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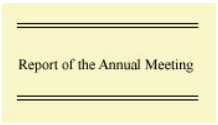

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GEORGE ETIENNE CARTIER IN THE PERIOD OF THE 'FORTIES

By J. I. Cooper

Of the more prominent public men of Canada there are few who are as little known as George Etienne Cartier. This statement is made with all deference to the sonorous biographies and to the minor studies that have been written about him.[1] His biographers, concentrating on his parliamentary career and upon his participation in great national events have produced a singularly formal and stilted figure, a solemn caricature of the real man. Impressed by Cartier's obvious successes they have concentrated on the later period of his life, when in company with Macdonald, he ruled the old Province of Canada or assisted with deftness at the birth of the Dominion or, to complete the figure, presided over the tumultuous nursery-days of the new federation. This emphasis, while understandable, has been unfortunate, for in passing so completely over Cartier's early years, his biographers have given scant attention to those very considerations which so influence a man's life: his professional success, his friends, his ideas. The purpose of this paper is to examine that section of Cartier's career which has been so largely neglected and to attempt to exhibit the man in relation to the period of the 'forties.

As is well known, Cartier came of a substantial middle-class French-Canadian family[2] that had been settled in the Richelieu valley for about half a century.[3] The election of law as his profession,[4] constituted a sharp break with the family's strong commercial instincts and appears to have caused Cartier some heart-searching even at a much later date.[5] He departed even more widely from his conservative origins when as a law student in Montreal,[6] and later as a young advocate, he attached himself to the radical wing of the Reform party that remained loyal to Papineau in the hectic years immediately before the Rebellion. A more emphatic declaration of his political inclinations was given when the young man became the secretary of the frankly revolutionary Central Committee of the District of Montreal,[7] and in that capacity corresponded with the Upper-Canadian Reformers and English Chartists.[8] In the Rebellion itself

[1]The following are the principal items of biographical material on Cartier. The earliest study of Cartier's life was published in 1873 by Turcotte. The standard biographies of Cartier are those by Alfred deCelles (1907) and by John Boyd (1914). A centenary volume, published in 1914, contains some excellent studies by men who knew Cartier personally. Later (1919), one of the contributors to the centenary volume, Benjamin Sulte, elaborated his study of Cartier and published it independently. In 1914, the late Armand Lavergne produced an interesting interpretation of Cartier as a statesman. A collection of Cartier's speeches, edited by Joseph Tassé (1893), contains a good deal of biographical information.

[2]Cartier was born on September 6, 1814. *Parish Register,* St. Antoine de Chambly, 1814.

[3]As, for example, in December, 1869. *Discours de Sir G.-E. Cartier* (Montréal, 1893), 641.

[4]Cartier had been articled to Edouard Rodier in 1830. Public Archives of Canada, *Internal Correspondence, Lower Canada,* Commission of Advocates, November, 1835.

[5]*Discours de Sir G.-E. Cartier,* 642.

[6]*Sir G.-E. Cartier, 1814-1914* (Montréal, n.d.), 68.

[7]R. Christie, *History of the Late Province of Lower Canada* (Montreal, 1866), V, 59.

[8]J. West, *The Chartist Movement* (London, 1920), 228.

Cartier's share was brief but stirring.[9] He fought with distinction at St. Denis,[10] and after the overthrow of the *Patriote* cause at St. Charles made his way into the United States. At Burlington, Vermont, he passed an uneventful year of exile enjoying the unique, if somewhat chilling experience of reading his obituary in the pages of a Quebec paper,[11] and holding secret confabs, so Garneau tells us, with Lord Durham's agents.[12]

In the winter of 1838 Cartier made his peace with the authorities and returned to Canada.[13] He established himself in Montreal and quietly resumed his law practice. The term "resumed" is, perhaps, somewhat misleading, for while Cartier had practised law previous to the Rebellion he had been too much disturbed by the stirring events of 1836 and 1837 to settle down to the humdrum labours of the office and his attendance at the courts had been irregular.[14] Reviving the partnership with his elder and exceedingly brilliant brother Damien, Cartier began to apply himself seriously to his profession. What appears to be a well authenticated tradition has it that the brothers effected a very happy division of labour.[15] The younger man with his wide acquaintance and infectious joviality rustled the business, while the elder and more studious brother remained in the office to prepare the cases. The evidence at our disposal leads us to believe that it was George who did the actual pleading in the courts.[16] What we know of the character of the two men serves to corroborate this view. Young Cartier had an excellent head for business, he was an effective speaker, and he was nothing if not a good mixer. The elder brother being of a more retiring nature was content to work with his books and to leave the active side of the partnership to his bustling junior.

