3

Cartier's Quebec

It was not just the natives whose history began before 1867. For George-Etienne Cartier, or any other *Canadien*, the history of Canada began in 1534, when another Cartier had made his landfall on the Gaspé shore of the Baie des Chaleurs. By erecting a cross and claiming the continent for His Most Christian Majesty, Francis I, Jacques Cartier had posted the French bid for North America.

The bid ignored the claims of Indians or Inuit, established for thousands of years since their ancestors had crossed the Alaska land-bridge from Asia. Even Europeans had staked an earlier claim; Vikings, driven west from Iceland to the coast of Labrador, Newfoundland, and perhaps even New England, had recorded their discoveries in Norse sagas. Basque and Breton fishermen had come regularly, returning under strict oaths of secrecy about the origins of their rich catches. In 1497, when the boastful John Cabot came back to Bristol to report schools of codfish so dense "they sometimes stayed his shippes," he merely broke a trade secret.

Cartier had come for a different form of wealth. He had been enticed by vague Indian claims of a wealthy "Kingdom of the Saguenay" and by the great river that he hoped would lead past the rapids of Lachine to a western ocean. When the gold he brought home on his third voyage proved to be iron pyrites, the St. Mâlo seaman was discredited. Anyway, France was too deep in the wars between Catholic and Huguenot to care about distant lands. Seventy years would pass before the French came again. This time, Samuel de Champlain would make them stay.

No nation could ask for a nobler founder than Champlain. Navigator, soldier, visionary, a Protestant turned Catholic by conviction, a man of Renaissance curiosity and eternal fortitude, Champlain created New France. A few bleak winters spent on the Bay of Fundy persuaded him to try elsewhere. Fate then took him back to Cartier's great river, the "Father of Waters." Where Cape Diamond rears up to narrow the St. Lawrence River, Champlain and a few men built their *habitation* in the autumn of 1608.

Champlain's business, financed by court favourites and Rouen merchants, was the fur trade. In its name, he made alliances with Algonquin Indians; fought their dreaded enemies, the Iroquois; journeyed to the Huron country that is now central Ontario; and sent young Frenchmen to learn Indian languages and lifestyles as the first *coureurs de bois*.

Champlain has been condemned for provoking the Iroquois, but his intervention only speeded up the inevitable. Enemies and climate had driven the Iroquois south of the Great Lakes. Their longhouse culture of cornfields and tribal alliances gave them a strength and a stability no other northern Indians possessed. On the other hand, they lacked rich sources of good furs or the swift canoes to carry them to the new European trading posts. Anyone who has tried skinning a rabbit with a stone knife or boiling water in a clay pot will not wonder why Indians were soon desperate for the steel knives and copper kettles the Europeans traded for their furs. Lacking furs and canoes, the Iroquois used their military power to become the middlemen between the stolid Dutch traders at Albany and the Huron and Algonquin suppliers. If these tribes went to the French, they would be punished or even destroyed by the Iroquois.

For almost a century, war with the Iroquois was a recurrent, tragic fact of life for the struggling French settlement. The war made every settler a soldier and a potential victim of death by torture or brutal captivity. One result was a legend of an embattled people, defended by heroes such as Adam Dollard of the Long Sault and such heroines as Madeleine de Verchères. Only divine inspiration could have spared the few hundred colonists or the frail outpost of Montreal, established in 1642 by Paul de Chomédy,

Sieur de Maisonneuve. In the legend of *Canadien* survival, there was little room for sympathy with the Indians, caught between powerful European rivals and struggling with their own ingenuity and courage to defend their interests.

To Champlain and to others, New France meant more than furs or war. The fur trade was a vital commercial foundation for a greater purpose: the conversion of the Indian people. As part of the price for their furs, the Algonquins and the Hurons had to take back with them black-robed missionaries with their strange incantations and their epidemic infections. It was a heavy penalty for the magnificent European goods. In five years, almost half the Hurons had perished.

If commerce led to conversion, Champlain saw that colonization was vital to both. European settlers would give the Indian converts a demonstration of the Christian life while they laboured to make New France self-sufficient.

