

Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

The Frontier in the History of New France

A. L. Burt

Volume 19, numéro 1, 1940

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300207ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/300207ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (imprimé)

1712-9095 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Burt, A. L. (1940). The Frontier in the History of New France. *Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association / Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada*, 19(1), 93–99.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/300207ar>

THE FRONTIER IN THE HISTORY OF NEW FRANCE

By A. L. BURT
The University of Minnesota

Historians are like horses. They wear blinkers to keep them from shying off their course. But there is a difference between these two kinds of driven animals. The horse is the wiser because he does not put on his own blinkers, whereas the historian does, and often so clumsily that he cannot see what is before him. On this continent it is all too common for historians to trot along with the use of only one eye, the north one or the south one according as they live in Canada or in the United States, with the result that their vision lacks perspective and depth. Americans, however, do not lose as much as Canadians by taking this squint-eyed view of their own history. This is not because they are endowed with superior intelligence, for they are not; but because, from the standpoint of human geography, Canada is but the northern fringe of the United States. American historians can be, and therefore are, more ignorant of Canada than Canadian historians can be, and therefore are, of the United States, so that perhaps the loss on both sides is about equal.

One striking example of how a failure to understand what happened on one side of the line may distort the understanding of developments on the other side occurred a few years ago in the controversy over Frederick Jackson Turner's interpretation of American history. A bold young man on the staff of Harvard University hurled New France at the heads of Turner's disciples, and they did not reply, apparently because they knew no more than he did about the society on the shores of the St. Lawrence. He saw feudalism, theocracy, and autocracy in the French colony, and he leaped to the conclusion that these things demonstrated the impotence of the frontier to emancipate the individual. The example which he chose was singularly unfortunate for his purpose. Indeed it is doubtful if he could have hit upon a more convincing illustration of the validity of the proposition which he was trying to disprove. The society and the institutions of France, though fundamentally different from those of England, did not prevent the development of the same sturdy independence of the individual when the sons of France were transplanted to the soil of the New World.

We are all familiar with the great gulf which separated the feudalism of New France from that of old France, but perhaps we have not always fully appreciated the reason for it. We have been told that the royal authority so pruned the offshoot that only in name did it resemble the parent plant, which had been allowed to grow wild. Of course the King did try to reform it in the new land where he thought his hands were free; and the Intendant, his agent, continually strove to check the growth of abuses. But the enormous difference between this social and economic institution in the mother country and its namesake in the colony was not the work of human hands. If Francis Parkman had written after Turner, instead of before him, and if William Bennett Munro had pondered the teachings of the man who became his colleague, we might have been more conscious of the real cause. It was physically impossible for anything like

the feudalism of France to exist in this colony. The competition of the Old World was turned upside down in the New World. Here it was between seigniors for tenants, and not between peasants for the land of seigniors. This inversion emptied feudalism of its substance.

American conditions of life emancipated the French peasants who crossed the Atlantic. With liberty forever beckoning through the trees and up the waters which flowed past their doors, how could they be ridden by feudal lords? If anyone found life in the colony too cramping, no power on earth could hold him from running away into the woods to live a wilder life of freedom with the Indians. As was so clearly shown by a paper read before this society a year ago, the earliest years of French settlement on this continent saw the emergence of the *coureur de bois* type. Long ago Turner described the same type on the fringe of English settlement. The condition of this escape was the adoption of savage ways of life, dictated by the environment. This was true of French and English alike, and both accommodated themselves in varying degrees.

We do not know positively, but we suspect that the proportion of French who thus escaped was greater than that of the English. If this suspicion were to be confirmed, it would not necessarily prove that life in New France was less free than life in the English colonies. Geography made it much easier to penetrate the interior from the shores of the lower St. Lawrence than from the Atlantic seaboard, and the harvest of furs within reach of any English colony was not to be compared with what could be gathered from Canada. If it be argued that, in addition to these external causes, internal conditions tended to produce a larger drain from New France, it may be replied that this very drain exercised a compensating action upon these conditions. But more of this anon. That the *coureurs de bois* were more numerous than their English cousins is reflected in the official correspondence between Quebec and Paris on the subject. No English colonial government ever worried as did that of New France over its men who slipped beyond the pale of civilization. But this indication of the numerical strength of these outlaws must be qualified by two considerations: New France had fewer settlers to spare, and it was also losing furs to the English through these deserters.