A heartening degree of success seems to have attended the Cartiers from the beginning. Our knowledge of their business affairs is admittedly small, for the books of the partners have long-since disappeared, but the records of the Court of King's Bench in Montreal tell an illuminating tale.[17] In the early years business was small, in fact Cartier's first clients appear to have been his relatives or country-folk, friends of the family. The disturbances of the Rebellion years and the exile of one of the partners did not improve the firm's position, and there is reason to believe that the brothers had something of a struggle to re-establish themselves. They had, however, one inestimable advantage, they could and did win their cases, and after 1841 or 1842, the name of Cartier appeared more and more frequently in the court records. There was a significant change in the character of the cases they argued; in the later 'forties cases involving the transfer of land seem to have engaged their attention principally. Their clientele improved as well, for by 1847 there came to the office in St. Vincent street such personages as the Honourable Charles Grant and the

[9]*Rapport de l'archiviste de la province de Québec, 1925-26* (Québec, 1926), 191.
[10]R. Christie, *op. cit.*, IV, 527-9.
[11]*Le Canadien*, 12 décembre, 1837.
[12]F. X. Garneau, *Histoire du Canada* (Paris, 1920), II, 687.
[13]*Sir G.-E. Cartier, 1814-1914*, 73.
[14]*Records of the Court of King's Bench*, District of Montreal, 1836, 1837, 1838.
[15]Boyd also makes this statement in his biography of Cartier, p. 416.
[16]In the Court records, the name of Damien Cartier appears very infrequently except during 1838, when his brother was in exile.
[17]This account of Cartier's early legal career is based on an examination of the records of the Court of King's Bench, Montreal, 1836-49, which were made accessible to me through the consideration of M. E.-Z. Massicotte, the prothonotary.

great Mr. Lafontaine, the leader of the Reform party. In the early 'forties, Cartier practised on the Circuit in the Montreal District,[18] but how long he continued to do so is difficult to determine. So far as can be ascertained, Cartier did not appear in the criminal courts. He had, indeed, few of the qualifications that make for success in that highly specialized branch of his profession, and one cannot easily picture Cartier as an outstanding jury lawyer.

Nor are there lacking evidences of a more informal sort to indicate Cartier's growing substance. When Robert Mackay brought out his celebrated *Montreal Directory* in 1842, he included Cartier's name among the professional men of the town.[19] Satisfying as no doubt this was as a recognition of Cartier's presence, it contained a humiliating indication of his obscurity since his name stood under the unfamiliar guise of "G. C. Cartier". He was still, "le petit avocat" and apparently, neither he nor Mr. Mackay felt that it was worth while rectifying the error till the issue of 1847. After 1847, Cartier's name recurred with becoming regularity, and before the decade was out, it appeared with the impressive addition of "M.P.P.".[20] A more convincing indication of advancing success was the removal into a larger office at 3 St. Vincent street. Even Cartier's domestic arrangements began to reflect his prosperity. In 1846 he married Mlle. Hortense Fabre,[21] and while it might be rash to suggest that matrimony is necessarily a sign of affluence, still less an assurance of its continuance, in Cartier's case it probably came to place the seal of recognition upon a steady and pronounced success. Where he had lived in his early days in Montreal, we have no means of determining,[22] but in 1846 he moved into Donagana's "palatial" hotel, which had been opened only in that year.[23] About a year later Cartier established himself permanently in Montreal by acquiring a substantial stone house,[24] in the fashionable Notre Dame street. The 'forties had meant much to Cartier. He had entered the decade an obscure attorney; an ex-rebel; a homeless man: he emerged from it a practitioner of repute; a member of Parliament; a man of property.

