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Newfoundland Seen Through French Eyes

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See table of contents

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Newfoundland Seen Through French Eyes

MICHAEL WILKSHIRE

DURING THE SUMMER of 1859 the French author and diplomat Count Joseph Arthur de Gobineau took part in an Anglo-French enquiry into the French Shore question, during which he visited not only Newfoundland but also the French islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon, Sydney, Halifax, and even Labrador. He subsequently used these experiences as the basis of a short story, "La Chasse au caribou," first published in *Souvenirs de Voyage* (Paris: Plon, 1872), and a much lengthier factual account of his mission, *Voyage à Terre-Neuve* (Paris: Hachette, 1861). I am in the process of completing a translation of both of these. But, in addition, there are a number of diplomatic dispatches and this personal memorandum to his minister, Count Alexandre Joseph Colonna Walewski, which, as he himself points out, is quite separate from the official report of the enquiry. It represents his own thoughts on the future development of St. Pierre and Miquelon, Newfoundland and pre-confederation Canada. It is of particular interest in that, unlike his published works, it was not a public document and his comments are engagingly frank and often quite caustic.

To His Excellency Count Walewski,
Minister of Foreign Affairs,
Paris.

Paris, 24 December, 1859.

My Lord,

During the course of the mission you paid me the honour of entrusting to me on the shores of Newfoundland, I had occasion to make observations that, fall-

ing outside the area of the matters I was concerned with, would have been out of place in the special report submitted to Your Excellency. Since, however, they seem to me to be worthy of your attention, I am taking the liberty of communicating to you their significance.

The British colonies of North America include Canada, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Cape Breton Island, and the island of Newfoundland. The population is made up of English and Scots, Irish emigrants, and former inhabitants of France, mostly from Normandy and whose main core occupies Lower Canada. Nevertheless, in all the other British possessions that have just been listed, there are still some clusters of the French who first settled the land.

From the religious point of view the Anglicans, although they represent the official denomination of the metropolitan country, are the least numerous. The Nonconformists, whether they are Presbyterians, Methodists, Independents or Baptists, include in their ranks the majority of the tradespeople of all kinds, and, in general, come from the Lowlands of Scotland or from the southern counties of England. The Catholics, who are to be found everywhere and, in some places, form an absolute majority, as in Lower Canada and in St. John's, Newfoundland, are made up of Irish, Scottish Highlanders, and French. I include with them for the record all that is left of the native Indian population.

Political parties there are, in fact, the expression of religious passions. Those who are Nonconformist Protestants prove to be moved by a democratic spirit, the character of which I shall explain later. The Anglicans, who are constrained by their numerical weakness to a certain modesty, generally accept the role of adjunct of the Catholic party and diverge only in cases where the issues debated too clearly concern Protestant interests in general. But mostly this forced alliance is maintained, in spite of lively antipathy; theological discussions are much enjoyed, and, controversy being practically the only field where the mind is exercised, in the absence of literature, theatre or any regular distraction, the population of North America avidly devours the polemics that the various sects give rise to, as well as the sermons and the pamphlets that are produced at every opportunity. There is perhaps no country in the world where the doctrines of tolerance would be in greater danger of perishing if the respective forces of different opinions, less perfectly balanced, did not hold each other so constantly in check.

Such a strong predilection for strife is naturally echoed in politics, where, at the same time, two ideas dominate all others. There is first of all an exaggerated and all the more tenacious notion of local importance. Every colony represents, in the eyes of its inhabitants, a notable portion of the civilized world, a point on this continent to which, it is believed, all future grandeur belongs, and in their mind, the British colonies of North America in general are called upon to harvest the greater part of that notional prosperity. It follows from this that they are jealous of the United States and feel no serious sympathy for them, that the idea of assuming the nationality of their neighbours, who, incidentally, are arrogant towards them, they find repugnant in the highest degree. One way or another, they are anxious to see their existence as a state develop outside the cir-

cle whose central point is Washington. In the past, approximately twenty years ago, the Catholics of Lower Canada, who were then being ill served by British domination, may have talked of joining the Americans; but, apart from the fact that this threat was intended more to intimidate Britain than to be carried into effect, it remained the work of one province only, and the political leader who issued it, Mr. Papineau, went from the height of popularity to being totally descredited when, after the promulgation of the new Constitution, he persisted in the same vein.