To extinguish this daring breed of men who seemed to be sapping the life of Canada, a whole series of royal decrees was issued. The penalties prescribed—death, confiscation, heavy fines, and the lash—were all of no avail, as was also the enticement of an amnesty. The drain continued, preventing the colony from growing as fast as it might otherwise have done. This fact has often been pointed out, sometimes with heavy regret; but it should also be recorded with rejoicing. As Turner so often observed, the West repaid with interest what it drew from the East. In return for the men whom the wilderness stole from New France, it gave back a priceless boon—the spirit of liberty.

The mere fact that the Canadian could depart enabled him to remain in freedom. He could not be tied to the soil. He could get, and he did get, much more land than he could ever use, and that at a trifling rent, such was the disparity between supply and demand. His tenure resembled that of most English colonists more than that of French peasants, except in outward form, and even in this there was less difference than is often sup-

posed. We sometimes forget that the majority of the English colonies were settled on the semi-manorial system still prevalent in their mother country. The annual feudal dues which the habitant paid in kind, in money, and in labour were all together very small and should be compared with the obligations of quitrents and leaseholds in the English colonies. Indeed the land which later Canadian settlers bought from colonization companies cost them as much or more, and the habitant's possession of his farm was just as secure, unless he thought so little of it that he abandoned it.

No other feudal obligations imposed any burden upon the Canadian. Nature saw to that. Consider the *lods et ventes*, the mutation fine on the transfer of holdings otherwise than by direct inheritance. How often could the seignior collect it in a country where parents were so prolific and the competition of virgin land was so strong? Consider the *banalités*. A long list of them oppressed the peasants of France, but only two of them were ever claimed in Canada, and here they amounted to nothing. One was that of the oven, which was practically frozen out. The other was that of the mill, which occasioned more grief to the seignior than to his tenants. Under pain of forfeiting by non-exercise a right which might become profitable to his heirs, he was forced by the government to build the mill and to operate it substantially at cost. This official interference may seem arbitrary, but the government was merely doing what conditions in New France required. Consider also the feudal lord's right to administer justice. It was one of the greatest grievances of the peasants in old France because there it was jealously guarded by its possessors as a source of revenue. That was because the mother country had a thick population. In New France, however, the population was so thin that the right had no fiscal value, and therefore it survived only in so far as it was a convenience to all concerned.

Privilege sickened and died in the vigorous atmosphere of the New World. New France was no place for the *noblesse* of old France, who were preserved in the glass case of their hereditary caste. They could not soil their lily-white hands by touching any gainful occupation, nor could they degrade themselves by even the slightest social commerce with their inferiors. The difference between society in the mother country and in the colony was as wide as the ocean between them. In New France, habitants frequently became seigniors, which they could never do in old France; and this made little or no change in their manner of living, for many other Canadian seigniors, including some titled ones, had to live and work like habitants. It was not uncommon for the lord of a manor, his lady, and his daughters to toil together in the fields. Such was the levelling influence of frontier life.

The inferiority complex of the psychologist did not at all infect the Canadian habitant. He was a superior being, and he knew it. According to Charlevoix, who would never tell a lie, "he breathed from his birth the air of liberty" and showed it in his bearing; and according to La Hontan, who then probably told the truth, he lived in greater comfort than an infinity of gentlemen in France. He was not a coarse and boorish rustic like the peasant at home, said Hocquart, but a well-dressed fellow with good manners. The very name by which he was called reflects his loftier spirit. Technically he was a *censitaire* or *roturier*, but his scorn for such labels of

servility led to the substitution, even in official correspondence, of the classless appellation of *habitant*.