Cartier's business interests were by no means exclusively confined to his profession. He was extremely active in railway promotion and this activity probably formed the link between his private and public life. He came by his interest honestly, for his father Jacques Cartier had been one of the original "Proprietors" of Canada's first railway, the Champlain and St. Lawrence.[25] Apparently it was not till 1846 that young Cartier became a figure in the railway world, for it was in that year that he took part in the great mass-meeting on the Champ de Mars in Montreal in favour of the St. Lawrence and Atlantic Railway.[26] Cartier knew both his

[18]J. Boyd, *Sir George Etienne Cartier* (Toronto, 1914), 87. Cartier to Lafontaine, Montreal, Sept. 18, 1842 (translation).

[19]As early as 1839, Cartier's name had been listed among the advocates of the province in John Neilson's *Quebec Almanack*.

[20]R. W. S. Mackay, *Montreal Directory* (Montreal, 1849).

[21]*Parish Register*, Notre Dame Roman Catholic Church, Montreal, June 16, 1846.

[22]The *Quebec Almanack* gave no information as to place of residence, and it was not till the 1847 issue of the *Montreal Directory* that Cartier's private address was recorded.

[23]*Montreal Herald*, June 20, 1846.

[24]Mackay gives the house number as 16 Notre Dame street; the cadastral number of the property was 41.

[25]Archives of the Château de Ramesay, Montreal, *Acts relating to the Champlain and St. Lawrence Railroad, 1832-1853.*

[26]*Montreal Herald*, Aug. 11, 1846.

subject and his audience, ". . . the prosperity of Montreal depends upon her being an entrepôt for the trade of the West. . . . We cannot keep it unless we secure the best means of transportation from the Western waters to the Atlantic . . . by means of Railways. . . ."[27] Thereafter Cartier was to figure with becoming regularity at similar gatherings and it is not without point that the first speech he delivered in the provincial parliament was on railway matters.[28] In this instance the man and the moment found themselves in happiest conjunction; Cartier could discuss his subject well, and in a world that was coming to regard railways as its politics he was bound to be heard. Nor was it inappropriate, that when parliamentary recognition came first to Cartier it took the form of the chairmanship of the Railway Committee. His subsequent connection with the Grand Trunk and his association with the transcontinental railway schemes grew logically from this beginning in the 'forties.

In every sense of the word Cartier's political career followed and depended upon his professional. He himself seems to have resolved to take no part in public affairs till he had made his private position secure. In 1843, he took part in the great gathering of Montreal Reformers that met to do honour to the retiring governor-general, Sir Charles Bagot.[29] Having demonstrated his ability to speak, if not to prophesy, for Cartier had rashly forecasted that, ". . . Sir Charles Metcalfe would be ready . . . to continue and to extend the liberal and the constitutional policies of his predecessor . . .",[30] he was deemed qualified to appear on the wider stage of the provincial general elections. Cartier became Mr. Lafontaine's "galloper" in the Richelieu country and in company with the redoubtable Dr. Wolfred Nelson stumped the parishes for the Reformers.[31] His gravitation to the Reform party was natural. As a boy he had been an admirer of Lafontaine,[32] and as a mature man he must have realized that the political salvation of Canada East and indeed, the very existence of the united province lay in the alliance of moderate men. A good deal of misapprehension has grown up round Cartier's part in the election of 1843-44. Taking for a positive assertion some chance remarks made by Cartier many years later,[33] Boyd states that Cartier had been offered a seat in the Parliament of 1844.[34] That there may have been an informal offer is possible, but neither the Lafontaine correspondence nor contemporary newspapers substantiate it, and existing evidence points to a less exacting role. Nevertheless, the young man took his political apprenticeship seriously, for with the devastating enthusiasm of the amateur he involved himself in an acrimonious newspaper controversy,[35] and in several duels.[36]

By 1847 Cartier had strong claims for consideration on the Reform leaders.[37] He had a recognized place in the legal circles of Montreal, his