The other dominant idea, which is no less significant, is that the metropolitan country owes everything and nothing is owed to it in return, a belief that is held in all British colonies in whatever part of the globe they may be found. North America, then, demands much of Great Britain, considers that it never has enough, maintains towards her an attitude of mistrust and susceptibility and, in general, does not rely on a fidelity which it would be imprudent to put to the test.

The Nonconformists are mainly animated by the republican spirit that guided the organization of the Presbyterian church. But it is a kind of republicanism that has nothing in common with the tendencies that are similarly described in Europe. It is based on election and the democratic principle, it is true, but it includes at the same time a somewhat austere hierarchy and an inquisitorial discipline that would seem to sin in the direction of excessive constraint rather than too much laxity.

The Anglicans are clearly attached to the structure of constitutional monarchy and the consequences that flow from it in the British system. They are also attached to communal institutions and to the establishment of an aristocracy and have viewed with great favor the elevation of three colonial notabilities to the rank of baronet of the United Kingdom.

The Catholics are completely controlled by the bishops and follow them with an obedience that never wavers. The authority of the prelates is boundless. They send their flock to elections with prescribed votes, they reprimand the members of the legislatures who stray from the mandate they have been given, they are in total control of the popularity of these agents, they order meetings, take up subscriptions, and, though paid only by the faithful, they have incomes that are scarcely equalled by the richest prebendaries in Europe. Moreover, the use to which they put these funds is generally likely to increase their respect and influence. They found huge and magnificent churches, convents, hospitals, asylums, and schools, and provide substantial aid to the Irish population, which is indigent everywhere, but active, ardent, and turbulent, and constitutes, when the need arises and under the guidance of its clergy, a militia to be reckoned with and much feared by the English authorities.

The policy of the Catholics, being summed up by the will of the episcopacy, is no longer that of a popular party, but takes on rather the firm character of a state policy, though it is variable in the means that are used. The bishops, in turn, are either the allies or the enemies of the British government: allies in resisting the Nonconformists, enemies in extracting from the metropolitan government an indefinite series of concessions. They can never be genuine

friends, even less, faithful subjects. They will always tend to escape from domination by a power that has sufficiently manifested its aversion to the Holy See. To this end they carefully foster the resentment of the Irish, which in the Colonies is of the most intense nature.

But, leaving aside the question of British supremacy, there is no doubt that the bishops, and hence the entire body of the party that they lead, are animated by monarchist sentiments, and this is one of the reasons why, in spite of contrary influences, they will always rally to the Anglicans.

The British government has never been able to forget the terrible blow that the revolt and emancipation of the United States dealt to the economy of its former colonial system. As a result they have found new principles, and the evil that they were unable to avert by repression they now seek to avoid by excessive mildness. Perhaps one might wonder if these conciliatory dispositions have not been carried further than necessary.

All of these British establishments, large and small, have received absolutely free constitutions. The metropolitan country gave to them the mechanism of the two chambers; it allows them to choose for themselves the ministers who are supported or rejected by a majority, to administer themselves, to set, collect and spend their revenue, to appoint nationals to all civil positions; it does not ask them for anything but contributes voluntarily, through its gifts, to all expenditures judged to be too heavy for the local resources. As the only manifestation of its sovereignty, it limits itself to sending governors who are changed every three years, but whom it recalls, without difficulty, before this period if they meet with displeasure. It pays out of its own funds for the mixed garrisons, a part of which is raised locally and commanded by colonial officers who may, if they wish, be moved to regular regiments, under the same conditions as the other subjects of the Queen, so that one can neither think nor say that a military career is reserved for the inhabitants of the home country. It seeks to ally itself with local notabilities by showing, as I said earlier, that the way to aristocratic distinction is open to them; and yet, in spite of so much consideration, the natural tendency of any colony and more particularly of those of the Anglo-Saxon race, still holds sway, and it is obvious that every day the territories of North America take another step towards an emancipation that may be delayed for a while but cannot be avoided.