The interlocking of commerce, colonization, and conversion was Champlain's plan, sustained against adversity, failures, and the first English conquest by the Kirke brothers in 1629. It was Maisonneuve's plan when he established Montreal in defiance of the Iroquois peril. It was the vision that Jesuit missionaries reported in the *Rélations*, the brilliant propaganda newsletters which attracted funds for their enterprise from the ladies and gentlemen of the French court. The plan sent Jesuits to Huronia in the 1630s. A generation later, the few Huron survivors of European diseases and Iroquois invasions withdrew from a devastated land. Only in 1662, when a newly powerful Louis XIV finally extended his royal government to his remote and embattled subjects, was Champlain's concept altered.

In fact, the three elements of Champlain's scheme had never worked together. Traders preferred to leave their customers as they found them. Missionaries were scandalized by trading morals and methods. Colonists rarely measured up as role models for the few Indian converts. As well, they were too attracted to the freedom of the fur trade, too busy defending themselves from the Iroquois, and often too untrained as farmers to be successful

producers. The *habitants*, as they proudly called themselves (in distinction from the proper term of *censitaire* or "tenant") cleared trees and laid out the characteristic strip farms running back from the river banks, but even the Iroquois peril could not persuade them to leave their own land and live in forts and villages. With effort and good weather, the settlers could enjoy a rude plenty. As often, however, the colony was close to starvation. Always the annual trading fleet had to make room for food and livestock as well as for the cloth, hardware, and brandy the fur trade demanded.

Under royal government, the missionary impulse weakened. The autocratic Bishop François Montmorency de Laval established a stern tradition of religious authority in the little colony, but the officials of Louis XIV could be certain of royal backing against any bishop's pretensions. It was far harder for them to resolve a dilemma which persisted throughout the French regime and, in some form, has remained with the leaders of French Canada ever since. Were the people of New France to be *habitants*, cultivating their small colony in the valley of the St. Lawrence, or were they to be *voyageurs*, carrying the fur trade, Catholicism, and French influence throughout the continent?

The instructions of Louis XIV's minister of colonies, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, were clear. His Intendant, or business manager, Jean Talon, must expand the population, improve farming, and develop industries in a compact, self-contained colony. Talon and his successors did their best to obey. Shiploads of women were brought over to provide brides and to balance the sexes in the male-dominated colony. Though immigration slowed to a trickle after 1700, impressive rates of natural increase sent the population of New France soaring from only three thousand at the start of royal government to sixty thousand a century later. As in the English colonies to the south, the legal and administrative structures of the old world were simplified and adapted to the new. Seigneurs served as settlement agents, and any who fancied themselves as feudal lords could swiftly be brought to earth by a rude reminder from the Intendant.

The seigneuries along the St. Lawrence and its tributaries formed one version of New France. On his farm, the *habitant* could fish or hunt. The long strip of land, rolling back from the river to the forest, would be divided among his sons. Rents and taxes were low. An efficient, reasonably cheap court system allowed the *habitant* to indulge a proverbial delight in lawsuits. Officials and clergy might seem all-powerful but they were also paternal. The forest and the fur trade were outlets for the ambitious or the discontented. Since officers' appointments in the colonial garrison were reserved for the sons of influential colonists, there was even access to the lower rungs of the French aristocracy. By the 1750s, visitors from the old world claimed that a new kind of French people was emerging along the banks of the St. Lawrence.

The pressure to expand created another version of New France. As Talon complained, his efforts to create a compact settlement were undone by the unscrupulous but plausible rogue Louis XIV had appointed governor of the colony. Sent to the new world to escape his creditors, Louis de Buade, Count Frontenac, saw only one way to rebuild his fortune and return in splendour to court. Whatever it might cost in renewed war or humiliating treaties, Frontenac had to reach past the Iroquois and revive the fur trade. First he built a fort at Cataraqui (now Kingston) where the St. Lawrence becomes Lake Ontario. Then he sent Robert de la Salle to build another fort at Detroit. Soon agents for the trade, missionaries, and *coureurs de bois* reached out along the Great Lakes, the Ohio and the Mississippi rivers, and north to Hudson Bay to find new Indian bands, new converts, and, above all, new sources of fur.