[27] *Ibid.*, Aug. 12, 1846.
[28] *Morning Courier*, Montreal, Feb. 17, 1849.
[29] *Times and Commercial Advertiser*, Montreal, Apr. 7, 1843.
[30] *Ibid.*, Apr. 12, 1843.
[31] *La Minerve*, 30 sept., 1844.
[32] Lafontaine was a friend of the Cartier family and when young George was articled to Rodier, Lafontaine had signed some of the necessary papers.
[33] *Discours de Sir G.-E. Cartier*, 507.
[34] Boyd, *Sir George Etienne Cartier*, 93.
[35] *La Minerve; L'Aurore; Herald*, Oct. 3-10, 1844.
[36] A. Fauteux, *Le duel au Canada* (Montréal, 1934), 264.
[37] By 1847 Cartier's name begins to figure prominently in the Baldwin-Lafontaine correspondence; *e.g.*, Baldwin to Lafontaine, May 8, 1847.

advocacy of the railway showed that he was one who kept abreast of the times, and his unswerving loyalty to Liberal principles all marked him as a man of some promise. Just what negotiations took place between him and the managers of the Reform party, we do not know. Cartier merely says, ". . . mes amis me prièn t de me présenter . . .". In consequence, he was returned for Verchères at a bye-election in April, 1848.[38] The contest can scarcely be regarded as exciting, for Cartier had behind him the full resources of the triumphant Liberal party. Verchères was traditionally Liberal and Cartier could command a powerful family influence that probably contributed more to his success than the sentimental appeals he made to the memory of his grandfather, Jacques Cartier, who had represented the constituency half a century before. As was only to be expected, he was returned with a comfortable majority and under these untrying auspices Cartier was launched on his long parliamentary career.

However much Cartier may have achieved later as a parliamentarian, it must be confessed that the beginning was unremarkable. He did not take his seat till the second session of the Parliament, and his vote was given consistently, if silently, for the Reform programme. He must have been an almost ideal private member in the eyes of his party leaders. He was always in his place; he always voted in the right direction; he seldom spoke. He was, for example, present at all the important divisions on the Rebellion Losses Bill, and on the fateful March 9, cast his vote with the victorious 47. Whether Cartier was involved in the celebrated riots of a month later cannot be determined; it is impossible to say whether he was in the House when the mob attacked it on the evening of April 25, although he was certainly present when the sittings were resumed in the Bonsecours market the following day.[39] Only on one or two occasions did Cartier speak. He introduced a bill to incorporate the Association of St. Jean Baptiste of Montreal,[40] and he brought forward a petition praying for aid for the St. Lawrence and Atlantic railway.[41] Towards the end of the session he had a few words to say in defence of a more ambitious railway project, the Halifax railway, a forerunner of the Intercolonial.[42] The voice may have been strange even to itself but the ideas it conveyed were soon to become familiar, ". . . can we be content to allow Lower Canada to stop at Montreal . . . can we allow Montreal to lose her place as the emporium of the trade of the Great Lakes? . . ."

Yet it would be entirely erroneous to regard Cartier as a political cypher. The true field of his activities lay, not in Parliament, but in the world of associations and of clubs that flourished in French Canada during the 'forties. Some of them like the St. Jean Baptiste Society and L'Institut Canadien carried a weight of public opinion that had to be taken into consideration. No investigator has as yet cared to apprise the influence of these societies upon the life of the province, but it might not be too much to say that the renaissance of the 'forties which made itself felt in almost every department of French-Canadian life had its origins in these gatherings of young men of liberal ideas and of critical views. The return of

[38] *Journal of the Legislative Assembly*, Province of Canada, Office of the Clerk of the Crown in Chancery, Apr. 15, 1848.
[39] *Ibid.*, Apr. 26, 1849, 262.
[40] *Ibid.*, May 6, 1849, 273.
[41] *Ibid.*, Feb. 15, 1849, 83.
[42] *L'Avenir*, 26 avril, 1849.

Papineau from exile in 1845 provided the oracle and the appearance of *L'Avenir* in 1847 the instrument of the new movement. Cartier's early connection with all this ferment is very obscure. He was a sociable man but he was scarcely the stuff that clubmen are made of. In the 'thirties he had been the secretary and the lyricist of the St. Jean Baptiste Society, but in the following decade he appears to have taken little active share in the affairs of the society.[43] With L'Institut Canadien, Cartier seems to have had no connection. Indeed with the views of many of its members he could have had little sympathy, and with the Papineau of the period Cartier had nothing in common. Towards these younger advanced-Liberals, towards the Rouges, as they soon were to be called, Cartier became increasingly hostile and for the control of the national societies and of their collaterals, the various philanthropic associations, he waged a vigorous if not always successful warfare. Here, much more than in Parliament, was the true field of his political activities and here he was to learn those secrets of party management which were destined to make him the master of Canada East.

