

Monuments To Empire: Atlantic Forts and Fortifications

Terry Crowley

Volume 10, Number 2, Spring 1981

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad10_2rv05

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Crowley, T. (1981). Monuments To Empire: : atlantic Forts and Fortifications. *Acadiensis*, 10(2), 167–172.

achievements was tinged with concern that energies were flagging. Gone was the optimism which characterized Haliburton's *Account*, Abraham Gesner's surveys, and Joseph Howe's speeches. While the late nineteenth-century histories written in Ontario and Western Canada dwelt on the possibilities of new frontiers, the histories of Nova Scotia, although not pessimistic, exhibit a growing apprehension that the province was losing momentum. The accuracy and objectivity of Nova Scotia's county histories may now be questioned, but not the honesty with which they unselfconsciously expressed the mood of a generation.

When Sir A.G. Archibald expressed the wish that the Akins Historical Prize essays should "embalm and preserve" the history of Nova Scotia, he meant it as an admonition, not a final benediction.¹⁹ After almost a century, there are good reasons for the modern historian to undertake an exhumation. The republication programme of which Nova Scotia's county histories are a part should help remind us of the considerable body of nineteenth-century non-fiction Canadian prose that remains unexamined. The Mika reprints are expensive, but well and advantageously produced in facsimile. It is to be hoped that they will make their way into many public, and not a few private, libraries.

M. BROOK TAYLOR

19 Sir Adams Archibald, "Inaugural Address", Nova Scotia Historical Society, *Collections* I (1878), p. 32.

Monuments To Empire: Atlantic Forts and Fortifications

Forts and fortifications are a visible legacy of the economic and strategic value Europeans once attached to Atlantic Canada. In securing their footholds on the seaboard in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, France and England tended to replicate their military experience in Europe. The French, although not without a considerable navy, put greater trust in permanent land defences as seen first at Placentia in Newfoundland and later more fully at Louisbourg. Initially Britain balked at the cost of such construction and emphasized its naval power as a more flexible instrument of military strategy. Yet in response first to the French, and later to the Americans, the British came to fortify their seaboard defences more solidly. The first serious attempt to improve the defences of St. John's occurred after Placentia's fortifications had been strengthened and Iberville had devastated the English settlement in 1696. Halifax was established as a counterpoise to Louisbourg, but its defences remained rudimentary constructs of wood and earth until the war with revolutionary France in the 1790s led the local commander to build redoubts and towers in masonry. After the War of 1812 Britain met the growing challenge

from the United States by new policies that highlighted the importance of communications lines and entailed the construction of new fortifications at Halifax, Quebec City and Kingston.

As many maritime military installations are today historic sites invaded each year by hordes of tourists, their history is of popular as well as scholarly interest. Few professional historians have attempted to bridge the gap between the two as Donald Creighton did in his later years when he used Canada's national historic parks and sites as the leitmotif for a curious survey of the country's history.¹ The *Fortress of Louisbourg* by John Fortier and Owen Fitzgerald (Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1979) has neither Creighton's sure grasp nor strong narrative. It is a slim but attractive coffee-table book with beautiful photographs handsomely printed in Hong Kong, but Fortier's limited introduction is seriously flawed by such incredulous statements as: "Compared with the rest of the New World, Louisbourg was urbane and sophisticated" (p.4). Parks Canada chose not to follow this appeal to the tourist market but to produce books for the educated and scholarly reader in the two series of publications it began early in the 1970s. The series "History and Archaeology" consists of research reports while "Canadian Historic Sites Occasional Papers in Archaeology and History" is more appealingly printed on expensive paper. Both contain a lavish number of illustrations and appendices but unfortunately the details on most contemporary maps and plans cannot be discerned by the naked eye. In neither series is the standard of editing particularly high, but it is markedly lower in "History and Archaeology".

Two studies of Placentia by Jean-Pierre Proulx, *The Military History of Placentia: A Study of the French Fortifications* and *Placentia: 1713-1811* (History and Archaeology 26, Ottawa, 1979) are very different. In the first Proulx places his chronological account of the development of Placentia's fortifications within the broader context of that settlement, but seldom does he pose larger questions or relate his subject to other areas. The second study is a brief general survey of Placentia that clarifies the port's rise under the British as Newfoundland's principal military base and fishing settlement that rivalled St. John's by the late 1740s, but which declined dramatically after the Seven Years' War. Proulx erroneously downplays both Placentia's importance as a central place in the French fishing industry and the necessity of its fortifications.² Placentia may not have been any more economically or militarily self-sufficient than was St. John's or Louisbourg, but it was vital to French communications and fishing. Nor were its elemental fortifications merely a hindrance; they were essential to the defence of the port from English marauders and naval vessels. Naval assaults were repulsed in 1692 and 1693 after the port's defences had been

1 Donald Creighton, *Canada: The Heroic Beginnings* (Toronto, 1974).

2 See C. Grant Head, *Eighteenth Century Newfoundland, A Geographer's Perspective* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1976), pp. 156-9.

improved, and Placentia served as the base for the successful raids across country on the more poorly defended port of St. John's in 1696 and 1704. Because Proulx fails to place his study within the context of French diplomatic and economic history, he makes some incorrect deductions about the place of Placentia within the French colonial system.

