

## Colonial Societies

On 26 September 1819, HMS *Hecla* and HMS *Griper* dropped anchor in Winter Harbour, off Melville Island, some 600 miles north of the Arctic Circle. For the first time, an expedition in search of the northwest passage would intentionally winter in the Arctic. Under no illusions as to the magnitude of this challenge, the crew got to work immediately, pulling down the ships' masts and draping sheets of heavy canvas over the yardarms, to create a tent over the main decks. Under *Hecla*'s canopy, they rigged up a bread oven and cobbled together a kind of central heating system that piped warm air to almost every corner of the ship. The sailors were in the most inhospitable environment imaginable, but at least they had a few of the comforts of home.

Had we been able to observe the *Hecla* on the afternoon of 5 November, we would have witnessed a strange scene under the canvas canopy. There, far north of the Arctic Circle, the crew mounted a performance of David Garrick's *Miss in Her Teens*, a saucy farce that had swept the London stage seventy years earlier. With the expedition's commander, Lieutenant Edward Parry, in one of the lead roles, the cast strode the makeshift stage in temperatures that dipped well below the freezing mark, despite the ingenious heating system. The cold even added a charming glow to the cheeks of Midshipman Ross, whose youth and slight figure made him a natural for one of the female roles. The performance was such a success that the crew immediately decided to continue the experiment. Parry and his fellow officers delved into the meagre library of books on board the two ships and every couple of weeks mounted another production. When they had used all the material on board the ship, Parry decided to write a new play, wishfully entitled *The North-West Passage, or Voyage Finished* and featuring five crew members, an Innu hunter, and a polar bear. The documents don't record precisely how the bear took part in the production.<sup>31</sup>



The upper crust replicates European polite culture at the Château St. Louis, Quebec, 1801.

For the crew of the *Hecla* and *Griper*, theatricals were primarily about diversion; as Parry realized, play-acting was a way to pass the long weeks of darkness that interrupted their quest for the northwest passage. But there was another element to it that stemmed from a desire to affirm their cultural heritage in a strange land. Performing Garrick in a world that was entirely foreign to these sailors confirmed both their Europeanness and their civilization; it reminded them that, however far they went from home, they could take their culture with them.

The European presence in the new world was all about extending dominion across the globe. Europeans brought to North America their religion, their politics, their economy, their social structure—it would be strange if they had not brought their culture as well. We have seen that the first newcomers focused on its utilitarian value in converting the indigenous peoples to Christianity; like military expeditions or native alliances, culture became a policy option, another way to achieve their goals. But as the settlements grew, culture became something more than just a weapon for missionaries to wield. It became an expression of values and ideals, a way to convey what the society was trying to achieve philosophically. As the years passed and the settlements grew larger and more established, it became increasingly clear that the new world was more than just an outpost of the old. It was possible to replicate Europe

in North America to some extent, but the specifics of place became more and more critical in shaping the forms of artistic expression that evolved.

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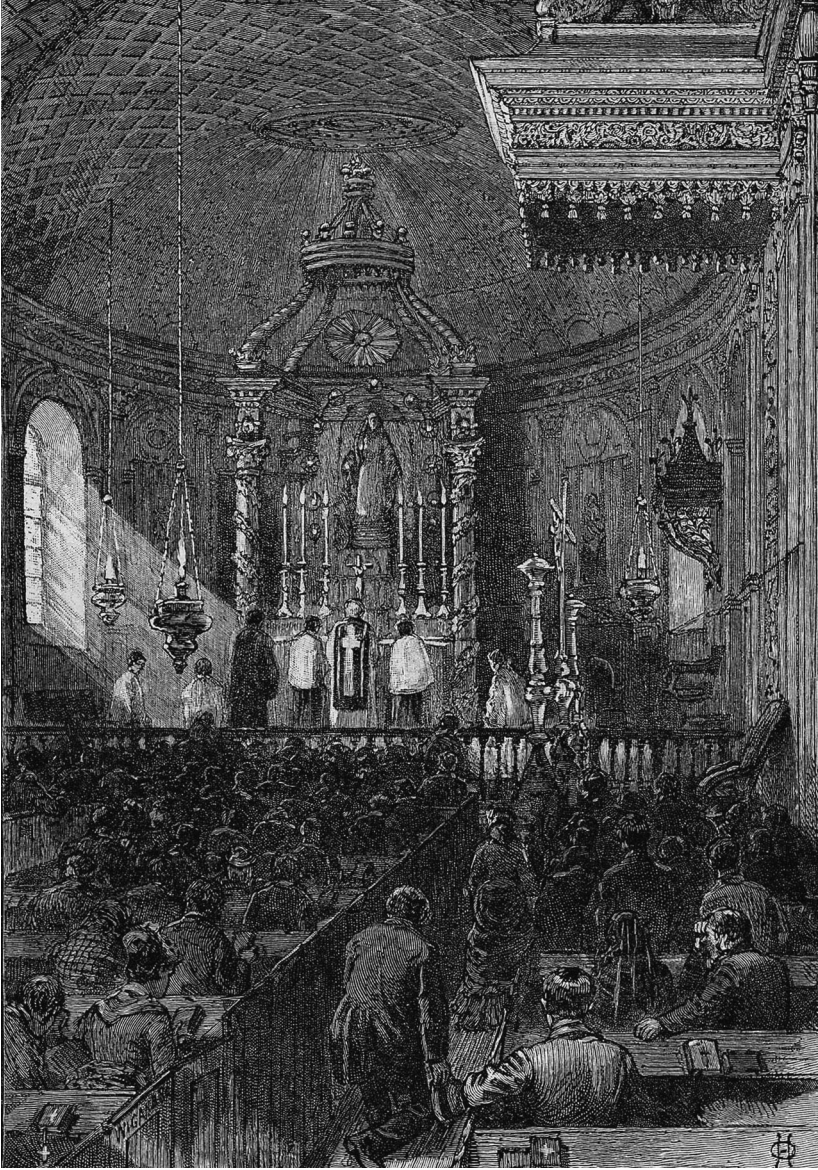
Given the church's reliance on music and painting to convert natives, it is hardly surprising that the distinction of being Canada's first great arts patron falls to a cleric, François de Laval, who became the first Bishop of Quebec in 1674. Aside from his support of the proselytising campaign, Laval was behind the establishment of New France's first arts and crafts school, which opened at Cap Tourmente, east of Quebec, in 1668. Craftsmen there taught cabinetry, painting, gilding, sculpture, masonry, and carpentry, and offered students a practical training regime that included assignments in which students decorated churches. The experiment lasted until practices changed and carvers and sculptors came to be trained as apprentices rather than in schools; by 1706, the school was teaching nothing but agricultural techniques. A private school, modelled after Cap Tourmente, operated in Montreal from 1694 to 1706 under the auspices of the Hospitallers of St. Joseph of the Cross. Connected to their hospice for orphans, the elderly, and indigents, it closed shortly after its sculpture and painting teachers died within two years of each other.