For governors, soldiers, and ordinary *habitants* there was really no other source of wealth. A journey to the West, with its dangers and back-breaking labour, netted a *voyageur* enough to buy the livestock or land that might turn subsistence farming into a chance to support a wife and family. A successful licence at a trading fort could give a young officer the quick fortune he wanted to support the status of minor nobility in France. Governors and

even intendants took their cut of fur-trade revenue, from selling licences to taking a share of the fur price. Nothing else was as profitable. Talon developed shipbuilding and the iron deposits at St. Maurice near Trois-Rivières, but never with commercial success. Only when the French king poured a fortune into fortifying Louisbourg and into wartime garrisons could corruption provide an alternative source of wealth. By then, the fate of the French regime was sealed.

The price of expansion was a far more dangerous rivalry than the Iroquois or the Dutch had represented. The English colonies, sheltered behind the Appalachians, looked as compact and settled as the seigneuries on the St. Lawrence. In fact, they were quarrelsome, divided, and, by the 1750s, ready to explode beyond their borders.

Two dissident *coureurs de bois*, Pierre Radisson and Médard Chouart des Groseillers, bedevilled by Talon's restrictions on the fur trade, had managed to interest English merchants in the opportunities of Hudson Bay. In 1670, the English established the Company of Adventurers Trading into Hudson's Bay. There is now no doubt that the French were more skillful at trading with the Indians than the English. Their goods, from Europe's leading manufacturing nation, were superior to most that the English could supply. The long Indian wars had forced the *Canadiens* to become tough, efficient wilderness soldiers. What the French lacked in the developing struggle for North America was a powerful navy and the will to match the thousands of English emigrants who left annually for the Thirteen Colonies. Embattled in Europe, France was forced to treat her remote colonies as valued but sacrificial pawns.

In a game of historical might-have-been, the compact colony of New France might have escaped conquest by a sort of armed neutrality. That never seemed possible. The frontier wars, with their lightning raids, burnings, and massacres, cried out for vengeance. A legacy of fear and hatred of the Iroquois and their American backers grew up in New France, to be matched with

equally horrifying memories in New England and northern New York. Even more significant was the role that the expansionist fur trade came to play in French strategic thinking.

At the French court, New France was only a pawn in a European power game. Louis XIV's decision to occupy New Orleans and the later plan in the 1750s to build a belt of French forts along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers were part of complex schemes to help France's Spanish allies and to distract the British. They owed nothing to the commercial needs of the fur trade for there were few pelts to be gained from the Ohio region. The French-Canadian militiamen who struggled and died in the brutally mismanaged expedition to build Fort Duquesne (at present-day Pittsburgh) were expendable pieces in a board game played far away at Versailles. When first the Virginians, under George Washington, and then the British, under General George Braddock, were sent reeling back from the Ohio valley in humiliation or defeat, the French congratulated themselves. In fact, by provoking the stronger British, the French strategists had sealed the fate of New France.

Blockaded by the Royal Navy, preoccupied by wars with its European neighbours, France could spare only a few thousand regular troops to back its gamble in the new world. Louisbourg, the vast fortress built on Cape Breton Island to protect the approaches to the St. Lawrence, fell in 1758 because France had too few warships to relieve it. The French military commander in New France, the Marquis de Montcalm, detested his superior, the Canadian-born governor, Pierre de Rigaud, Marquis de Vaudreuil. Their bitter rivalry, far more than the gross corruption of the last Intendant, François Bigot, doomed the colony. Though Montcalm's outnumbered regulars won against incredible odds, notably at the battle of Carillon or Ticonderoga in 1758, the general's insistence on mixing Canadian militia with his soldiers was a big factor in their defeat on the Plains of Abraham in the following year. An almost accidental last-minute victory by General James Wolfe and his redcoats was made certain by confused tactics in the French ranks. In the fall of Quebec, the French and the *Canadiens* discovered how little they had in common.

In September 1760, with Quebec in British hands and Montreal surrounded, the surviving French troops burned their standards, boarded ships, and went home. So did most of the merchants and leaders of the colony. The remaining *Canadiens*, abandoned in the hands of their enemies, would retain an enduring suspicion of remote imperial strategies and their bloody consequences.