Louisbourg was the replacement for Placentia rather than for Acadia. The fortress was intended to protect the French fishery and trade, vital imperial economic interests as Fred Thorpe demonstrates at the beginning of his mature and refined book, *Remparts Lointains, La politique française des travaux publics à Terre-Neuve et à l'île Royale 1695-1758* (Ottawa, Editions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1980). Thorpe justifiably discusses public construction in Newfoundland as well as Cape Breton because both places served to safeguard the same economic activities and imperial concerns. This study does not detail the construction itself but attempts to answer the questions of why such defences were undertaken, the manner in which construction was organized, how much was spent and the administrative procedures created to control expenditures, the labour force employed, and the nature and source of building materials. Although Thorpe ventures into an area never before examined so extensively, he writes on the defensive about the French effort at Louisbourg and skirts major historiographical questions. When he says that "personne n'a pu démontrer que la forteresse de Louisbourg et ses dépendances avaient été construites moins économiquement que tous les autres bâtiments publics du continent" (pp. 49-50), he suggests statements that are never substantiated and comparisons that neither he nor anyone else has ever made. As he arrives at the question of administrative morality, he avoids the Boshier thesis about the confusion of public and personal interests during the Ancien Régime and is content with vague conclusions and a detailed discussion of the diligence with which the disorganized accounts of one official were investigated.³ Facing issues squarely would have made this work more interesting, just as unblurred plans and illustrations would have made it more attractive.

Of all Atlantic military installations, Louisbourg has of late attracted the greatest attention. Two works deal with the familiar topic of the successful Anglo-American capture of the fortress in 1745. Raymond Baker's *A Campaign of Amateurs: The Siege of Louisbourg, 1745* ("Occasional Papers" 18, Ottawa, 1978) adds nothing to George Rawlyk's work of a decade ago, and it curiously lacks any reference to that more significant study.⁴ Julian Gwyn and Christopher Moore have carefully edited an integral French source, *La chute de Louisbourg. Le journal du 1er siège de Louisbourg du 25 mars au 17 juillet 1745*

3 J.F. Boshier, "Government and Private interests in New France", *Canadian Public Administration*, 10 (1967), pp. 244-57 and *French Finances, 1770-1795, From Business to Bureaucracy* (Cambridge, 1970).

4 G.A. Rawlyk, *Yankees at Louisbourg* (Orono, 1967).

par Gilles Lacroix-Girard (Ottawa, Les Editions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1978). Their introduction provides a fresher and better balanced short account of the first siege than Baker, but despite the fact that Lacroix-Girard was a militia captain during the siege, it fails to clarify the nature of the colony's militia. Nor do the editors justify the historical value of this journal except to note that Lacroix-Girard was a dispassionate observer. That they themselves make only one footnote reference to the journal in their introduction is indicative of how little new this source, which fills less than a third of this volume, has to offer.

Research on Louisbourg has also begun to venture into less traditional areas. Allan Greer employs some of the techniques of social history in his *The Soldiers of Isle Royale, 1720-1745* ("History and Archaeology" 28, Ottawa, 1979), but his work is not so much an integrated social history as it is an attempt to explain the 1744 soldiers' mutiny at Louisbourg. Unfortunately there is little here that Greer has not previously expressed more cogently.⁵ Blaine Adams attempts both a structural and social approach in his study of the largest building not only in Louisbourg but in all colonial America. Although there is some overlapping between the two sections of *The Construction and Occupation of The Barracks of the King's Bastion at Louisbourg* ("Occasional Papers" 18, Ottawa, 1978), the social history of the building's occupants — from the soldiers and priests to the governors — is related in the older manner and with a good eye to revealing anecdote. Linda Hoad's *Surgeons and Surgery in Ile Royale* ("History and Archaeology" 6, Ottawa, 1976) is largely a study of the medical and economic activities of two of the colony's chief surgeons prefaced by a worthwhile essay on the state of surgery and the profession in France of the Ancien Régime. Lacking an adequate conceptual or comparative framework, however, Hoad falls flat on the question of the social standing of her surgeons in the Louisbourg community. In that same volume another study by Olive Patricia Dickason, *Louisbourg and the Indians: A Study in Imperial Race Relations, 1713-1760*, is more engagingly written and broader in its sweep. This is really a study of French/Micmac relations and Dickason is particularly successful in achieving a dispassionate analysis of the cultural backgrounds and viewpoints of both sides. She concludes that the Micmacs never held the balance of power in the Anglo-French conflict in the Maritimes during the first half of the eighteenth century, but neither were they pawns of the Europeans. Dickason's principal interest is the structure of relations between the two peoples; a more encompassing study of White/Indian relations at this time can be found in L.F.S. Upton's last book prior to his untimely death.⁶