Laval's influence, however, went far beyond the training of artists. As the founder of the first parishes in the colony, he was also behind the erection of its first parish churches, a building campaign that fostered the development not just of architecture, but of painting, carving, and sculpting as well. Architecturally, Laval's churches tended to follow European models, with due allowance for local conditions. The Jesuit Church in Quebec (1666–76) was probably designed in France, to reflect the character of the large Jesuit churches there, but the French Baroque elements were simplified and modified to compensate for the harsher climate, the different range of materials available, and the limited artisanal skill. Many of the parish churches were patterned after Notre-Dame-de-la-Paix in Quebec. Similar to the secular architecture of the upper classes, this was a kind of ecclesiastical imperialism, a way to use architectural forms to project power over outlying communities.



In the 1928 photograph, Quebec wood carver Edmond Patrie works alongside examples of the craft from centuries past.

But it was inside the churches where the skills of local artists really shone. There, in the ornately carved decorations, the masterfully sculpted figures, and the intricate altar screens and tabernacles, we see the skill that moved art historian Russell Harper to call wood-carving ‘Quebec’s highest form of artistic expression and the real glory of the eighteenth century.’<sup>32</sup> At first, the work was done by craftsmen from France who came to Canada on contract, completed their assignment, and then returned home. But by the late seventeenth century, artisans had begun to take up residence in New France, either working on their own or as part of a workshop. The most prominent of these was operated by the Levasseur family, which dominated church decoration in New France from 1651 to 1782. Over four generations, the family included twenty-two artisans—sculptors, ornamentalists, carriage-makers, carpenters—and became essentially artistic contractors. The patriarch would enter into a contract with a parish council, and then sub-contract the work to his relatives or other sculptors, painters, and craftsmen. It might take as long as a decade to complete the decoration of a single church, but the end result was a building that blended European styles with Canadian materials and craftsmanship.



The rich decoration of a typical Quebec parish church. Undated.

Clerics, however, realized that the church had to walk a fine line—culture could be a powerful weapon for the good, but it could also be a tool of the devil. Art, for example, was clearly effective in conversions, but there was always the possibility that religious paintings could become objects of veneration themselves, the very graven images that the Ten Commandments warned against. Indeed, in the painting *La*

*France apportant la foi aux Indiens de la Nouvelle-France* by the Récollet missionary Frère Luc, who in 1670 became the first trained artist to come to Canada, the figure of France warns against becoming preoccupied by the beautiful images on the canvas she holds; she points languidly towards heaven, a reminder of where to find the true objects of veneration.

Literature could also be suspect. In fact, the Jesuits had been in New France just a few months before performing Canada's first book-burning, in 1625, when they hunted out and consigned to the flames a copy of the controversial pamphlet known as the *Anti-Coton*, directed at the former confessor to the French King Henry IV. There was no printing press in New France until 1751, despite petitions from administrators that it could be used to print laws; Swedish traveller Peter Kalm was told that the colony's rulers feared the power of the printed word in attacking the government. And while Laval's successor as Bishop of Quebec advised each family to own 'quelque bon livre,' the church generally regarded lending libraries as a pernicious influence, and clerical suspicion of reading was strong. Baron de Lahontan, a minor nobleman who came to New France with the colonial regular troops, reported in 1685 that the clergy of Montreal 'prohibit and burn all the Books that treat of any Subject but Devotion,' and related an incident in which a local cleric, seized by what Lahontan called a fit of 'impertinent Zeal,' tore apart his volume by the Roman novelist Petronius. A friend had to restrain the outraged Lahontan from ripping the cleric's beard out at the roots.<sup>33</sup>

Nowhere was the conundrum clearer than in the church's attitude to drama. Not only was it a much more public art form than reading or painting, but in a society where literacy rates were low and books were costly, drama had the potential to be accessible and appealing to the mass of colonists. As early as 1584, the Jesuits had suggested using dramatic presentations as a way to make studies more interesting for novitiates, an innovation that the Ursulines eventually copied. The most common form was the *action*, a religious and pedagogic tragi-comedy, usually with a Biblical theme, that was soon established in the colony's rudimentary education system. Typical of this genre was a mystery play performed in 1640 as part of the festivities to mark the second birthday of the future king of France. It had been added to the bill to impress

any natives who might be watching the performance and, if Father Le Jeune's description does it justice, it must have been quite a spectacle: 'the soul of an unbeliever pursued by two demons, who finally hurled it into a hell that vomited forth flames.'<sup>34</sup>

These presentations were usually for ceremonial or educational purposes rather than public consumption, but there was a tradition of civic drama in New France. In fact, the first play mounted in North America, Marc Lescarbot's *Théâtre du Neptune en la Nouvelle-France*, was performed on 14 November 1606 to celebrate the return of a party led by Champlain and Jean de Biencourt de Poutrincourt, a seigneur at Port-Royal, that had gone in search of a better site for the colony. *Théâtre du Neptune* was a variety of dramatic presentation known as a *réception*, the name given to the ritualized addresses and mixed dramatic dialogues that had long been used to mark important events in the French cultural tradition. On the calm waters of the Annapolis River, the play featured Neptune, drawn in a chariot boat, and his tritons giving a series of declarations that the settlement should be grateful for the blessings it enjoyed. A number of aboriginal warriors, also played by French settlers, then came forward to pledge allegiance and cooperation, and the entire production ended with a call to feast.

