

Britain's Conquest of Quebec: 250 years later

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Colonization. Conquest. Words that even today evoke widely varying historical memories.

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Just last year Quebec City staged an elaborate round of events to celebrate the 400th anniversary of its founding as the colonial capital of New France.

No expense was spared as federal and provincial governments alike poured money into the city's coffers. Capping the ceremonies were massively attended concerts by Québécoise singer Céline Dion and former Beatle Paul McCartney — apparently deemed emblematic descendants of the French and British “founding peoples” of present-day Canada. It seemed to be one great love-in of all those involved.

(Lost in all the self-congratulatory rhetoric, of course, was any recognition that the city's site had in fact been occupied by its Indigenous inhabitants for many centuries prior to the arrival of the Europeans.)

This year was the occasion for another anniversary. On September 13, 1759 — exactly 250 years ago — in a 20-minute battle on the same city's Plains of Abraham, the invading British defeated a French army, effectively putting an end to the French empire in North America. But plans to mark this anniversary, from the outset, sparked an acrimonious debate among politicians and the media. The dispute expressed the deep divide between those who are basically satisfied with Quebec's place in Canada and those who aren't. And to some degree it reflected the widespread recognition among the Québécois that the Conquest was the seminal event at the origin of their inequality of status as a people within Canada.

It all began in January, when the National Battlefields Commission, a federal government agency that administers the remains of the French fortress on the Plains of Abraham, announced plans to stage a re-enactment of the famous battle. Following a huge outcry of opposition, this was dropped. It seemed that many Québécois did not want to be reminded of an event that sealed their fate as an oppressed minority in the post-Conquest colony.

Then a coalition of Québécois nationalists announced that they would stage a different kind of re-enactment: a series of events to “Reclaim the Plains”, culminating in “Le Moulin à Paroles” (literally the word-mill, or chatterbox), a public reading on the weekend of September 12-13 of some 140 works by various protagonists in Quebec's troubled history from the time of the Conquest to the pro-Quebec sovereignty movement of today.

It would feature, for example, statements by Louis-Joseph Papineau, a leader of the 1837 Rebellion, and by Louis Riel, the martyred leader of the Northwest Rebellion of Métis and Indigenous peoples

in the 1880s, as well as excerpts from the infamous 1840 report of Lord Durham proposing that British policy promote the assimilation of the French-speaking population of Canada, and from a letter by British General James Wolfe, commander of the victorious army in 1759, written a few months before the battle. "It would give me pleasure to see the Canadian vermin sacked and pillaged" wrote Wolfe. And indeed, that is precisely what the British troops did in towns and villages along the St. Lawrence as they pursued their offensive.

But what most drew the ire of the big-business media and politicians in both Quebec and English Canada was the organizers' plan to read from the "Manifesto" of the Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ), issued during the October Crisis of 1970. Recited on the federal government's CBC/Radio Canada as a condition for the release of a British trade commissioner in Montréal kidnapped by an FLQ "cell", the Manifesto's popularly worded message had, to the authorities' surprise at the time, struck a sympathetic note with many Québécois who nevertheless did not support the FLQ:

"Workers in industry, in mines and in the forests! Workers in the service industries, teachers, students and unemployed! Take what belongs to you, your jobs, your determination and your freedom. And you, the workers at General Electric, you make your factories run; you are the only ones able to produce; without you, General Electric is nothing!"

Workers of Quebec, begin from this day forward to take back what is yours; take yourselves what belongs to you. Only you know your factories, your machines, your hotels, your universities, your unions; do not wait for some organization to produce a miracle."

"Make your revolution yourselves in your neighbourhoods, in your places of work. If you don't do it yourselves, other usurpers, technocrats or someone else, will replace the handful of cigar-smokers we know today and everything will have to be done all over again. Only you are capable of building a free society."

We must struggle not individually but together, till victory is obtained, with every means at our disposal, like the Patriots of 1837-1838 (those whom Our Holy Mother Church hastened to excommunicate, the better to sell out to British interests)." [1]

The "savage, sneering, race-supremacist... self-justification of a gang of terrorist murderers", sniffed the editors of the Toronto daily National Post, overlooking the violence and terrorism of a Wolfe or a Durham. Quebec Premier Jean Charest spoke for many federalist politicians: "We are not going to be associated with an event that trivializes the FLQ, terrorism and violence." No government funding for this event!

(Only last fall, by the way, the federal government's National Arts Centre in Ottawa had performed in French a show entitled Manifeste!, featuring readings from such historical documents as the Communist Manifesto, the Dada Manifesto, Quebec's Refus Global (1948) and ... the FLQ Manifesto! Apparently, time and place play some role in official responses to these things.)

Why the French lost

Besides the political flap over Le Moulin à Paroles, however, the 250th anniversary of the Conquest elicited a few attempts in more serious media to recount and explain the events that led to the defeat of the French regime in North America. For example, the Montréal daily newspaper Le Devoir, relatively sympathetic to Quebec nationalism and the sovereignty movement, ran a series of articles over the last month interviewing contemporary historians on their explanations of the British victory.