It had taken a century and a half to create New France but now the French were finished with it. To the French Ministry of Marine, the colony had represented huge costs, small returns, and no advantage that fishing concessions off Newfoundland could not match. Voltaire's blunt dismissal of Canada as "several acres of snow" became the official consensus. The British seemed hardly more interested. His Majesty's new Province of Quebec would be made as hospitable to British settlers as the imposition of English law and an elected assembly reserved for Protestants could make it. Narrow boundaries for the new colony cut off the fur-trading hinterland, but incoming British merchants would presumably find other ways to become rich. The conquered *Canadiens* would undoubtedly accept the blessings of the new regime and become English-speaking, if not necessarily Anglican.

Not for the last time, however, the *Canadiens* defied the inevitable. The first British governor, General James Murray, and his successor, Sir Guy Carleton, detested each other, but their aristocratic souls both rejoiced in the ordered, rural, and seemingly dutiful society that had survived the capitulation of 1760. Under its Catholic clergy and a scattering of remaining seigneurs and merchants it was, claimed Murray, "perhaps the bravest and best race upon the Globe." To both governors, it was intolerable that the handful of shifty merchants and camp followers who had accompanied the British army to Montreal and Quebec should now monopolize power simply because British law excluded Catholics. Murray's good will was immediately apparent. The Catholic bishop of Quebec had died on the eve of the conquest. Without a bishop, no new clergy could be ordained. With Murray's help, a successor was chosen, sent to France to be consecrated [since the Catholic church was illegal in Britain], and returned to Quebec. The British gained a staunch clerical ally.

The British had imagined that a flood of settlement would soon help anglicize Quebec. Few people came. By 1772, Sir Guy Carleton, Murray's successor, had absorbed an obvious point: "barring a catastrophe shocking to think of [Carleton probably meant smallpox], this country must, to the end of time, be peopled by the Canadian race." A more troublesome principle followed: they must be governed by institutions and practices familiar to them. Carleton's arguments persuaded the British government. The Quebec Act of 1774 restored the kind of regime Quebec's clergy and seigneurs desired. The Church regained its legal right to tithes and the seigneurs regained the old civil law. The earlier promise of an elected assembly vanished. If the community of English-speaking merchants at Montreal raged at this betrayal, they were more than compensated. The huge fur-trading hinterland to the west, removed from Quebec in 1763, was now restored. Indians and traders would not be disturbed by settlers.

Carleton could not foresee that his Quebec Act would help drive the Thirteen Colonies to open revolt, but he was certainly confident that the Act would rally both the Indians and gratified *habitants* to the British side. He was disappointed. When Americans invaded Quebec after the Declaration of Independence in 1775, the clergy and seigneurs appealed almost in vain for people to rally to Carleton's aid. The Americans, as they advanced to besiege Quebec City, had little better success in winning over the *Canadiens*. Only when starving Americans began to raid livestock and food supplies, leaving worthless paper from the Continental Congress as payment, did the *habitants* choose sides. By the spring of 1776, the Americans had been driven away.

The American Revolution undermined Carleton's prediction. Quebec would not be forever *Canadien*. Ten thousand Loyalist refugees poured into the province up the old invasion route of the Richelieu River and across the Niagara River. Beyond the seigneury of Longueuil, Loyalists and German veterans of the war were granted land.

The cataclysm of the American Revolution forced the British to reconsider the government of the scattered colonies that

remained to them. Once again it was Carleton (now Lord Dorchester) who tried his ingenuity. He would split the old province of Quebec. Beyond Longueuil, Upper Canada would develop as a model British society that *Canadiens* and Americans could admire – and perhaps even ask to join. The eastern portion, Lower Canada, would also have an elected Assembly, an appointed upper house or council, and an executive – replicas of the British Commons, Lords, and Cabinet – but the *Canadiens* would also keep their language, their civil law, and their religious institutions. The Act of 1791 confirmed the arrangements.