A ritualized ceremony was one thing; in the eyes of the church, however, secular drama was an entirely different story. A performance of Corneille's *Le Cid* in 1651, only four years after this masterpiece of French drama opened in Paris, drew little comment from clerics; but as the colony's political masters began to show a growing taste for more dubious forms of entertainment (the first ball in New France was held 1667, but twenty years earlier the Jesuit *Relations* had reported with alarm of a ballet performed in a warehouse owned by the Company of One Hundred Associates), the church became concerned. In an echo of what was occurring in France, where the court of Versailles was becoming increasingly pious and restrictive, prominent clerics began to speak out against all kinds of frivolous amusements—but particularly secular theatre. Father Pierre Nicole of Port-Royal referred to the playwright as 'a poisoner of the public,' but the great defender of the faith against theatre emerged in the person of Laval's successor, Bishop Saint-Vallier of Quebec, a narrow-minded and testy zealot who succeeded in making enemies of almost everyone he encountered in the colony.<sup>35</sup>

Even before arriving in New France in 1685, the bishop had informed the then-governor, the Marquis de Denonville, that theatre, dancing, and balls were injurious to Christian principles; he expected the governor and his wife to set a good example for the common people by avoiding all worldly diversions. Denonville, who arrived in New France at a time when native attacks and a terrible epidemic were threatening the very life of the colony, had more important concerns than theatre and dancing, but the next governor, the urbane and sophisticated Louis de Buade, Comte de Frontenac, was not above using the powers of his office to allow him to live in style. In the winter of 1693–94, he sponsored performances of Corneille's *Nicomède* and Racine's *Mithridate* in his home for a select audience of colonial elite. Saint-Vallier took no apparent notice until it was rumoured that the next play in the series would be Molière's *Tartuffe*. The comedy by one of the greatest dramatists of the age had already caused a storm of controversy in France, where leading churchmen accused it of subverting organized religion. The bishop would have known of the dispute and, when word of the proposed performance reached his ears, he could not sit idly by.

Saint-Vallier seemed to be as offended by the performance itself as he was by one Lieutenant Mareuil, the disreputable fellow who was to direct it, for he targeted both. He immediately issued a decree condemning theatre in general and forbidding any member of the diocese from attending the performance, and then charged Mareuil with blasphemy. But with this the bishop overstepped himself; blasphemy was a civil offence and Frontenac, who apparently relished any opportunity to annoy the bishop, protested strongly against the intrusion into his civil authority as governor. The dispute might have blown up into a nasty quarrel had Saint-Vallier not offered Frontenac 100 *pistoles* (over \$9,400 in 2009) to cancel the play. Although the bishop insisted that it was simply a repayment of the expenses that Frontenac had already disbursed in preparing the play, it had all the hallmarks of a bribe. The governor, however, was neither offended nor insulted, and happily pocketed the money. The King's Council eventually decided that all sides should share both the blame (as historian Margaret Cameron put it so aptly, 'the council ruled that the bishop was in the wrong but that the governor was not in the right'<sup>36</sup>) and the embarrassment that resulted from the unseemly tiff.



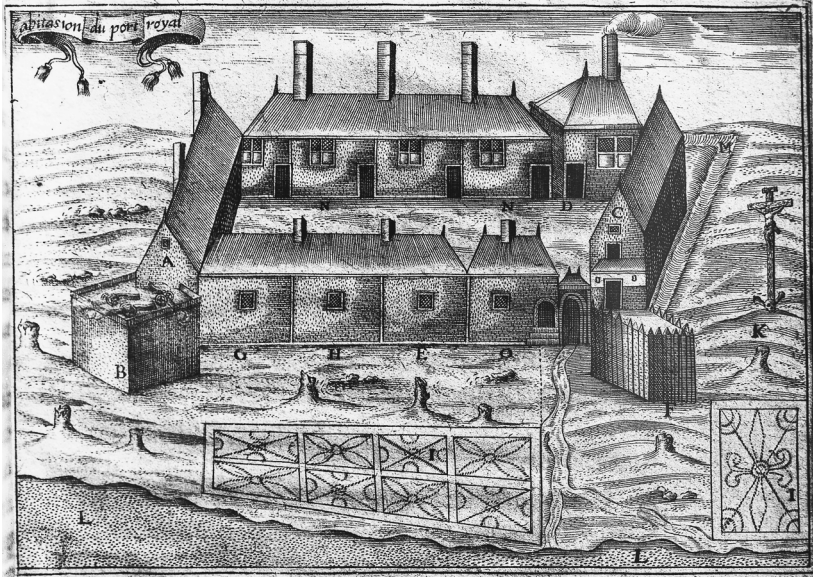
And yet Saint-Vallier had the last laugh. His decree was reinforced in 1699 and remained on the books for two centuries. The records suggest that it was entirely effective, for there was little drama performed in the colony, except for the odd *réception* and some plays mounted by soldiers. There may have been other performances that have been lost to history, but at the very least it is clear that, thanks to the bishop's efforts, theatre ceased to be an important aspect of social life in New France.

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As the *Tartuffe* controversy reveals, not everyone shared the church's attitude towards culture. Frontenac was typical of the people who were reluctant to see it in simple utilitarian terms, as something that could be useful only in certain circumstances. For them, culture was part of the fabric of life and, as a result, it had a place in the colonizing impulse. They believed that the hinterland, whatever else it became, should be a reflection of the metropolis. More than simply an outpost of trade and commerce, it should be an outpost of European civilization and culture in the wilderness of North America.