He was a typical farmer of the North American frontier, where nature made men free and equal by enabling all to become economically independent. His economic independence was pretty complete, for he and his family produced practically everything they consumed. Their tastes were simple and their wants were few, but they lived well. They had so much more land than they needed that they cultivated only a corner of it, and that rather carelessly. It was the way of the frontier, which had no market for surplus agricultural produce, and it gave them an abundance. Though horned cattle were cheaper than horses as beasts of burden, these people invariably kept horses—mostly for pleasure. Many hands made light work in this self-sufficient household, the members of which had therefore plenty of leisure for the enjoyment of life. In short, the *habitant* of New France was one of the most independent men alive. By setting foot on this continent, he had escaped from feudal bondage.

A man who thus stood erect on his own feet and could look the whole world in the face was not likely to be a hewer of wood and a drawer of water for his church, no matter how much he might be devoted to it. Nor was he a slave of the clergy, as a glance at the history of the tithe shows. When this ancient institution was introduced into the new country by the royal decree of April, 1663, which ordered the payment of one-thirteenth of all the fruits of human labour as well as of the soil, how was it received? With meek submission? Decidedly not! With one accord the people refused to pay. In Three Rivers they would not allow the decree to be read or posted, and from Beaupré they chased out the priest who came to minister unto them. The decree, which Laval had procured, raised such a storm that he had to bow before it.

Commencing with the parishioners of Quebec, who had contributed to the building of their church, the Bishop exempted them from the first year's payment. Then he reduced their obligation to one-twentieth for the next six years, and he soon extended this concession to the rest of the colony. Still the general opposition was menacing, and he continued his retreat. He issued a *mandement* which explained that the words of the royal decree did not mean what they plainly said. What was to be taxed was not all the fruits of human labour as well as of the soil, but only the produce of that labour which was applied to tilling the soil. In old France the clergy might collect wood, hay, fish, eggs, fleeces, and livestock; but they could not do it in New France. Laval also announced that the lower rate, instead of holding for only six years, was to last through his lifetime, without prejudice to his successor. As the people were not yet appeased, he put off all payment until the vessels of 1665 arrived, that they might have time to lay their objections before the King. But payment did not begin in 1665. When Tracy, accompanied by a new governor and the first intendant, came out in that year to organize the administration, the Bishop appealed to him to put the law in operation, only to find that this high functionary likewise hesitated before the popular resistance. Not until after he had convoked the "notables" of the country and got their advice on what the *habitants* would bear did he act; and then, on September 4, 1667, in concert with Courcelle and Talon, he issued an ordinance

establishing the tithe at a still lower rate and with a further exemption. Nothing was to be paid from newly cultivated land until five years after it was broken, and only one-twenty-sixth was to be taken from any land for twenty years. At last, four years after the first demand, the burden was scaled down to suit the people and they shouldered it. Light as it was, however, it occasioned many local disputes with the clergy right down to the end of the French régime, and afterwards, as Murray testified. It is therefore not surprising that all clerical attempts to raise the rate and to broaden the base of the tithe were defeated.

These attempts were inspired by the unfulfilled promise of the 1663 decree. In 1678 Laval sought a revision of the law to restore the original rate, but in the following year a royal edict confirmed the ordinance of 1667. This confirmation, however, did not extend the period of twenty years during which the rate was cut in half, with the result that Saint Vallier, who succeeded Laval in 1688, could maintain, as he did, that the full payment should be exacted. Yet even he shrank from ordering it himself. He wanted the government to fire his blast which might provoke a war; and in the fall of 1705, when he was over in France, there appears to have been some fear in Quebec that he might succeed, for then the Intendant essayed to spike this episcopal gun. Writing home to the minister, he declared, "The Bishop of Quebec does not understand the interests of his clergy in demanding that the tithe be fixed at one-thirteenth as in France." At this very time, also, the base of the tax came under official review. Two rural congregations near Quebec were treated to a series of startling sermons in which their *curés* notified them that the tithe, hitherto collected only on grain, would thenceforth be levied on everything produced from the soil, whether by cultivation or not, on cattle, hay, fruit, flax, hemp, sheep, and other things. According to the record, there was "un grand murmure" among the habitants as soon as mass was over. Straightway the matter was brought before the Superior Council, which summoned the offending *curés* to appear in person to present their authority for this announcement, and not only prohibited them or any other clergy from making any innovation in the tithe but also forbade the people to pay any more than was customary. From this summary decision, which was taken in the absence of the man who was probably responsible for the provocative preaching, an appeal was carried to the King. When the appeal was heard, the question of the rate was also pressed, and both were finally dismissed by the royal Council of State in the summer of 1707.

