Racism in the Old Province of Quebec

Hilda Neathy

No one contemplating today what is often called the French fact in Canada can be blamed for assuming that the roots of the dangerous and occasionally even violent French-English racial-nationalist confrontation in the modern province of Quebec must have taken hold in the period immediately after the Conquest. Superficial evidence supports this assumption, but recent research is showing the actual situation as more complex than has been supposed and the issues as far from fitting neatly into a racial-nationalist pattern.

It was in the years 1759–60 that a British naval force and British troops operating from bases in the British-American colonies completed the military occupation of the French province on the St. Lawrence and prepared for the events that resulted in surrender of the whole French empire on the mainland in North America to Britain in the peace treaty of 1763. This for Britain was a great but almost embarrassing victory. It necessarily involved London, at a time of great political instability, in a major reorganization of vast territories formerly ruled or claimed by France, territories in which almost every colony along the Atlantic seaboard had its claims and interests, at a period when there was considerable friction among the colonies themselves and a good deal between them and Great Britain.

The necessary reorganization eventually helped to precipitate American armed resistance to Britain in 1775, the American Declaration of Independence in 1776, and the ensuing war which ended in 1783 with recognition of the United States of America.
Meanwhile, Great Britain had in 1763 created on the St. Lawrence a new province destined to be the nucleus of the later Dominion of Canada, the province of Quebec. This province was, roughly, a parallelogram extending along both sides of the St. Lawrence River from a little above the prosperous fur-trading town of Montreal to a little below the older, more dignified, government and military centre of Quebec, an area roughly 700 miles in length and something over 200 in breadth, a considerable extent but trifling compared with the other tremendous continental spaces now ruled by Britain. The province included most of the Canadian settlements which were clustered along the banks of the St. Lawrence and Richelieu Rivers, as well as very considerable tracts of vacant land.

The Royal Proclamation of October 7, 1763, which had created this province, had also, and indeed as its primary purpose, established the tremendous area south of the Lakes, north of the Ohio, and east of the Mississippi, known generally as the Ohio country, as a large Indian reserve. Restless Americans and any others who wanted to settle there were strictly prohibited from entering; they were instead invited to occupy the vacant lands made available in the new province of Quebec and were promised, should they respond to the invitation, "the enjoyment of the benefit" of English law, and an elected assembly as soon as one could be summoned.

This historic document, the basis of the first Canadian constitution under British rule, saw the beginning of a problem which has always looked large to Canadians, and has often been much noticed by Americans—the problem of Canadian-American relations.

Not many frontiersmen or would-be farmer settlers responded to the invitation of the Proclamation, but some hundreds of others did. These were the traders and merchants from Boston, New York, and other American towns, and from London and elsewhere in Britain, all of them eager to supply the army and to take over the fur trade in which, as was well known, merchants on the St. Lawrence had important natural advantages. Some of them no doubt also were interested in buying up seigneuries which might be made available by Canadians who, by treaty, were allowed to sell their property and return to France. On their arrival these new settlers found detachments of British troops at Quebec, Montreal, and elsewhere, troops which had been in occupation since 1760 and had administered the colony until the Proclamation made possible a return to civil law. These troops were also responsible for supplying the network of forts and posts maintained on the Great Lakes and in the Ohio country. The newcomers also found an English Governor, or rather a Scottish one, General James Murray, and a few English-speaking officials. Apart from these their neighbours were the "new subjects," some 65,000–75,000 Canadians, the name then and for several generations later applying only to the ancient settlers, the French-speaking inhabitants of the former colony of New France.

This was the first contact, as fellow-citizens or fellow-subjects, of the French and English, who for a century and a half had been neighbors, and often bitter foes, in eastern North America. There were of course misunderstandings and tensions which were very obvious and which were given sufficient prominence at the time to make it natural for historians to adopt a simple French-English pattern as the theme of Canadian history from 1760 onward.

Canadians, so goes the story, first met the conquering army from Britain and found it surprisingly humane, benevolent, and tolerant of all their ways—their language, their laws and their religion. The later introduction of civil government in 1764, though vexatious in some ways, left them still with the humane soldier—Governor Murray. Meanwhile, however, they witnessed an influx of English and American merchants, who (no doubt unthinkingly) treated Quebec as an English province and demanded that Murray establish English law courts, summon an elected assembly, presumably English-speaking and Protestant, and recognize more fully the place of the Church of England as the established Church. Murray, generous defender of Canadian claims, resisted and with his officials headed what came to be called the "French party" to oppose these English demands.