The desire to replicate Europe in North America was evident in architecture from the earliest days. In Champlain's habitation at Île Ste.-Croix, erected in 1604, the houses of notables had steep hipped roofs, similar to those that graced castles and stately homes in France, the very buildings that expressed in tangible terms the social hierarchy. The same was true of Champlain's second habitation at Quebec (1624–26), which resembled a medieval château of the Loire region, a form that Champlain would have seen as a symbol of feudal control, and the Château de Vaudreuil (1723–26), which had all the features of fine French houses of the day. As architectural historian Helmut Kallmann put it, the Château exemplified the architecture of the ruling class, 'formal, contrived, based on study, and consciously produced to express power, wealth and authority.'<sup>37</sup> Here, old world forms symbolized a kind of imperialism, a reminder that European civilization would be imposed on the new world.

The tendency to replicate European culture was strongest in the urban centres of New France, where roughly a third of the colony's population lived, including the wealthy and powerful who had the leisure time and the financial resources to enjoy and sponsor the arts. Over



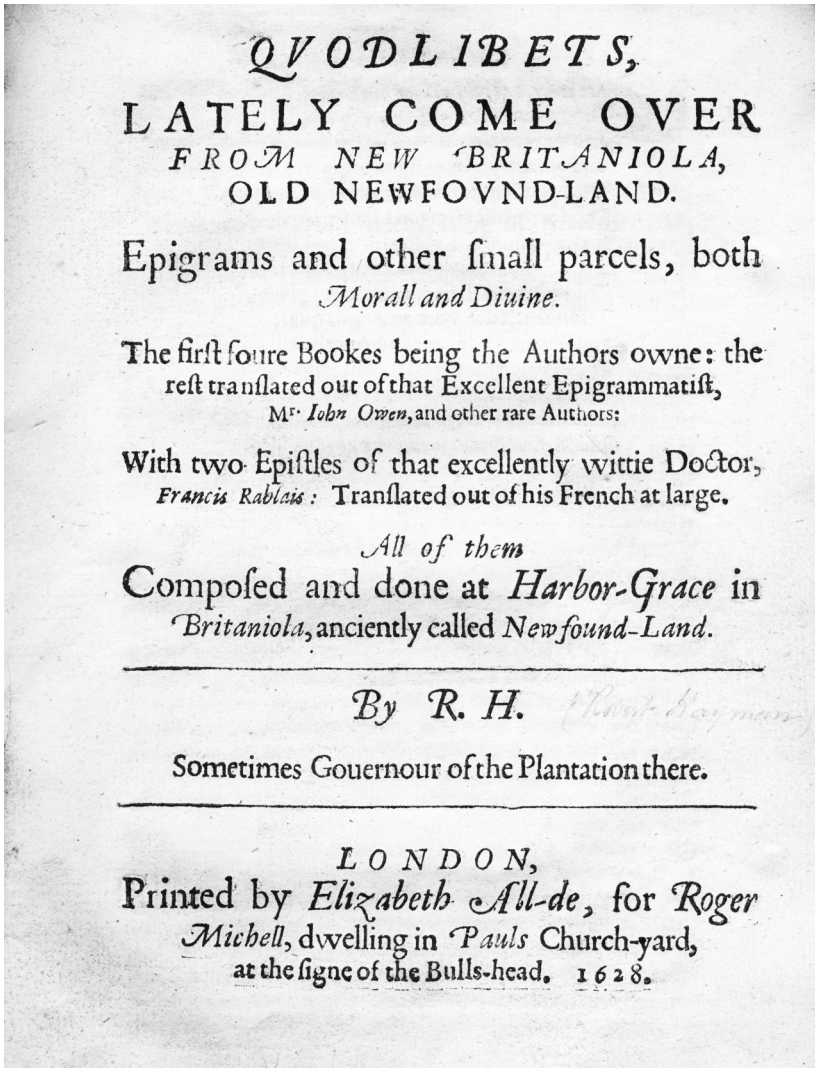
Champlain's *Habitation du Port Royal*, 1614–15, showing European architectural styles in a North American setting.

time, they fostered a lively cultural life, even with the church's stifling influence. Elements of the Enlightenment could be found, although in a weaker form because of the remoteness of New France and the small size of the bourgeois group. Despite clerical attitudes towards books, there was a strong demand for reading that was satisfied by imports from France. Although there was little in the way of a retail book trade, and even that rarely extended beyond liturgical and prayer books, leading citizens had libraries running into the thousands of books imported from France, ranging from religion and Latin classics to professional books and contemporary French literature. By the mid-1760s there were probably some 60,000 books in New France, mostly in private hands, and the library of the Jesuit College in Quebec rivalled that of Harvard, the greatest university in North America at the time.

Secular painting also took hold early in the eighteenth century, as military officers, merchants, and government officials increasingly had the means and the inclination to commission portraits. One of the first professional painters in the colony was Jean Berger, a former soldier who established a studio in Montreal after being released from prison for counterfeiting royal money. Only a handful of works from the period still exist, but those that survive show a shift in style away from the clearly French-

influenced work of earlier painters like Frère Luc. If they are generally simpler, less ostentatious, and indeed less accomplished than their predecessors' work, they can be seen as the beginnings of a Canadian style. Russell Harper admits that these works continue to show the influences of French art, but argues that they nevertheless represent the 'first attempts by local artists to paint the local scene as they personally felt it.'<sup>38</sup>