While the work of historic archaeologists has added immeasurably to our

5 Allan Greer, "Mutiny at Louisbourg, December 1744", *Histoire Sociale-Social History*, 10 (1977), pp. 305-36.

6 L.F.S. Upton, *Micmacs and Colonists: Indian-White Relations in the Maritimes, 1713-1867* (Vancouver, 1979).

understanding of the early White/Indian contact period, historians will find the work of their colleagues less rewarding for the eighteenth century. The subjects are generally too narrow and the methodology too prescriptive in Charles Lindsay, *Lime Preparation at 18th-Century Louisbourg and Louisbourg Guardhouses*, and T.M. Hamilton and Bruce W. Fry, *A Survey of Louisbourg Gunflints* ("Occasional Papers" 12, Ottawa, 1972). Lindsay's work on lime preparation does, however, illustrate the transmission of European technology to North America and tends to reinforce Thorpe's conclusion that public construction by France in its North Atlantic colonies was essentially an extension of the "French fortress building industry".

Halifax has not recently been subjected to the same extensive investigation as Louisbourg, but two volumes have attempted to illuminate part of its military history. John Joseph Greenbough's, *The Halifax Citadel, 1825-60, A Narrative and Structural History* ("Occasional Papers" 17, Ottawa, 1977) goes far to dispel the notion, current even among military historians, that the Halifax citadel was one of the strongest North American installations of its day. The citadel's faults lay in design as well as location. The ridge on which it sat was too narrow for a regular fortification and poorly situated for the defence of either the harbour or the town. When it was begun in 1825 fortifications theory had not made great strides since the days of Vauban, but by the time of its completion in 1862 it was rendered obsolete by the range, accuracy and breaching power of the new rifled artillery. Indeed, Greenbough can find little solid reason for its construction other than it was recommended by the Duke of Wellington and served to impress local residents and visiting Americans during a period of antagonistic Anglo-American relations.

In building the Halifax citadel the British encountered the same problems experienced by the French a century before: engineers whose vanities complicated the project, escalating costs (twice the original estimate), shoddy work by private contractors, a climate that did not facilitate construction, and the need to import skilled manpower and materials from the mother country. Although Greenbough does not draw such comparisons any more than Thorpe does, he has unfortunately misunderstood the meaning of "narrative history" and turned his account into a rigidly chronological rehashing of correspondence exchanged with the Corps of Royal Engineers and the Board of Ordnance. The Citadel that Greenbough describes rises on its hill in a vacuum, and we are left wondering how this fortification fitted into Halifax's other defences and how it was perceived by the local population or the soldiers who lived there.

Ivan J. Saunders' *A History of Martello Towers in the Defence of British North America, 1796-1871* ("Occasional Papers" 15, Ottawa, 1976) is much better at placing the towers he has studied (not all Martello) within the context of the defence systems for Halifax, St. John, Quebec City and Kingston, but an infelicitous style and grammatical errors seriously detract from this work. The first three towers in British North America, built at Halifax between 1796 and

1799, were part of a military craze to respond quickly and cheaply to the threat posed to Britain by revolutionary France. In the mother country over one hundred towers were constructed as sea batteries for coastal defence, but in the colonies Martello towers were more frequently intended as battery keeps and land defences. As with the citadel, the value of the towers was as much psychological as it was military. Yet Saunders is perhaps too cynical about their defensive capabilities. He judges the towers on the degree to which they varied from the English usage, and while it is true that those intended as batteries could not withstand a concerted landbased artillery barrage, that was not their purpose. Except for the one at St. John, the colonial Martello towers were integral parts of larger defence systems, and Saunders too readily forgets that in defensive warfare delay is everything. As no British or colonial tower was ever attacked, their military value will remain problematical. Robbed of any dramatic encounters to recount, Saunders' book resembles historic archaeology with its emphasis on descriptions of proportions and materials. And if words are insufficient there are also illustrations, thirteen alone pertaining to Fort Frederick in Kingston.

What these studies point to is the similarity of French and British experience in Atlantic Canada. Command of the sea was always too elusive to suffice for the protection of coastal settlements and imperial interests. By the late seventeenth century French strategic thinking had come to link the defence of its maritime colonies with its interior possessions. France then began to fortify Placentia more solidly and later built Louisbourg. Early in the nineteenth century a similar logic entered British military planning and Britain began construction of fortifications whose scale approached that of the French. For both countries the high costs and the problems encountered in building these monuments to empire were the same. All the defence systems contained flaws, but fortifications have never been impregnable, or at least not for very long. In conjunction with seapower, these installations did serve their purposes of deterrent, delay and protection. If historical interpretation has tended to be more favourable to British military conduct, it is perhaps because the experience of Placentia and St. John's is too readily forgotten while Louisbourg was not afforded the good fortune bestowed on Halifax of not being attacked.

TERRY CROWLEY