According to this version of history Murray's successor, Guy Carleton, continued to support and indeed to invigorate the French party, and secured that key piece of legislation the Quebec Act of
1774 as a "French Canadian charter." The Quebec Act was indeed a remarkably tolerant piece of legislation in its concessions to a conquered people: it recognized Canadian civil law; it recognized the generous concessions already made in practice to the Roman Catholic worship and discipline; it instituted a special oath of office which would give Roman Catholics the civil equality not to be enjoyed by their co-religionists in England or Ireland until 1829; and it conceded that an assembly would be for the present "inexpedient." A concession to English merchants was the redrawing of the boundary of this formerly restricted province to include the enormous area of the Ohio country and the area surrounding the Great Lakes as far as the height of land which divided them from the Hudson Bay. The colonies to the south were outraged by the Act, and particularly by this provision, but that is another story. The English and Americans in Quebec protested at the provisions as an infringement of the rights promised them in the Proclamation of 1763 and, in practice, as injurious to commerce in its substitution of Canadian for English civil law.

For the next fifteen years the English demanded modifications, particularly the granting of an elected assembly and of at least some English commercial law. The "French Party" resisted successfully for about ten years, until the end of the American Revolutionary War and the arrival in the province of thousands of displaced loyalists made it essential to consider some changes. As a result, after due consideration, the province, already greatly reduced by the concession of the Ohio country to the new United States of America, was divided, each part receiving an assembly. Surprisingly, the Canadians, who had supposedly been rejecting everything English in favour of their traditional institutions, took to the English ways as ducks to water and were soon dominating the assembly of the new province of Lower Canada, to the confusion of English merchants and English governors.

It has long been recognized that this French-English pattern, with English officials sponsoring the helpless French majority against the assimilating energies of the English, does not completely fit the facts. It was based on the official correspondence and legal documents most readily available to historians and these suited the nineteenth-century political national approach well enough. Even this interpretation, however, does not offer much suggestion of racial nationalism. There was, indeed, no tradition of race in New France as such. The Indians were referred to as "sauvages" but "sauvages" is a gentle enough word, and it was hoped that they would be converted to Christianity. The English were "heretics," but English children captured in Indian raids were rescued by the French, treated well, and converted in many instances. Racism appears, as one would expect, in relation to slaves. It is indeed something of a shock to find a Canadian merchant, charitable, kind, affectionate, and upright, bemoaning the love affairs carried on by his Negro servant in the attic, and regretting that the law forbade the surgical operation which was to him the only obvious remedy; or trying to sell his little panise—too attractive for the peace of mind of the Negro—to some trader of the West Indies. "Anybody would be glad to have her as she is so pretty." There were, however, only a few thousand slaves in the whole history of New France. A recent historian sets the French-English pattern aside altogether. This perhaps goes too far, but it is important to bear in mind that New France and its successor the old province of Quebec was an eighteenth-century colony, an integral part of a Western civilization not yet subjected to the violent national and racial patterns of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

What struck the soldier-governors, apart from the fact that the Canadians were a likeable people needing protection from the representatives of a conquering nation, was that this was a society ordered and decent, apt to fight but willing to obey, delightfully unlike the turbulent American colonies, who generally would neither fight nor obey. These saw in New France a kind of Roman colony, a placid but potent mass of habitants ranged in orderly obedience under priests and seigneurs. And one of them, Guy Carleton, who partly planned and chiefly implemented the Quebec Act, seems to have decided that this was a better kind of colony than Britain had ever devised. It was not merely that Carleton was willing and anxious to protect conquered Canadians against English bullying; he was moved at least equally by an admiration for the kind of government and society that he thought he saw in Quebec, and he wanted to preserve and maintain it as good for Canadians, good for English, and good for the British empire in North America.
Unfortunately for Carleton's conclusions, he and the historians who have concentrated on his early dispatches overlooked a very important group of people. Canadians were not confined to priests, seigneurs, and habitants. There was a small but very significant class of Canadian townsman: merchants, traders, and a few professionals. They were not powerful economically. Within a few years, for example, although their numbers were fewer, the English had decidedly the larger investment in the fur trade, a development to be expected since the richer Canadian merchants, indeed all Canadians who could afford it, had returned to France.\(^2\)