There were personal differences as well. Cartier's candidacy in Verchères had been opposed by the Rouges, and by *L'Avenir*.[44] Later in the summer Cartier found himself enmeshed in an exceedingly rancorous newspaper controversy between his old friend, Dr. Nelson, and his old idol, Papineau.[45] Again it was *L'Avenir* that led the attack, and in its columns arraigned Cartier as a coward. Finding his pen inadequate, Cartier had recourse to more direct methods and fought a duel with Joseph Doutre, the editor of the paper. Indeed, in the first heat of his anger, Cartier appears to have issued a species of collective challenge to the entire editorial board of *L'Avenir*.[46] Whether Doutre was the hero or the victim of his fellow journalists will never be known for the very details of the rencontre have perished. Tradition has it that the pair fought two duels.[47] An encounter on Mount Royal having been interrupted by the police, they met again on the Chambly road where Cartier vindicated both his honour and his marksmanship by putting a ball through Doutre's hat.

In fact, Cartier had come already into sharp conflict with some of the Rouges. The point at issue was a curious one: the struggle of the Reformers and of the Rouges for the control of the association which had been formed to settle the French Canadians in the Eastern Townships. With the organization and with the early efforts of the Colonization Association, Cartier appears to have had little to do.[48] The problem of finding homes and a livelihood within the province for the rapidly increasing population was one that had agitated the French-Canadian leaders for nearly a generation. The hard times and the political unquiet of the 'thirties and 'forties had produced a veritable exodus from Canada East, chiefly to the growing mill-towns of New England. Of the various schemes put

[43]For this information, I am indebted to the kindness of M. Larochelle, the secretary of the St. Jean Baptiste Society, who made a search through the Society's records for me.

[44]*L'Avenir*, 8 avril, 1848.

[45]The controversy seems to have originated with the publication of a letter by Dr. Nelson in the columns of *La Minerve*, in which he severely criticized the conduct of Papineau during the Rebellion of 1837.

[46]*L'Avenir*, 1 août, 1848.

[47]*Bulletin des recherches historiques* (Vol. XX, 1914), 352.

[48]This is not to be wondered at, since Cartier's election in Verchères and the formation of the Colonization Association coincided.

forward to stem this flood, none seemed so attractive as that suggested by the Reverend Father O'Reilly, the Roman Catholic missioner at Sherbrooke, to settle, or as the phrase went, to colonize the French Canadians beyond the seigneuries in the Eastern Townships.[49] Whether Father O'Reilly's projects owed anything to the promptings of Mr. Alexander Galt, the energetic Commissioner of the British American Land Company, it would be idle to speculate. It is worth observing, however, that the Land Company was anxious to dispose of its unsold holdings and that Galt was prepared to take some long steps to make the Townships attractive to the French Canadians. Father O'Reilly's plans were taken up by L'Institut Canadien and by *L'Avenir,* and in April, 1848, a society rejoicing in the extraordinary hybrid title of, "L'Association canadienne française des Townships" was formed.[50] The Association at once entered into negotiations with the British American Land Company,[51] and by mid-summer the first colonists had been placed in the township of Roxton.[52]

It is at this somewhat late date that Cartier's name begins to figure in the gatherings of the Colonization Association. He came apparently at the instigation of the provincial cabinet to challenge the overwhelming influence that the Rouges had acquired.[53] If confidence may be placed in contemporary newspaper reports, the colonization scheme had roused an unusual degree of enthusiasm in the province.[54] Realizing, at last, the gross political blunder they had committed, the Reform leaders commissioned Cartier to secure the control of the Colonization Association for the Liberal party. Cartier's methods did not lack emphasis and at the elections of the Association he made a strenuous effort to capture the presidency and the principal offices for the Reformers.[55] In this he was unsuccessful, despite his very effective speech and despite the activities of his youthful satellites headed by young Hector Langevin. The honours went entirely to the Rouges, either to members of L'Institut Canadien or to the editorial board of *L'Avenir.*[56] The importance of the episode lies, not in the success or failure of the Liberals to capture the Colonization Association, but in the way in which it indicates the type of political activity in which Cartier figured. This probably did not represent his first efforts, for there is reason to believe that he had carried out a similar but more successful manipulation of the St. Jean Baptiste Society in Montreal the previous year.[57] At a little later date he was to intervene actively in Montreal municipal politics when he was instrumental in securing the return of a Reform nominee, Dr. Nelson, as mayor. With his boundless self-confidence and tireless energy, Cartier was an ideal partisan leader, and his real service to his party lay in the manner in which he could manage and mould the organs of public opinion.