Since there is no harshness or violence with which to reproach the metropolitan government, neither is there, in general, except on the part of the Irish, any feeling of hatred towards it. But, precisely because it is considerate and patient to a fault, it is said to be fearful. Local pride increases proportionately. More demands are made. This sovereign authority is judged to be so meek, so powerless to refuse whatever will be claimed or to recover what has been taken from it that a strong desire for a great innovation has been openly expressed and this will unquestionably put the territories of North America on the threshold of egalitarianism.

Everywhere, and principally in Canada and in Nova Scotia, there are demands for a legislative union and a single administration for all of the colonial states of these parts. There has even been talk of bringing to the important

post of Governor-General a prince of the royal family and the name of His Grace, the Duke of Cambridge has been mentioned. This would constitute a grouping of four million souls spread over a vast area and geographically located in a manner most likely to play a considerable role in the northern seas. This idea is not that of a single party. It is shared by all shades of opinion. The Nonconformists envisage it as do the bishops, and the Anglicans rally to it on pain of taking a position of doubtful patriotism. They differ only on the means to arrive at the end and on questions of expediency. But the question has been put, welcomed, agreed to in principle, and one of its results can be seen in the huge funeral ceremony last year which brought together the Governor, the legislature, the magistrates, and the Canadian troops around a monument dedicated to those who died in the battle of Quebec. Without any distinction of race, the same respect was paid to both generals and soldiers, French and English, who fell in this affair. They were honored with the name of common ancestors of the peoples of the colony.

One can, then, consider the fusion of the territories as an eventuality that is not at all remote, and from this situation to complete emancipation is only a short step. If this event were about to come to pass, I should be forced to differ from local opinion to the extent that I do not share the commonly held beliefs regarding the power of the new state. Whatever importance I may grant it in other respects, it does not seem to me to be capable of achieving the somewhat exaggerated destiny that it has been promised. It will never vie with the United States; it will not be a rival to be feared by Britain. Admittedly these territories occupy a vast area and extend close to the pole. But, on the mainland as well as on the islands, it is largely uninhabited and barren, and the climate is so harsh that it deters settlers. When the Irish emigration was at its height, the main movement was never directed there but towards the United States, and, in the end, towards Australia. Today this source of population is in the process of drying up. German emigrants never came this way. On the contrary, every day there are still people leaving Nova Scotia and Newfoundland to seek their fortune in the United States.

The main bases for development are the fishery, the mines, which seem to promise well for the future, especially in Newfoundland, and agriculture, which is truly flourishing only in Canada.

These are meagre resources. One may suppose that English North America, if it were strong enough to live, to survive, and even, within certain limits, to prosper, would not be sufficiently strong when faced with its neighbours, the United States and Britain, to dispense with adequate protection. It could naturally wish for nothing but benevolence from France, to whom moreover the preferences of a large part of its population have always been directed, since they are themselves of French origin. Furthermore, France can easily obtain the affection of the bishops, the clergy, and the Irish, who are so close to us in their instincts and their memories, and consequently of the powerful Catholic party in its entirety.

As for the interest that we may have in accepting and fostering such a situation, this is quite obvious, and Your Excellency will doubtless consider it

superfluous for me to spend too long pointing it out.

On casting one's eyes over a map, this interest becomes self-evident. If one thinks first of all of peacetime, we find in these united territories a commercial ally that is useful for our exports from France, mainly silks and wines, and a valuable agent which cannot but increase considerably our relations with the northern United States. All the economic concepts of these regions are favourable to freedom of exchange and we can be the first to profit from them. And if it is not too foolhardy to think of the future of railways in these countries, taking into account the bold manner in which these means of communication are used across wilderness, one can foresee the day when a rapid channel would be opened up for us to the seas of the Far East.

But it is particularly in times of war that we should be able to congratulate ourselves on the creation of this new state, if we were bound to it by friendly relations. Its numerous ports and anchorages that cut into the huge extent of its eastern shores would be so many havens open to our ships. We should no longer have to fear, as we have in the past, that our many Newfoundland fishermen, these ten or twelve thousand men who constitute so vital a part of our naval personnel, might be taken away by enemy cruisers without having had time to contemplate returning to France. A few hours of sailing would take them, with no risks, from the places they normally occupy to a friendly coast. We would always be assured of safe supplies of provisions in these seas, while the need to maintain a presence in this area would force our adversary into a division of his forces that would be advantageous for us.