The Canadians who remained, however, were culturally and politically significant. They were not merely literate; they had positive intellectual tastes and political interests. When the Loyalists arrived in the country after the American Revolution, they spoke much of the illiteracy of the Canadians in contrast to the English, who maintained the Protestant tradition of literacy as a religious and moral duty. Yet the increasingly numerous Canadian merchants and professional men who could read generally made a serious business of it. In the 1770's one young merchant, ambitious and very busy, wrote to France to order the works of Voltaire, Rousseau, "and other good writers"; another accepted with gratitude a French edition of Blackstone from the English Lieutenant-Governor; a third, apparently after very little formal schooling, in letters written throughout his long life made frequent references to more or less serious reading and showed it of it in his reflections and also in his increasingly mature and effective style of writing.\(^3\)

Some of these Canadian townsman owned seigneuries, or intermarried with seigneurial families. They might share in some measure the seigneurial outlook, and they did not necessarily like or trust the English entirely. When certain of the English merchants in 1764 had launched a rather bitter attack on Murray and his policy through a Grand Jury presentment, a Canadian merchant, alarmed at an apparent hostility to Roman Catholic rights and the Canadian law, wrote, "If we are not careful they will destroy our nation." At the same time, while joining in petitions for concessions to Canadians, these men were very far from supporting the seigneurial demands for a "national charter," "sacred and in-

violable," which should forever preserve the mummified structure of New France.\(^4\)

As early as 1765 a Canadian writer to the Quebec Gazette asked to be instructed in the true nature of the English liberties and rights of which he had heard so much and which as a British subject he now hoped to enjoy. Although there is a faint suggestion that this particular letter may have been written with tongue in cheek, it may have been genuine; and there is no doubt that the Gazette, a bilingual publication, offered a steady diet of articles on English rights and liberties to its Canadian readers.\(^5\) Moreover, in Montreal in 1766 there was a serious protest of Canadian and English merchants against an informal "assembly" that had gathered there to discuss Canadian problems; the merchants protested that it was composed of seigneurs only, and yet professed to speak for "the nation." On this occasion the merchants, Canadians and English, demonstrated together and tried to gain access to the meeting. When this was forbidden, forty-one of them, fifteen English and twenty-six Canadians, literally registered, in notarial instruments, two protests, one English and the other French, asserting the bad effect of a so-called representative meeting which did not include both Canadians and English, merchants and seigneurs.\(^6\)

It was not the Canadian merchants alone, however, but a legal pundit (who was also a small seigneur) who, when the Quebec Act was under consideration, organized some of his fellow seigneurs and some Canadian merchants to prepare a petition for an assembly which would secure to them, as they said, the rights of British subjects and enable them to protect their own laws and customs to an extent that under an appointed council they might not be able to do. The leading seigneurs, however, held aloof, and the English merchants, also asking for an assembly, refused to be as explicit as the Canadians felt it necessary to be in dictating the form of it. Therefore, in spite of interest at both Quebec and Montreal, and of efforts at co-operation, Canadians and English failed to agree, and the formal Canadian petitions which were presented made no mention of an assembly.\(^7\)

As a result the Quebec Act in 1774, representing ostensibly the desires of the Canadians, decreed as has been said that an assembly at the moment was inexpedient. This is not surprising and need
not be attributed to current trouble with assemblies along the Atlantic coast, although the authorities were not unaware of these troubles. It would have been difficult, even had the neighbouring colonies been at perfect peace, to turn the colony over to a representative assembly composed chiefly of Canadians, yet an assembly which did not do so would, of course, have been a mockery of Parliament comparable to the one in Ireland: and the English probably thought that one Ireland was enough.

It seems quite certain, however, that in 1774 the Canadians were not united in the rejection of an assembly, and there is good evidence that some at least among the Canadian merchants were dismayed at a government which, professing to meet the wishes of Canadians, gave control to a partnership of the official “French” party and the leading seigneurs. Chief Justice Hey, who had been on leave in England, arrived in the province just after the Act came into force in May, 1775. He wrote a number of letters home during the summer and fall, giving his impression of the Canadian reception of the Act. He noted that, contrary to Governor Carleton’s expectations, the Canadians had not, in their gratitude, taken up arms to repulse the invading Americans. As he said, in complete astonishment, he must attribute the fact partly to pure ignorance preyed on by “malignant minds”—no doubt American ones. In addition, he saw clearly, and apparently for the first time, that the seigneurs as a class were neither liked nor trusted by the habitants. He reported that the Canadians had noted that Canadian members of the newly appointed council were all seigneurs, that these men were boasting foolishly and without cause of the great power now restored to them, and that they “have carried themselves in a manner very offensive both to their own people and to the English.”