Late in 1849 Cartier made a move, which if he had any view to

[49]In February, 1848, Father O'Reilly's letters elaborating his schemes began to appear in *L'Avenir.*

[50]*L'Avenir,* 15 avril, 1848.

[51]*Ibid.,* 27 mai, 1848.

[52]*Ibid.,* 7 juin, 1848.

[53]*L'Avenir,* 15 juillet; *La Minerve,* 17 juillet, 1848.

[54]The various gatherings of the Colonization Association were fully covered by both the English- and French-language press of Montreal.

[55]*La Minerve,* 17 juillet, 1848.

[56]*L'Avenir,* 17 juillet, 1848.

[57]*L'Avenir,* 15 juillet, 1848; *La Minerve,* 14 juin, 1847.

posthumous fame succeeded admirably.[58] He not only refused to sign the Annexation Manifesto, but in company with some kindred spirits, signed a counter-manifesto. To make very much of this somewhat gratuitous exhibition of patriotism, it is necessary to give the annexation movement a much more serious interpretation than it deserves. Cartier's reaction is interesting because of the light it throws on his personal attitudes. Old friendships and new political animosities were probably present, for while Dr. Nelson had signed the counter-manifesto, Papineau had become an annexationist. The very conditions that made for annexation, the commercial depression, appear to have passed Cartier by, for although as a property-holder he must have suffered in the astonishing drop in real-estate values in Montreal in 1849, his professional work did not lie among the commercial group and his law practice went on unaffected.[59]

From one serving a parliamentary apprenticeship as Cartier was doing in the 'forties, we can scarcely expect any clear-cut expression of political ideas or very much that could be regarded as a political philosophy. Cartier's public utterances were based, manifestly, on the general fund of Reform theories and arguments. He paid due respect to what he called "the principle of responsible government", and was a ready defender of the Act of Union, although what he understood by the principle, or what benefits he expected from the Act, he did not specify. Nor did he make any statements which might be construed as a forecast of conservative inclinations. Throughout the 'forties and well into the 'fifties, Cartier was a professed Reformer of the Lafontaine school. His actions, of course, belied his professions, for in opposing the Rouges Cartier took up the defence of the established institutions and old traditions of the province. Whether he realized it or not, Cartier was being driven towards the conservative position, although it was some time before he was to rationalize his stand. His was essentially the practical, non-speculative mind which saw with admirable clarity on specific problems but because of that very faculty was slow to grasp the significance of more general issues. Much the same explanation lies behind Cartier's silence on the larger problems of the day: the revolution in imperial fiscal policy, the repeal of the navigation acts, trade relations with the United States. These things lay beyond the bounds of his personal experience and local knowledge and he hesitated to express opinions on them.

Such was the Cartier of the 'forties, a man making his way steadily forward in the world. The decade had meant much to Cartier. It had given him professional success; it had given him a recognized place in the brisk Montreal community; it had introduced him to public life. Yet the 'forties could recognize few of the liniaments of the later Cartier. The period only knew a rising lawyer, a voluble advocate of railways and a successful dabbler in local politics. Cartier's record in the 'forties is not without interest, but the interest lies almost wholly on the personal side. Here was a rebel who had reconstructed himself; here was a young man, who in a decade which has been described as revolutionary, became increasingly conservative. For Cartier demonstrates that curious, but by no means unusual, phenomenon of the strong personality in revolt against the prevailing fashions of the age in which it finds itself.

[58] As, for example, Boyd, p. 101, and deCelles, pp. 44-5.
[59] *Records of the Court of King's Bench,* District of Montreal, 1849.