They pointed to a number of factors: the small size of Quebec's population in 1759 (60,000 inhabitants, compared with 1.5 million in the 13 English colonies to the south); the dispersion of the French over a vast territory, largely inhabited by the Indigenous peoples, and their decreasing ability to withstand the English colonies' pressure to expand west of the Ohio; France's setbacks in Europe in the Seven Years' War with Britain beginning in 1756, and its inability to supply its North American colony with the supplies and troops needed to defeat the British offense. Key to this, it was commonly noted, was the British navy's supremacy on the seas, a major impediment to French communication with its colonies. The military importance of the navy was like that of the air force today. Whoever controlled the seas would control America. [2]

Although the French, allied with some Indigenous peoples, won a few battles in the early stages of the war, by 1759 their situation was worsened. The battle of the Plains of Abraham was preceded by 63 days of bombardment of Québec by the British fleet assembled off the nearby Isle d'Orléans. The town lacked munitions and food; many people were ill. The September 13 defeat on the Plains was not the final skirmish — the French forces actually won a few more battles before the Empire's defeat was confirmed in the 1763 treaties. But it destroyed the morale of the colony's inhabitants, who were already becoming alienated from a royalist autocracy that was more interested in quick profits from the fur trade than it was in fostering and maintaining enduring settlements in the colony.

France's defeat signalled the end of its empire. The treaties ending the Seven Years' War, signed in 1763, left it with only a few colonies in the Western Hemisphere: Haiti, Martinique, Guadeloupe, St. Lucia and, offshore of Newfoundland, St-Pierre and Miquelon. The latter assured France's access to the fisheries of the Grand Banks — and gave it a pretext to revive its naval fleet, which later assisted the 13 British colonies in their war of independence. In fact, the Conquest helped open the door to the American Revolution, by removing a French colony to the north and west as a potential menace to American settlers' sovereigntist and expansionist tendencies.

Not least important, the Conquest was a catastrophe for the aboriginal inhabitants of America. As historian Denis Vaugeois notes, it ended an important system of alliances with Indigenous peoples that allowed the French to control an immense territory. The defeat of a revolt headed by the Outaouais chief Pontiac, who refused to ally with the British, marked the ultimate collapse of the Indigenous peoples' capacity to resist successfully the expansion of the Anglo-American colonists, U.S. historian Fred Anderson told *Le Devoir*.

Social and political implications of the Conquest

However, the recent media accounts — some of which focused on the thesis that France had "abandoned" its Canadian colonists out of disinterest — largely overlook the underlying explanation for the French defeat in these battles among the colonial empires, "the very first world war". To understand what was involved, an inquisitive reader is well advised to begin his or her investigations with the work of the Marxist historian Stanley B. Ryerson. His book *French Canada*, first published in 1943 (a later, French version, *Le Canada français*, was published in 1945), still stands as a seminal analysis of the roots of Québécois inequality and oppression within the emerging Canadian social formation. [3]

Ryerson attributes France's defeat in the Seven Years War to the relative backwardness of its class relationships, mode of production and political regime:

"That France in the long run was to meet defeat, was due primarily to the fact that her rival enjoyed a major advantage: the English bourgeoisie in the Great Rebellion of 1642-48 had broken the back of

feudal-aristocratic obstruction, whereas the French bourgeoisie was to establish its Republic and sweep aside the feudal fetters on economic progress only in 1789-93 — thirty years after the loss of New France.” [4]

This had important implications for the post-Conquest colony. The new English rulers, initially a small minority, consciously enlisted the support and collaboration of some of the most retrograde elements of the old regime in their administration. At the same time, they maintained the semifeudal property relations of New France, leaving the habitant settlers largely restricted to small scale subsistence agriculture, while superimposing English hegemony on the commercial and industrial development of what was to become Lower Canada.

Through such legislation as the Quebec Act, 1774, they suspended the operation of the English Test Act, thus allowing Roman Catholics to hold public office, and maintained the special status of the Catholic church and clergy, including their control of schools. These measures laid the basis for the formation of a Francophone petty-bourgeois and religious elite that would collaborate with the new colonial rulers in maintaining political and ideological control over the population. Also, French civil and property law was preserved; and — most important — the system of seigniorial landholding, temporarily abolished in 1763, was restored together with the restitution of tithes and other feudal burdens on the French-Canadian habitant peasantry.

These semifeudal property relationships were to remain in effect for many decades following the Conquest, and lingered to some degree, despite their legislative “abolition”, to well into the 20th century, through the conversion of feudal-like obligations into a system of debt peonage. And they served to hold back the technological development of agriculture and retarded the development of capitalism in French Canada and among French Canadians.