And the *Canadiens* seemed to prosper. If a high birthrate is a symptom of a nation's well-being, rarely have a people been happier. The sixty thousand *habitants* of 1760 were a hundred and ten thousand by 1784 and three hundred and thirty thousand by 1812. The Colbert-Talon dream of a compact, prosperous rural society was fulfilled. The methods were primitive – farmers piled their manure on the ice to float downriver at the spring breakup – but wheat production climbed and seigneurial fortunes rose. The long war between Britain and revolutionary and Napoleonic France that began in 1793 awakened few old loyalties among Lower Canadians. Instead, wartime scarcities promoted wheat exports and a growing timber trade from the St. Lawrence. The Church opened colleges to train its clergy. Wealthier *habitants* sent their sons to train for such professions as law and medicine.

The avocation of these newly educated *Canadiens* would be politics. The aging anglophile seigneurs and local notables who had represented the *Canadiens* in the Assembly in its early years soon gave way to younger, more critical men. Politics provided an outlet for new grievances. Despite their dramatic population growth, the *Canadiens* felt threatened. Land that their children would someday need was now being granted to Americans who had not even been Loyalists. Quebec's new Anglican bishop, Jacob Mountain, made no secret of his hope that a state-endowed "Royal Institution," through its schools, would systematically anglicize the French. Through the Assembly, French-Canadian politicians could fight back.

In spite of the *Canadien* predominance, there were signs that Lower Canada was becoming anglicized. By 1812, most of the thirty thousand Montrealers spoke English. So did a majority in Quebec City. Whether the French-speaking merchants were vanishing through intermarriage, deliberate preference for the seigneurial life, or because of brutal competition, the business of Lower Canada was being done in English. Beyond those who purchased seigneuries as a source of income, few merchants cared about the over-population or the shrinking harvests of the rural districts. Their concerns lay with the fur trade or improving the St. Lawrence route to the wheat and potash trade of a thriving Upper Canada. Financing canals to get past the St. Lawrence rapids would cost money. Like most prudent men, the Montreal merchants wanted others to foot the bill.

In Lower Canada, the Assembly soon became the battleground where *Canadiens* could challenge the harsh verdict of the conquest. Their leader, Etienne Bédard, taught the young notaries, doctors, and lawyers that *Canadiens* could win their fight by using the institution the British themselves most admired: Parliament. By 1810, Bédard's determination had led him to prison. However, with war imminent on the American frontier, the British removed his antagonist, Sir James Craig, replacing him with a more sympathetic (and bilingual) governor, Sir George Prévost. In French Canada, Craig's name would remain a symbol of English oppression to the *Canadiens*.

The War of 1812 rarely crossed the Lower Canadian border. When it did, both *Canadiens* and the Assembly could take pride in their patriotic role. Among the officers of the French-Canadian militia was Louis-Joseph Papineau. Eloquent, handsome, seemingly self-confident, Papineau was the logical choice for Speaker of the Assembly in 1815. A professed believer in British institutions, Papineau was also a proud and by no means benevolent seigneur and, thereby, a firm guardian of French Canada's most basic institution. Above all, Papineau was a man of words, concealing a tragic streak of indecision behind billowing rhetoric.

In the wake of the War of 1812, there was much that was seriously wrong in Lower Canada – economic stagnation, crop failures and declining yields, over-population in the seigneuries. Montreal's English-speaking merchants urged reunion of the Canadas and costly improvements of the St. Lawrence route; Papineau and the *Canadien*-dominated Assembly refused. When the merchants pushed their ideas with the appointed council and executive in 1822, Papineau and his allies visited England to defeat the reunion plan. Far from returning triumphant and grateful, Papineau came home disillusioned by Britain and her institutions. Every issue was soon reduced to an uncompromising battle between Papineau and his *patriotes* and those he sweepingly denounced as a "Château Clique" of *bureaucrates*. Leaving more moderate allies in his wake, Papineau set an increasingly radical course, halting all public works, preventing payment of official salaries, and making administration of Lower Canada almost impossible.

Papineau's goals were unclear. In religion he was almost a free thinker; as a seigneur, he was highly conservative. At times, he preached the merits of an American-style republic. Above all, he denounced the control of patronage by the governor's appointed advisers. This issue had strong appeal for the growing *Canadien* elite of educated professionals, condemned to remain as ill-paid village notaries and doctors. Constitutional arguments also aroused English-speaking followers like Wolfred and Robert Nelson, ready to believe that British liberties were at stake. George-Etienne Cartier, studying law and sharing the circle of Montreal's French-speaking elite, was only one of scores of ardent young men who took up the *patriote* cause.