Through the first half of the eighteenth century, then, New France experienced a kind of cultural flowering, even with the stultifying influence of the church. The same could not be said of England's North American colonies, which were regarded much more as economic outposts of empire and therefore not places where culture should flourish. Literary activity there before the mid-eighteenth century was sparse. *Quodlibets*, a verse cycle written by Robert Hayman, the English governor of Harbour Grace, Newfoundland, in 1628, Donnachadh Ruadh MacConmara's clever poetry that both praised and criticized Newfoundland, a few verses written by naval officers passing through the colonies, and the odd travel account—these represent the literary output of more than a century of English presence in North America. Despite the fact that the earliest surviving paintings done on Canadian territory were by Englishman John White, who executed a series of watercolours of Inuit he encountered on a voyage in 1577, art also lagged behind New France. This was in part because of the influence of Puritanism, which feared any kind of religious art and demanded that English colonial churches be austere and devoid of the decoration that had been so important in fostering artistic activity in New France. Nor was there much in the way of secular art—wealthy Nova Scotians patronized the American portraitist John Singleton Copley because there was no good painter in the colony. The city of Halifax, founded in 1749, could sustain neither a dancing academy nor a bookseller. Henry Meriton placed an advertisement as a dancing teacher in 1752, but the failure of his enterprise is suggested by a notice in the newspaper a year later, in which Meriton offered his services as a man-midwife, surgeon, and apothecary. In 1761, James Rivington advertised his intention to begin selling books, but the venture only lasted a short time before Rivington departed Nova Scotia for the greener commercial pastures of New England. There are few mentions of music in surviving letters and diaries of the period, and it seems likely that it was confined to churches and military bands. But if



Title page of Robert Hayman's *Quodlibets*, which was Newfoundland's first book of English poetry, originally published in London in 1628.

the English colonies seemed to be a cultural desert, they would not long remain so; war was about to re-shape their very essence.

Like so many other aspects of their history, the paths of New France and the English colonies were dramatically altered by conflict. The

declaration of the Seven Years' War in 1756, when a struggle between the imperial powers of Europe spilled over into their colonial possessions, began a period of turmoil that would continue until the end of the American Revolution in 1783. Those decades would mark a watershed in the political, economic, and social life of North America, but also in its cultural life. Not for the first time, war would be both the destroyer and the creator of art.

For the cultural life of New France, the most immediate consequences of the Seven Years' War were disastrous. Many of the colony's architectural gems were destroyed by British cannons, and the program of church building ended abruptly as resources were poured into defence. There was little demand for portraits as the colony's survival hung in the balance, and soldiers who had once turned their leisure hours to play-acting found their time consumed by military duties. The religious orders, once prominent sponsors of culture, stopped sending people to New France, and few young people could travel to the metropolis to study. The supply of French books slowly dried up as space in ships' holds was taken up by the tools of war.

But after the Treaty of Paris of 1763 returned peace to Quebec, the colony's cultural life was reborn. A program of church building that dwarfed Laval's was begun, and by 1791 thirty-nine new churches had been built and thirteen more repaired. The Levasseurs stopped working in 1782, but there were other workshops, like the Baillairgés', ready to fill the void. Jean Baillairgé was an architect, and in the 1770s he sent his son François to France to train as an artist. Upon his return to Quebec, François, and later his own son Thomas, took over the family workshop, winning contracts with some of the wealthiest parishes in the colony. The Baillairgés' workshop was active well into the 1830s, bringing into the nineteenth century the golden age of Canadian carving that the Levasseurs had begun in the seventeenth.

French-Canadian secular painting, too, came of age in the years after the conquest. Most artists still got the bulk of their commissions from the church, but the market for non-religious art was expanding, something that became clear when François Beaucourt became the first painter to advertise his services as a portraitist and art teacher in 1792. In this context, the isolation from France—not only during the Seven Years' War, but also during the French Revolution and the Napoleonic



Québec's Récollet Church in 1761, showing the damage done by British cannons during the conquest of New France.

Wars as well—proved to be an asset. At the very time when there was growing demand for their work, French-Canadian artists were cut off from European trends and had to find their own way stylistically, developing an artistic vocabulary that combined the bright and playful elements of the rococo with the passion and power of neo-classicism.

There is little indication that the evolution of a French-Canadian style of painting was anything more than an accident of the times, but in literature there were concerted efforts to forge a distinct French-Canadian voice as an antidote to the English influences that cultural elites feared would sweep Québec. Part of the concern stemmed from the fact that French-Canadian literature, unlike art, went into the doldrums after 1760; literary historian Gérard Tougas suggests that it was almost non-existent in the decades after the conquest. Only in newspapers was French-Canadian literature fostered. The first publisher, Fleury Mesplet, concluded that the best way to preserve the French language under the new order was to maintain every possible tie with France, so his *Le Gazette du commerce et littérature* relied heavily on verse and prose imported from France. Unfortunately, it also included generous doses of criticism of the educational system, the government, and the judiciary, commentaries that offended both the church and the governor, Sir Frederick Haldimand. After only a year, the paper

was suppressed and Mesplet tossed in jail. Shortly after his release, he started a new paper, the *Montreal Gazette* (a direct ancestor of today's newspaper of the same name). This tamer venture was rather more successful; perhaps not financially, but at least it kept Mesplet out of jail. In 1817, Michel Bibaud established the journal *L'Aurore* in Montreal, using material taken from a Bordeaux magazine—thereby affirming his desire to keep his readers informed of French culture. Bibaud was also responsible for publishing the first volume of verse in French Canada, in 1830. Canadian in content but inspired by the satire of French writer Nicholas Boileau, the verses may have been weak, but at least they affirmed the desire of French Canadians to foster what Tougas called 'an autonomous life of the spirit.'<sup>39</sup>

The post-conquest years were less happy for the theatre in French Canada; despite the changing of the guard, it continued to draw the ire of the church. A company calling itself the Young French-Canadian Gentlemen performed Molière's *Fourbières de Scapin* after the conquest, but at least one actor complained about having to delete all the female roles because the church frowned upon the mixing of the sexes on stage. When the Théâtre du Société opened its first season in Montreal in the winter of 1789–90, a parish priest publicly denounced the plays, largely because they featured males performing in female roles. He threatened to withhold the sacrament from anyone who attended, but when the public and even his superiors chafed against this heavy-handed approach, the priest turned to the confessional to discourage theatre-going. This evidently had the desired effect, for the company survived only a single season. Clerics in Quebec adopted the same tactics, refusing absolution 'to all those performing, aiding, or abetting these sorts of performances.' Again, the effect was considerable: not a single play is known to have been performed in French in Lower Canada between 1797 and 1804. That year, an amateur group called Theatre Paragon, drawn from Quebec's social elites, appeared on the scene only to fall victim to Joseph-Octave Plessis, soon to be Bishop of Quebec. As concerned as Saint-Vallier had been about moral decay in the colony, Plessis demanded that church painting show more decorum, frowned on dancing, cowed writers and newspaper editors into toning down their criticism, and perhaps most importantly, denounced the theatre as being 'against the principles of God.'<sup>40</sup> For another decade,

the pattern was repeated; a group of enthusiastic amateurs would come together to mount plays, only to find that they were unable to withstand the considerable pressure of the church. Perhaps the only milestone in the period was the completion in 1788 of *Colas et Colinette* by Joseph Quesnel, a Frenchman who became a Canadian when his ship was captured off Nova Scotia in 1779. The first play to be written and published in Canada, it was revived almost two centuries later and was performed widely, in French and English, in the 1960s and 1970s.