Fortunately there is also evidence on this matter from Canadians. The strongest comment comes from a Canadian merchant in Quebec, the same one who employed his winter leisure in reading Voltaire, Rousseau, and other good works. He wrote to his business correspondent in Montreal that, largely owing to the activities of the “monsters”—presumably the seigneurs—in Montreal, Canadians would be sorry that they had asked for a change in government; to which his Montreal friend agreed, congratulating him on being a bachelor and free to leave the country if he chose. Another merchant remarked that Canadians might soon find that they had changed “King Log” for “King Stork.”

The conclusion must be, I think, that even before the American Revolution, Canadians, although aware of dangers to their language, customs, and religion, were almost, if not quite, as much interested in a social-economic resistance to their own seigneurs as in a cultural-national resistance to the English. Some indeed were beginning to see that the English had very good ideas about liberty and self-government which, with English help, might well be turned to French-Canadian advantage.

The American war, breaking out in 1775 immediately after the coming into force of the Quebec Act, put an end to effective political agitation for the time, but the diligent distribution of American propaganda undoubtedly enlarged Canadian ideas of English liberty, even though Canadians gave no very material assistance to the American invaders. Immediately after the war there is fragmentary but important evidence of political activity splitting the whole Canadian community and allying one section of it more or less with the English against the Governor’s “French party.” A small but significant incident occurred when the council was debating a piece of legislation long sought by the English but resisted by the official French party: a precise definition of the right of habeas corpus. The French party, in a delaying action, insisted that there must be a clause exempting religious communities from this dangerous privilege. Thereupon from the nuns of the Ursuline convent, cloistered but obviously well briefed on political events, came a message deploiring the inclusion of any such unwanted exception. And the Bishop, when applied to, supported the nuns. Meanwhile six English and five Canadian merchants had been jointly but vainly petitioning for admission to the council chambers, that they might hear the debates on this important matter.

Even while this debate was going on in the council, a group of Canadian merchants, privately supported by leaders of the Church but not by the seigneurs, were sending a deputation to England to ask for permission to invite French priests to Quebec to fill the many vacancies in seminaries and parishes. Britain was naturally hostile
RACISM IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

to any such idea, being convinced that the French priest would always be also a political emissary. What is interesting is the supporting argument offered by the deputation, almost certainly inspired by American teaching and example, and surely not approved by the Canadian clerics, that religious freedom, "a natural right" promised them at the time of the Conquest, must necessarily include the right to choose their own priests.11

The failure in this primary demand led directly to another, a renewed petition for an assembly; "our only hope," said one of the disappointed delegates in London, "is in this change."12 By the fall of 1784, English and Canadian committees were hard at work together on renewed petitions which were presented to the Lieutenant-Governor for transmission to Britain early in 1785. These were followed by counter-petitions against any such measures, which had been diligently circulated by the seigneurial party. Their opponents accused the seigneurs of having claimed as one of their manorial rights the privilege of transcribing to these counter-petitions the names of a number of their reluctant censitaires.13

The Canadian petitions for an assembly did secure a formidable number of signatures, but their seigneurial opponents presented almost twice as many against the measure. Hugh Finlay, the provincial postmaster who knew the province well, believed that the majority of literate English and literate Canadians wanted an assembly; the habitants he thought were too ignorant to think much of anything except escaping taxes.14

Government by assembly was granted in 1791. The province was divided into Lower Canada, which included Quebec, Montreal, and the old established seignuries, and Upper Canada, composed of the new settlements of the Loyalists. The concession is generally attributed to Loyalist demands and to the penury of Great Britain, bent on local representative institutions because only through them could she now legitimately tax her colonies. During the five or six years preceding this grant, however, the political situation in the colony was involved, and was very far from conforming to an English-French pattern. Canadians were all somewhat resentful of the Loyalist assumption of moral and intellectual superiority, and of their often unconcealed contempt for the Canadian way of life,15 but the division between Canadian merchants and seigneurs had not been healed by this apparent English threat. On the contrary, fed by all sorts of propaganda from revolutionary France, Canadians were writing to the radical Montreal Gazette, pouring contempt on the idle and ignorant seigneurs and even on their priests.16 Now at last the national theme was beginning to emerge, but less as an attack on the English than as an assertion of the claim of the radical merchant and professional group that they, and not the seigneurs, truly represented le corps de la nation. Political and, still more, racial nationalism in Canada attained self-awareness not through the English Conquest, but through the liberal and radical ideas disseminated first by the American and later by the French revolutionaries. These ideas, rejected by the seigneurs as damaging to their social pretensions and economic hopes, were eagerly received by the bourgeoisie and even by some of the clergy.17