Laval's biographer is careful to absolve him from all blame for accepting the compromise of 1667. If the father of the Canadian church had not made this concession to public opinion, he would have compromised everything, even the existence of the tithe. So says the Abbé Gosselin, and in this he is probably right. But the explanations offered by him and by others of his cloth are open to criticism. They place the responsibility upon the bad disposition of the civil authorities and upon the poverty of the people. But it was to the interest of the home government to increase the yield of the tithe in the colony, because this would reduce the royal obligation to make up the deficit of the Canadian church. For this very reason, three successive governors were instructed to restore the original rate. Only when the experience of many years seemed to prove that this was

impossible did the Council of State reject the church's demand for it. The repeated accusation that the laymen who ruled in Quebec suborned the people against the church is simply begging the question. It overlooks two important facts: these officials reflected the spontaneous resistance of the people, and the latter found no favour when they disputed the payment established by law and custom. The other allegation, that the habitants were too poor to give any more, is positively ridiculous. They were much better fed, better clothed, better housed than the peasants of France, who rendered their clergy more than twice as much in proportion, for their rate was double and they had fewer exemptions. The Canadians had an abundance of leisure and idle land, but they also had a sturdy independence born of life on the frontier. Long noses might here smell anti-clericalism, but they would be on the wrong scent. The popular resistance to the tithe, which was so effective, was as far removed from a challenge to the spiritual authority of the church as is earth from heaven.

The freedom which permeated Canadian society also baffled the royal autocracy. Witness the many futile decrees to keep the people from wandering in the woods. The weight of the government fell heavily upon the masses at home, but the population of the colony would not bear it. The arbitrary imposition of the *corvée* by the state bent the backs and crushed the spirits of the French peasantry. This was impossible in New France. Here the service was required for the benefit of those who performed it, chiefly in building and repairing their own roads. As Munro has told us, it was essentially the same, even in the provision for commutation, as the statute labour which later generations of English-speaking farmers have contributed to their own communities. The taxes which ground the common people so mercilessly in France were unknown in New France. In fact, the habitants paid no taxes at all. Their economy was so self-sufficient that they paid nothing by way of customs, and they were never subjected to a direct levy. In 1704, the King proposed the establishment of the *capitation* or the *taille* to help defray the expenses of the Canadian administration, and thenceforth ministers repeatedly urged it on governors and intendants; but the officials in Quebec, knowing full well how stubbornly the habitants were opposed to any imposition, were always afraid to undertake it. Thus, as the new President of this Association has remarked, the obstinacy of the Canadians triumphed over the royal will. They were a frontier people, like those of whom Turner wrote, and they had their own independent life. Government meant relatively little to them. In so far as it touched them, it had to accommodate itself to them. Otherwise it could not command obedience.

In various ways throughout the French régime, governor and intendant sought this accommodation, and they found it most completely in the militia captain of every parish. Originally little more than a musketry instructor, he grew to be the general factotum of the government. He was its mouth, its eyes, its ears, and its hands. Every Sunday after mass, the congregation gathered outside the church door, where he read and posted all public notices; and it was his duty to see that these were observed. Legally he was the agent of autocracy, but practically he was the elected representative of the people. The seignior usually recommended him to the Governor as the habitant who was the fittest for this employment, or, in

other words, the natural leader of the community. The Governor then ordered the appointment to be proposed to the parish, which was done at the regular Sunday assembly, and he gave or withheld the commission according as the habitants approved or rejected. Can our more formal and artificial elections produce as true a representation?

Here was real democracy, and it faithfully conformed to the familiar North American type. In contrast to that of the Old World, which developed out of a mass struggle to gain freedom which existing conditions of life denied, the democracy of this continent has existed because the individual would not surrender the freedom which the very conditions of life conferred upon him. It was the freedom of the frontier. This fresh and invigorating breeze from the West blew through New France as well as through the English colonies.