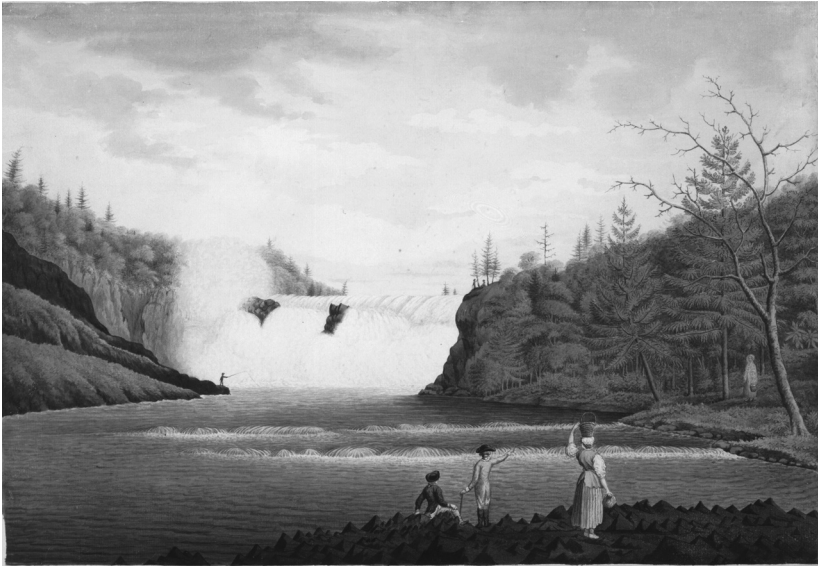
The heavy hand of the church concerned not only budding thespians, but the nascent arts community in general, especially cultural nationalists like Mesplet and Bibaud. Their fears that French Canada's culture would be swamped by the English occupiers were entirely justified, and they objected to clerical interference in their campaign for *la survivance*. The conquerors of New France brought with them not only their merchants, their administrators, and their soldiers, but also a cultural life that had been booming in New England through the Seven Years' War. Unlike New France, the English colonies had not themselves been under direct threat, so the lively arts scene of the region continued to blossom, stimulated by the energies of conflict. When that conflict ended, it was only natural that the energy would overflow into the new possession, Quebec, and also into the older English colonies as well.

There's nothing like a great military victory to inspire creativity in the songwriter and the poet, and the conquest brought a minor boom in celebratory music and poetry. John Worgan's 'I Fill Not the Glass—A Song on the Taking of Mont-Real by General Amherst' and Thomas Smart's 'General Wolfe' are typical of the patriotic songs dating from the period, while Valentine Neville's poem 'The Reduction of Louisbourg' (1759) describes the capture of the French stronghold on Cape Breton Island; Thomas Cary's *Abram's Plains* (1789) does the same for the battle at Quebec. Still, with lines like Cary's 'on the green-sward oft encamped they lay,/Seen by the rising and the setting ray./Here, in life's vigour, Wolfe resign'd his breath,/And, conqu'ring sunk to the dark shades of death,' few such works will ever be considered timeless classics of Canadian music or literature.<sup>41</sup>

The situation was a little brighter in painting. The arrival of British military units in Quebec brought a wave of activity in art that was every bit as important as the one that swept French Canada. In the days



before photography, the only way to make accurate records of terrain or defensive positions was by sketching. Consequently, a number of British officers were also topographical artists who had been taught to draw landforms, cityscapes, and fortifications. They were not trained *as* artists, but they were trained *by* artists, indeed by some of the leading watercolourists of the day, and the best of them soaked up an artistic sensibility that tempered the severe pragmatism of their military training. This proclivity, combined with a growing demand in Europe for pictures of far-off places and the fact that garrison duty typically left soldiers with plenty of time on their hands, impelled British military artists to produce a large and vibrant body of work that captured the new colonies in all their many moods.



Thomas Davies's 'Chaudière Falls near Quebec,' 1792.

Typical of these artists was Thomas Davies, who entered the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich as a gentleman cadet of artillery in 1755, at the age of eighteen. His drawing master was the French artist Gamaliel Massiot, who saw enough potential in the young Davies to recommend him for further training in sketching. In 1757, Davies was posted to Halifax for the first of four tours of duty in North America. Over the next thirty-three years, he would travel widely on the continent, primarily as attaché to British general Sir Jeffrey Amherst. He took

part in Amherst's successful expedition against Louisbourg in 1758, and was probably the officer who raised the first British flag over Montreal in September 1760. He served in some of the most significant battles of the American Revolution, and finally left Quebec for the last time in November 1790, devoting his retirement to the study and drawing of birds.

Davies was first and foremost a military draughtsman whose training was directed at the near-photographic reproduction of what he saw. But he was an artist by inclination, and his work shows clear influences of the picturesque style that was popular in Europe in the eighteenth century. Both of these tendencies come through in his views of Canada. There is the delicate and detailed drawing of the best military topographers (something that makes it possible to identify, even two and a half centuries later, the precise location of many of his works), but there is also the skilful rendering of light and water, the assured use of colour, and, not incidentally, the wonderful human touches—a native hunter shooting a porcupine, an elegant couple reclining across the river from Montreal, an artist calmly sketching the scene—to give the watercolours a warmth and immediacy that makes them more than mere topographical sketches.