The London cabinet appears to have understood the situation in which it is placed by the eventualities I have outlined. In order to guarantee itself a stronghold in these parts, it conceived a plan to fortify the Strait of Belle Isle, situated between Newfoundland and Labrador. The result of this measure would be to safeguard the eastern entry to the Gulf of St. Lawrence. This situation is certainly powerful and is a threat both to Newfoundland and to Canada. But it should be realised that this strait is practicable only during a part of the year. In winter it is blocked with ice, making the passage of ships impossible. Situated in the far north, it is a gateway that is rarely used, while, on the other hand, access from the south would not only be open to us year round, but would also, in a way, be protected by us, for we still have the islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon. I ask Your Excellency's permission to elaborate on this possession which I do not hesitate to describe as being of the utmost value to France.

To my mind the first of these advantages lies in the fact that it is not a colony. A bare rock, without any organic soil, would be incapable of feeding its inhabitants on its own, of inspiring in them a feeling of local pride and independence or of ever dispensing with the mother country; in a word, of creating the threat of a separation which, after many sacrifices, too often results in making the colonies either an encumbrance or a danger for those who have created them.

The second advantage consists in the absence of any serious fortification. That may have been an inconvenience in the seventeenth century, but today,

with the modern system of warfare, which spares non-military territories, St. Pierre and Miquelon is forever free from the risk of violent destruction; at the same time, these islands will never need any garrisons that, together with the squadrons used to supply them, could be put in a vulnerable position. The enemy may perhaps occupy them, but without doing any damage, and will give them back when peace returns.

In its present state this possession is still more or less as it was given to us in the treaty of 1763. But by instituting territorial property rights, and by introducing in the manner in which the possession is administered a few innovations modelled on the general character of the surrounding countries, there is every reason to hope for clear success and the development of an important commercial city.

The consequences of this fact would not be insignificant. The prosperity of St. Pierre would exert a great influence on the Banks fishery and the total number of our ships sent out from France would be increased; we should then see a rise in the number of excellent sailors that we already owe to this industry. We should also have storage facilities for our French products from which we could supply the neighbouring consumers, who, I must point out, are not aware of what we could provide them with; this fact is all the more regrettable since, according to the opinion of competent men, our wines could successfully compete against Spanish imports, if people knew where to procure them. Finally, and more important than all these questions, however worthy of interest they may be, St. Pierre would become for us, in relation to the present English territories of North America, much more important strategically than the Strait of Belle Isle can ever be. This does not take into account the other reasons for the weakness of this latter location that Great Britain will one day discover.

Please accept, My Lord,
this renewed expression of the deep respect
with which I have the honour of being
Your Excellency's most humble and obedient servant.
Count de Gobineau.

Note on the Text

The French text may be found in the Archives of the Ministère des Affaires Etrangeres in Paris under the heading Mémoires et Documents, Angleterre (Pêcheries de Terre-Neuve), vol. 108, tome III, 1859-60, pp. 302-10. It was published in French in an article by Michael D. Biddiss, "Gobineau et les colonies anglaises de l'Amérique du Nord." *Etudes Gobiniennes* (1967): 11-26. The translation given here is by Michael Wilkshire.

PANEL REVIEW

The Impact of Hibernia

Mark Shrimpton
Lars Osberg
Peter Sinclair
Don Steele
on

Hibernia Development Project: Report of the Hibernia Environmental Impact Statement. 4 vols. (vol. 3 has 2 pts.). St. John's: Mobil Oil Canada, Ltd. 1985.

Judith Bobbitt
on

Hibernia Development Project: Report of the Hibernia Environmental Assessment Panel. [Ottawa]: Government of Canada, Minister of Supply and Services, 1985.

INTRODUCTION

JOURNALS DO NOT normally review such volumes as the Hibernia Project Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). It is an example of "grey literature"—a weighty technical document, produced at the behest of government, printed in a limited number of copies, and not available for sale in bookstores. Yet the EIS is one of the most significant reports to be published in Newfoundland in recent years. Producing it cost over $8 million and involved a number of primary and secondary studies of the impact of the Hibernia project on the society, economy and environment of Newfoundland. The four volumes of the EIS proper are based on 22 "supporting documents," many of them produced by local consultants. As such