Industrial capitalism was slow to develop in Quebec, and when it did it tended to be dominated by the English. And this, too, was a result of the Conquest, Ryerson explains:

"The political fact of the British Conquest was at once the resultant and the initiator of economic developments. As we have seen, the superior economic strength of merchant-imperial Britain and her American colonies triumphed over absolutist France and her settlement on the St. Lawrence. From the time of the Conquest, the colonial economy of the Canadas was to become integrated with the most advanced industrial capitalism then in existence — that of England. Not only did English merchants take over from the French the main sources of capital-accumulation—the fur-trade and the land-monopoly; but, enjoying in addition the advantages of business connections with English capital, they were to thrive on the investment of large portions of that capital in the timber-trade, canals and railways of the colony.

Thus from the very start, while the mass of the French-Canadians remained tied to the primitive agrarian economy of the seigneuries, the English community was able to press forward on the path of trade and industry." [5]

Thus the conversion of the French colonizing population into a colonized subject people resulted in a new national question that in various transformations and permutations has persisted to this day.

More recent history, of course, has seen many important changes in Quebec. Ryerson himself was noting, in 1945, how the development of large-scale industry in the early 20th century, taking advantage of abundant cheap labour and natural resources, was creating a large Québécois proletariat. Since the Second World War, and particularly since the early 1960s, Quebec has transformed its society by secularization, the development of a welfare state, the modernization of education, and a new assertive approach to French-language rights, etc. By 1970 quite a few

Québécois were prepared to listen sympathetically to the FLQ's denunciations of the bosses.

Politically, however, the Canadian state structures have failed to keep pace with the social and political reality of the new Quebec, nor has English Canada developed the necessary inclination to accommodate Quebec's ongoing concerns over the maintenance and survival of its character as a French-speaking nation. The debate over how or whether to mark the British Conquest reflects this unresolved issue. The Conquest as an historical event, and its impact on Quebec's subsequent evolution and status, still leave few indifferent.

An editorial in the September 12 edition of the conservative nationalist *Le Devoir* underscored the ambiguity of many in Quebec today about their relationship to Canada. Entitled, in translation, "The battle of the Plains of Abraham – A duty of memory", it noted that the small French community on the banks of the St. Lawrence had managed to survive and thrive in part thanks to "a series of accommodations" made initially by the British (as noted above). But the "battles of national affirmation" since then, it said, were too many to count, ranging from struggles for French schools, postage stamps and bilingual currency to the exercise of provincial autonomy and recognition of the distinct character of Quebec society. "And there still remains a reluctance within the other founding people to accept the existence of a 'difference'."

Quebec, the newspaper continued, seemed unable to resolve its conundrum. Those who sought to reform Canadian federalism had failed in the Meech Lake Accord, while the sovereigntists had narrowly lost the 1995 referendum. Neither course now seemed to offer a way out.

"The maturity acquired by Quebec over these 250 years enables it to take refuge in itself. Its steadfast vote for the Bloc Québécois in federal elections for 16 years is nothing but a manifestation of passive resistance, serving to affirm its distinctiveness. That is a situation that cannot endure forever, however. The 250 years since this September 13, 1759 tell us that resignation, especially, is not an option. We must either resume the dialogue to find new accommodations that will give some sense to the recognition of Quebec as a nation, or we will have to conclude that Quebec must walk by itself."

Richard Fidler

Postscriptum

The alternative commemoration of the Conquest, *Le Moulin à Paroles*, was held throughout the weekend of September 12-13. It was a great success. The audience, at times more than 1,000 persons, descended on the Plains of Abraham armed with folding chairs, blankets and even hammocks, and listened attentively to a broad range of readings and songs that are important parts of Quebec's historical and literary heritage. The texts, authors and readers — the latter including prominent artists, politicians, Indigenous leaders, trade-union activists, and singers — are listed on the event's web site, at <http://tinyurl.com/q92jt23>. The site also includes media accounts, photos, videos and a reproduction of the entire event as broadcast live on the TVA television network.

For readings by Québec solidaire activists, see <http://tinyurl.com/n3hdsr4>.

P.S.

* From Life on the Left blog:

Footnotes

[1] The full text in English is at <http://english.republiquelibre.org/Manifesto-flq.html>6.

[2] One of the best recent sources in English on the war for colonial supremacy between Britain and France is by Jonathan R Dull, *The French Navy and the Seven Years' War* (2005, University of Nebraska Press), much of which is available online at <http://tinyurl.com/r5sgnk7>.

[3] The book has recently been made available on-line by Progress Publishers: <http://tinyurl.com/q95spq8>. The book suffers in places from attempts to square its generally sympathetic treatment of the Quebec national question with the Labour Progressive [Communist] Party's support in the 1940s of "total war", which put the party at odds with the prevailing antiwar and anti-conscription sentiment in Quebec. In his 1980 preface to the 3rd edition, Ryerson acknowledges his embarrassment over some of its more extreme attacks on Québécois nationalists, attributing this to "sectarian oversimplification" although he does not link this to its Stalinist inspiration. He is also critical of the book's sanguine interpretation of the terms of the 1867 Confederation as they affected Quebec, a weakness he corrected to some degree in a subsequent book, *Unequal Union* (1968).

[4] *French Canada*, p. 113.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 133.