The conquerors brought artists and musicians (the military bands that became fixtures at public concerts and society balls, and whose conductors often did double duty as private music teachers), but they also brought another innovation that the church in New France had frowned upon: the public library. When it became apparent that a good number of Montreal's new militia captains were unable to read the Laws and Orders, the governor suggested a lending library as a way to improve the literacy of the upper classes. Accordingly, the Quebec Library was announced in 1779 and eventually opened for business in 1783 with roughly a thousand volumes. At £5 to join and a £2 annual subscription, it was beyond the means of all but the wealthiest in the colony. Even so, it was successful enough that Montreal followed with its own subscription library in 1796.

The library movement undoubtedly did its part in creating a climate that was receptive to reading, but it had little to do with the publication of Frances Brooke's *The History of Emily Montague*, usually considered to be Canada's first novel. Brooke came to Canada in 1763 while her

husband was chaplain to the military garrison, and spent much of her time lobbying for his continued employment in the colony. When that seemed unlikely, she turned to writing as a source of income. She had published one successful novel (as well as an equally successful translation) while in England, and in 1766 began writing *Emily Montague*. The four-volume novel had slow but steady sales over succeeding decades, and became a kind of travel guide for Europeans embarking on a journey to Canada. But was it really Canadian? It is entirely in the tradition of eighteenth-century English novels, but her vivid descriptions of the people, places, and events (many of which can be linked to real details from contemporary Quebec) make it unmistakably Canadian. It was written in Canada, yet published in England. Frances Brooke spent only a few years in Quebec, although she clearly got to know the colony well enough to describe it with great accuracy and sensitivity. The epistolary format may have been English, but the subject matter was purely Canadian. On balance, then, it seems reasonable to conclude that the history of the Canadian novel begins with *The History of Emily Montague*.

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However important it was in Quebec, culture loomed even larger in the new Loyalist settlements that sprang up after the American Revolution. The ideals of the rebels were by no means universally acclaimed throughout the Thirteen Colonies, but opponents of the new order had just two options: swallow their principles and find a way to live in the republic, or leave everything and flee. In what has been called the first mass movement of political refugees in modern history, over 40,000 Loyalists decided they could not live in the new United States, and decamped for other British possessions in North America. The wealthiest of them came away with what they could, even to the point of floating their houses on barges to what would soon become the new colony of New Brunswick. The majority, however, left with only what they could carry. For Loyalists who had worked for generations to build up their positions, it was a huge sacrifice.

It was no surprise, then, that they felt a powerful impulse to rebuild what they had been forced to leave behind. They had fled a region

with a well-developed culture—theatre, art, a lively book and magazine trade, music—and come to a place that had nothing. Reverend James Cuppidge Cochrane recalled growing up in Nova Scotia in the late 1790s with his Loyalist parents, and noted that it was a shock to his cultured family: ‘we had no reading rooms—no lectures—no social gatherings for mental improvement—no performer to delight the ear and refine the taste by his admirable readings—no libraries except two filled with such things as Mrs. Radcliffe’s romances... We had nothing in short to elevate and improve.’ The first task for people like the Cochranes was to set this right, in literary scholar Gwendolyn Davies’ words ‘to re-establish in this “wilderness” the educational and cultural institutions left behind in America.’<sup>42</sup>

And so Loyalist émigrés such as Jacob Bailey and Jonathan Odell picked up right where they had left off, putting their talents to good use in their new land. As well as being a pleasant diversion, writing poetry and prose was also one of the social graces that characterized a truly civilized society. It might be entertaining and amusing—and in the work of someone like Bailey we see the roots of satiric literature in Canada—but more importantly it was integral to rebuilding in British North America a cultured community that was worthy of its heritage.

Another manifestation of this impulse is the fact that amateur theatrical performances were mounted in Saint John in 1789, only six years after the earliest settlers arrived. The first professional actors to reach Saint John were probably the Marriotts, a husband and wife team who came north to try their luck with less sophisticated audiences after a disappointing experience in the United States. In February 1799 they performed *Douglas*, a tragedy by Scottish playwright John Home, and Mrs. Marriott became the first woman to act on stage in Saint John, ironically cast in the role of a boy. But the Marriotts picked a bad time to come to New Brunswick. The city’s theatre-going elites were hit hard by an economic downturn, and the couple did not have the legion of local friends and relatives who filled the seats for amateurs. We can follow the decline of Marriott’s fortunes through advertisements in the local newspaper, as he tried his hand at being a restaurateur, butcher, wine shop owner, barber, school teacher, and hotelier before eventually giving up and leaving Saint John. But the situation would improve, and New Brunswick would soon boast a thriving theatrical scene. Saint

John's original venue, Mallard's Long Room—an empty hall that the actors shared with the Common Council and the Legislative Assembly—hosted a wide range of professional and amateur performances in the early nineteenth century before the city's first purpose-built theatre, the Drury Lane, opened in 1809. There, in 1816, citizens witnessed a performance of the first locally written play, a two-act farce called *The Sailor's Return, or Jack's Cure for the Hystericks*. Even when the Drury Lane fell into disuse, troupes continued to visit Saint John, performing in any converted hall that happened to be available.

