prestige to a man who had either acquired or inherited it, but it gave him hardly any more privileges than a commoner. There were commoners who were seigneurs, and nobles who were not. Nobles lived in just the same way as the middle classes. It could not be otherwise since land or property provided little and the offices were insufficient to maintain those who received them. Titled or not, the lesser nobility or the upper middle class, the upper stratum of society, enriched by commerce, set the tone of Canadian society. It constituted an oligarchy which shared the trading posts, occupied most of the public offices, and distinguished itself in military expeditions. In fact it was that group which had built up Canada, the Canada which disappeared in 1760, by developing its economy, directing its territorial expansion and inspiring its politics.

The economic basis of Canadian society was thus a luxury trade, the fur trade. Even in years of prosperity (1730-1744) furs constituted two-thirds of the value of the exports. Hence the considerable difference which existed between the living standard of the farmers and that of the commercial and political aristocracy which controlled the fur trade. It followed that there was a similar difference between the social importance of the two groups. So, of these two classes, that which really counted, that which set the tone, was not the mass of peasants, but the great commercial middle class.

Such seemed to be, around 1750, the social structure of Canada. At the bottom, the peasants on the seigneuries and the artisans in the towns; above, the commercial groups, including a middle class and an aristocracy in which were included the civil and military officers, who, having control of affairs, had the destiny of their country in their hands.

THE COLLAPSE OF 1760-1763

In 1760 Canada was completely crushed. The colony which passed to Britain three years later was an economic ruin. It was also a political ruin. When the French government put Montcalm over the head of Vaudreuil at the end of 1758, a revolution could not have shaken more brutally what was called at that time “the constitution of the colony”. A scion of the Canadian aristocracy, Vaudreuil typified the level of
political life which the Canadians had achieved. Finally, in 1763 the country was ruined socially. It had lost the most influential and competent part of its ruling class, a part which could not survive outside of the political and economic framework of New France and the French empire. The latter now disappeared from America, and the former from the map.

During the years of 1760-3 Canada was not merely conquered and ceded to England; it was defeated. Defeat means disintegration. When an army is defeated there are still soldiers, but there is no longer an army. In 1763 there were still Canadians, but Canada was no more. Eliminated from politics, from commerce, and from industry, Canadians turned back to the soil.* If they came to boast that they were "children of the soil", it was because defeat had affected not only their material civilization but also their ideas. They had had higher pretensions when their community was more complete.

The social development described in the preceding pages does not conform with the account given by most historians of Canada. The reason is that most of them attempted to reconstruct the society of the French regime on the lines of that broken society which they could examine in the period following 1760. They have read history backwards. It is only because of this dubious approach that they came to conclude that, under the French regime, the chief factors which conditioned Canadian society were neither the existence of the French motherland nor the fur trade but only the peaceful work of the countryside. The behaviour of the mother country was shown as being inadequate and, at times, uninspired; but that does not mean that it was superfluous. A simple examination of the facts brings into sharp relief the importance of big business and of the economic activity which implied the existence of a middle class.

In truth, the old-time Canadian society was something more than a rustic community. It had all the elements which made up the society of a normal colony. Like other American settlements, Canada possessed political and social institutions borrowed from the motherland and adapted to the conditions of the New World. Like other colonies it had its rustics and its townsmen, its clergy and its faithful, its workers and its merchants, its soldiers, its officials and its politicians, its middle classes and its aristocracy. Between Canada and the British colonies the chief difference was not one of kind but of size. It had very few people; they were populous. Hence, after an inevitable conflict, it was defeated.

* The control of the all-important fur trade passed into the hands of British merchants in Montreal (Ed.).
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Most of the material in this booklet may be found in expanded form in the following works by Guy Frégault: *Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville* (Montreal, 1968); *Le XVIIIe siècle canadien* (Montreal, 1968); *La Civilisation de la Nouvelle-France* (second printing Montreal, 1969) and *Canada: The War of the Conquest* (Toronto, 1969).