In the Lower Canadian countryside, the mood was different – grimmer. The growing population had become a terrible burden. The narrow strips of land, subdivided for the sons in each generation, could be split no more. Seigneurs, French and English, had become oppressive landlords with no Intendant to restrain them. The land could no longer support its people. Wheat fly and exhausted soil produced shrinking yields. For the first time, a class of landless labourers appeared.

Since the end of the long European war in 1815, a tide of immigration had swept up the St. Lawrence. Most of it had moved on to Upper Canada or the United States; often only the poorest remained. So did the cholera epidemics. The first of them invaded Lower Canada in 1832. Hundreds died miserably from a plague no medical knowledge could cure, and there were those who echoed the *patriote* orators who insisted that the British had deliberately plotted the death of the *Canadiens*. Suspicion and hatred were mutual. The old cordiality of a merchant class that had intermarried, learned French, sometimes even converted to Catholicism, was not inherited. British governors, assailed by hostile *patriote* politicians in the Assembly, also worried about the growth of a rancorous, bitter "English party" in Montreal. The violent attacks by journalists like Adam Thom and the military drill of young men in the Doric Legion only spurred Papineau's followers to fresh extremism in language and tactics.

In 1837, the clash came. Three years before, Papineau had compiled every imaginable Lower Canadian grievance into what he called "Ninety-Two Resolutions" and despatched them to London. The Assembly, he promised, would let the colony stagnate until Britain acted. In 1837, Lord John Russell's Whig government sent its reply, in the form of the "Ten Resolutions." These instructed the governor to reject the Assembly's demand for executive power, ordered him to give hard-pressed officials their back pay, and to govern the colony with or without an elected Assembly.

It was a terrible year to provoke a political conflict. While the colony had stagnated, tensions had risen. Endless rains in the summer and autumn of 1837 had ruined crops. In the United States, President Andrew Jackson's anti-banking crusade had led to a commercial collapse that affected Montreal. Huge, sodden rallies of *habitants* gathered to hear Papineau, echoing his outrage but ignoring his unexpected appeals for prudence and patience. Papineau's indecision was beginning to show, just as the avalanche of anger he had helped to build was beginning to move. Angrier, harder men, like Wolfred Nelson, a wartime surgeon, began drilling men at St. Dénis.

In Montreal, both the *patriotes* and the English drilled. When the governor banned the Doric Legion, it reformed under another title. Suddenly there were clashes; one violent riot threatened Papineau's house and only the arrival of British troops saved it. Fearing arrest, Papineau fled to the countryside. The cautious, peace-seeking Lord Gosford resigned as governor; Sir John Colborne, one of the British army's ablest soldiers, succeeded him.

Given time and a united leadership, the *patriotes* of 1837 might have been a formidable force. At St. Dénis on November 23, Nelson's men drove off two hundred British regulars. Young George-Etienne Cartier shared in that victory, but Papineau had fled St. Dénis, slipping across the border to Vermont. Other *patriotes*, like Louis-Hippolyte La Fontaine, hurried to Quebec City in a vain effort to make peace. An impatient Sir John Colborne gave the rebels no more time to drill or debate. Beaten at St. Dénis, the British troops mounted a swift counter-attack on the rebel centres on the Richelieu River. With the winter freeze-up, Colborne sent his men north of Montreal to crush rebels at St. Eustache. His ill-disciplined irregulars spread across the countryside, leaving the *habitants'* homes blazing behind them. Colborne would be remembered in the historical mythology of French Canada as "*Vieux Brûlot*," the Old Firebrand.

Long after the futility and self-interest of Louis-Joseph Papineau and the *patriotes* had been forgiven, the bitter memory of fire and sword would remain. As in 1760, the *Canadiens* had been defeated. The bitterness of a second conquest engulfed the Lower Canadian leaders, leaving them paralysed and despairing. Others would have to find strength and ingenuity to survive.