Sometimes one wonders why they bothered, given the incredibly harsh judgements offered by budding theatre critics. A performance at Halifax's New Grand Theatre in 1796 led one critic to throw up his hands in despair: 'In the name of all the Gods at once, what can induce you to act operas? Is it to convince us what dismal singers you are?... [we] invariably have seen more to be disgusted with, than pleased at; for instead of sterling Sense, we receive Grimace and wretched Buffoonery.' Describing a performance of *Kate and Petruchio* in Montreal in 1806, the British traveller and writer John Lambert reported that the actors' talents 'were nearly eclipsed by the vulgarity and mistakes of the drunken Katherine, who walked the stage with devious steps and convulsed the audience with laughter, which was all the entertainment



Garrison Theatre in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where military officers are putting on a show, 1872.

we experienced in witnessing the mangled drama of our immortal bard.' He did not find the next season much better, observing that 'the performers are as bad as the worst lot of our strolling actors...I have seen none except Col. Pye and Capt Clark, of the 49th, who did not murder the best scenes of our dead poets.'<sup>43</sup>

Some people were less concerned with the quality of the theatre than its morality, and the debate that had bedevilled New France for two hundred years was reignited in Saint John. Critics continued to insist that the theatre's only purposes were to separate the gullible from their money and to provide training for thieves and other 'persons of professionally evil life' who were attracted by the proceedings. The profession of acting had never produced 'any practical and positive good,' they wrote, and was nothing more than 'a blank in creation.' Supporters, however, believed the theatre offered 'public benefit to our improving community' by teaching lessons of virtue and advocating the cause of religion.<sup>44</sup> Eventually, the tussle was brought to the attention of the mayor, who felt the theatre was beyond his jurisdiction and referred the matter to the Grand Jury. Seventeen of the twenty-one jurors accepted free tickets to see this nuisance first-hand; they must have liked what they saw because they failed to present a report and declined to suppress the theatre.

Clearly, the Grand Jury was grappling with more than simply a form of entertainment. Loyalist families had faced a very painful choice in deciding to leave everything they had built to start over as homesteaders. But they remained utterly convinced that their choice had been right, and were determined to demonstrate this at every opportunity. Creating a theatrical community in their new home was one way to convince themselves that they had made the right choice, and to dispel the sadness associated with having left behind all they had built. As one newcomer to Saint John wrote in a 1795 poem entitled 'On Opening a Little Theatre in the City,' culture could serve as 'consolation to distress.'<sup>45</sup>

It was also a way to convince others that they had made the right choice, and that they were every bit the equal of, and perhaps even a little superior to, the Yankees who had remained behind in the new United States. In this respect, culture was a means to affirm the values that the Loyalists held dear. They saw the world as a hierarchy ordained by God; every person had a place in that order, and a set of responsibilities to go

along with it. In New England, the order had been challenged and ultimately destroyed by the rebels, but in the Loyalist colonies it would be preserved, thanks to the stewardship of the Anglican Church, which gave the society its moral compass, and the wisdom of the ruling classes—whose passion for rationality saved their world from disintegrating into chaos. This belief would find expression in the work of people such as Bailey and Odell, whose writing, even when it wasn't overtly political (as it had often been when they were still in the Thirteen Colonies), implicitly served the purpose, as Gwendolyn Davies put it, of 'reaffirming for Loyalists the rightness of their social vision.'<sup>46</sup>

A typical manifestation of this worldview was *The Nova-Scotia Magazine and Comprehensive Review of Literature, Politics, and News*, founded in 1789 by William Cochran and John Howe to provide a monthly digest of current literature, news, poetry, and natural science. It was all in the name of sharpening the cultural sensitivities of readers, and imbuing in them the 'good taste and sound sense' that underpinned the Loyalist version of toryism. Much of its content was imported, but Cochran and Howe encouraged local writers wherever possible and looked forward to the time when the journal would be 'enriched with the exertions of *native genius*.'<sup>47</sup> Its mailing list was not large, reaching only 276 at its peak (including 172 in Halifax); but it did have subscribers in almost every township and brought culture to a wide range of people, from leading clerics and military officers to carpenters and farmers, at a time when there were no public libraries. In 1826, the *Acadian Magazine or Literary Mirror* was established to carry on this tradition and, in so doing, to correct the impression that the people of the Loyalist colonies 'were comparatively ignorant and barbarous.' John Graves Simcoe, the lieutenant-governor of Upper Canada, had precisely the same thing in mind when he advocated the establishment of a lending library for Upper Canada in 1791. He saw it as part of the process of making the colony a legitimate 'Rival, for public Estimation and preference, of the American Governments near to which it is situated.'<sup>48</sup>

In seeking to rival the United States by cultivating an appreciation for the arts, Simcoe made an implicit assumption about the uniqueness of Canadian culture. The very fact that elites were interested in replicating European culture in North America would seem to militate against any

sort of cultural distinctiveness, but it is possible to discern in this period the first glimmerings of a perspective that was different from the European models it replicated, or the aboriginal practices on which it was sometimes grafted. Perhaps without even knowing it, these artists were creating something that was distinct: a hybrid of European and North American culture, which took the principles of the former and adapted them to the milieu of the latter. It may have been derivative or rough around the edges, but the quality of the product was less important than the artistic impulse itself and the realization that culture was an essential part of life. As Gérard Tougas later wrote in a comment that could apply equally well to painters, musicians, and architects, ‘the humble efforts of these pen-wielders have contributed to the spread, if not the acceptance of the idea that a writer, far from belonging to the ranks of the unproductive, is one of the most indispensable elements of a society.’<sup>49</sup> Whether a matter of *la survivance* or to demonstrate the rectitude of the Loyalist cause, culture was regarded as essential to building a better community. Without a vibrant cultural life, these people reasoned, a civilized society could not be said to exist. Theatre promoter Charles Powell had this in mind when he opened a reading academy in Halifax in 1802. In part he was motivated by a need to supplement his income through a lean period of the theatre, but he was also mindful of culture’s ability to provide moral and spiritual uplift; studying classical literature was essential, he wrote, ‘not only to point out the most distinguished beauties of each author, but to explain to the young reader the moral contained in the several respective passages, which may not be so clearly understood in general, so as to form the judgement and give them a taste for cultivating their minds with polite literature.’<sup>50</sup>

Powell’s reading academy was not a success, and the difficulties that he experienced in trying to introduce Halifaxians to this kind of intellectual stimulation suggest that not everyone shared his views. Indeed, in Canada’s growing cities, there was an increasing divergence of opinion as to the proper role of culture. For Powell and his ilk, it was all about moral improvement; one of the foundations of an enlightened society was a vibrant cultural life to provide moral and spiritual uplift. But for others, culture was something very different. It was entertainment, pure and simple, a diversion from the drudgery of the workaday world.