Meanwhile national distinctions were being reinforced by economic and social factors. The Treaty of Paris (1783) surrendered to the United States the area of the Ohio country, hitherto the preserve of the Quebec fur merchants, both Canadian and English. Henceforth the fur trade became, far more than it had been, a big business requiring extensive partnerships which could command large sums of risk capital. Such enterprises were alien to Canadians, who were generally devoted to the small, secure family business. As a result, the closing years of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century saw great prosperity for Quebec, but for English Quebec alone, since the English now controlled not only the fur trade but also the rapidly growing commerce in timber and wheat. Canadians tended to move into the retail trade, into the professions, and especially into politics. Far from rejecting the assembly, said by the "French party" to be alien to their customs, they swarmed in, took possession, and dominated it with considerable skill and determination, eagerly claiming full parliamentary privileges from the English Governor and from the now predominantly English council. At first linked with some English radicals, they spoke as before in the name of liberty; but, as the eighteenth century moved into the nineteenth and as greater prosperity and closer communications brought them nearer to the in-
Intellectual currents of Europe, they began, by a very easy and natural transition, to speak more and more in the name of the Canadian nation.

It was not accurate, then, to see Canadian nationalism as emerging immediately after the Conquest in a homogeneous Canadian society. Canadians in the eighteenth century, like other peoples, were more excited by the new political ideas of liberty and equality than they were by the romantic ideas of nationalism. They were stirred by revolutionary thought before, during, and after the American Revolution. They were greatly stimulated by the French Revolution and by the experience of the English institutions which were given them at the very moment that similar institutions were being introduced into France. By the early nineteenth century a chiefly bourgeois group, which a decade or so before had associated political liberty with the right to import priests from France, was beginning to be touched with anticlericalism and was launching into a true racial-nationalist campaign against the Church, which had heretofore been benevolent, though naturally standing somewhat aside.

The generation after the Conquest has, I believe, been misread. What happened was not a solid confrontation, French against English, with the French “chartered” by the Quebec Act, but a social-political conflict in which the dynamic Canadians joined the English in protesting against the Quebec Act, not because they were not potentially nationalist but because to them the Quebec Act was an instrument of class domination which denied them the one valuable fruit of the English Conquest, political liberty. It was their cooperation in seeking the assembly and in learning to use it for their-political purposes, and their increasing awareness of current European thought that led them on to a sense of community and to a possible national fulfillment.

NOTES
1. Public Archives of Canada, Baby Collection, Letters, pp. 2812, 2833, 2860, 2952. (Hereafter cited as PAC Baby Letters.)
2. PAC, CO 42, Vol. XXVII, p. 140, (microfilm of original in Public Records Office); Quebec, Internal Correspondence (S. series) IX, 34;
The Idea of Racial Degeneracy in Buffon's Histoire Naturelle*

Phillip R. Sloan

I

In the history of eighteenth-century racial speculation, Buffon's Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière occupies a position of paradoxical ambiguity. Supplying the Enlightenment with the first fully articulated analysis of man as a natural and primarily zoological phenomenon, a world-wide species whose "natural history" was to be studied in the same terms and categories as that of any other species of animal,¹ Buffon offered a model of a naturalistic and empirical science of man which would leave its deep imprint on scientific anthropology of the succeeding two centuries.²

In insisting, as an integral part of this empirical science, that theory be grounded on concrete empirical evidence, Buffon departed from the previous, largely speculative, approach to the question of racial origin and diversity. Against the polygenetic theory deriving from the writings of Paracelsus, Giordano Bruno, and Isaac de la Peyrère, which had provided the backbone of much of the speculation on the origin of the races in the early Enlightenment,³ Buffon unequivocally asserts that an empirical test, fertile interbreeding, is to stand as the sole criterion of specific identity, taking precedence over all distinctions made on the basis of mor-

* Revised from a paper delivered at the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, annual meeting, March 24, 1972. The author wishes to acknowledge partial support for this research from the University of Washington Graduate School Research Fund, 11-1984. The author also wishes to express his appreciation to Dr. Paul L. Farber for useful comments on an earlier version of the paper.