

*THE
SELECTED
PAPERS*

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LOWER CANADA
DURING 1810-14

By Mr. Benjamin Sulte



THE SELECTED PAPERS

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LOWER CANADA DURING 1810-14

By Mr. Benjamin Sulte

The History of the War in Lower Canada during 1812-15 is principally concentrated in the short period comprising the Autumn of 1813, therefore it cannot be compared to the numerous military actions which took place in the Upper Province from the Summer of 1812 to that of 1815, but a description of the state of the Province of Lower Canada from the year 1810 to 1814 is absolutely necessary in order to understand the whole situation of the Canadas of that time.

I will proceed after the following order: 1st, What took place from 1810 to 1813; 2nd, The events of the year 1813.

The wars which had raged in Europe from 1793 to 1800 caused England to draw largely from Canada for various supplies in the shape of timber, masts, ready made ships, hemp, oats, etc. On the continuation of the demand from the Mother Country the population of Lower Canada had gone earnestly into extensive preparation to enable them to sell large quantities of these products, and it must be said that gold was entering abundantly into the Province. The country bordering on the river Chambly was then the best wheat land that could be found in the world; the same with the region from Terrebonne to Three Rivers, on the North Shore of the St. Lawrence; the same with the localities situated South of the City of Quebec. Hemp was cultivated nearly everywhere, oats also; the forest contributed the substance to make tar and rosin of all sorts. The ship building in Quebec was extensive.

The short period of 1801-3, during which Europe was apparently quiet, did not stop the trade of Canada, because England was fully convinced that Napoleon, "who was then only Bonaparte," would take up arms at the first occasion, and the consequence of that foresightedness was a greater development of our trade with England, so much so that in 1802 the lumber which, till then had been standing on the shores of the St. Lawrence, was cut down and the lumbermen entered the rivers flowing into the main one, in order to obtain more of that staple article. It was at that time that the valley of the Ottawa was in some respects discovered by us, and in 1806 rafts began to float from the Gatineau to the St. Lawrence en route for Quebec.

Now that the commercial side of the Province is understood, let us try to explain the feelings and the sentiments of the population in regard to the political affairs of their Province and the threatening invasion of which rumour was already spreading amongst us. The population of the Upper Province was about

70,000 in 1806 when the French Canadians in Lower Canada numbered about 250,000 and had very few Englishmen intermixed with them. Consequently, the Province was entirely French, and although more Englishmen had been elected to the Legislative Assembly than the number of their countrymen would justify, the great majority of that House was necessarily French. Governor General Sir James Craig, newly arrived, had unfortunately to meet the famous case of John Henry, a spy whom Mr. Dunn, the Administrator of the Province before him, had sent to Massachusetts with a view to awake the spirit of that large State in favour of England. As I have already stated, there were rumours of an invasion of Canada from the United States. Massachusetts was, at that time, the governing power, or the Empire State of the American Republic. Her citizens had made up their mind not to join the English nor to aid their sister States, because they had a plan of their own which will be seen afterwards. Henry having failed in his mission came to Governor Craig for his salary, but was refused, and he then delivered up his correspondence to the American Government. It created a scandal which put Sir James Craig in a very delicate position, as the cry of war against Canada had been heard in Congress in Washington, coupled with expressions of defiance against England on account of the Right of Visit which the English vessels exercised on a large scale for the search of deserters. President Madison contended that this constant stopping of the American Navy by the British Cruisers was an abuse in itself and a humiliation to the Americans.

At the same time a bosom friend of Sir James Craig was elected to the Legislative Assembly, but as the Governor had taken a severe attitude towards a certain group of the members who owned a paper published in French and which was the mouth piece of what I may call the Reformers of those days, that friend of Sir James, called Ezechieel Hart, was refused his seat by a majority of the House. This was also the moment when orders from England were received for the re organization of the Militia, which had been for more than 30 years without any knowledge of the handling of fire arms or anything else belonging to Military life. The few corps. which were called upon in this manner had to be officered by four or five of the men belonging to the group above mentioned, because of their influence in the country. Much against his will Sir James was compelled to appoint them. Then came the second Hart trouble, and

as heart disease is very often fatal, this also proved a very dangerous one, for the House again rejected the newly elected member under the pretext that he, being a Jew, could not sit in an Assembly of Christians. This was stabbing Sir James in the person of his friend, and he felt it so keenly that he dismissed the House. The general elections took place amongst a people who had already begun to suspect the Governor of ill feeling towards themselves, and consequently the new House was stronger than ever in opposing the return of Mr. Hart. Sir James had paid a visit to Mr. Hart's house, and had resided there during the time of the votation; this was not calculated to raise the Governor in the esteem of the public at large, and Mr. Hart, who was a man of ability, thought they were going too deep into the fight, so he resigned as a candidate before the polling was over.

Everyone would think that the Session of the House would then be rendered more pleasant than the year before, but two judges having been elected members of the Legislative Assembly, a motion was put before that body to have them resign one of their two functions, Sir James blamed the House openly for doing so and the majority kicked. The situation was worse than ever, and curiously enough in the midst of that firing a bill was passed unanimously granting the Governor power to suspend the *Habeas Corpus Act* on account of certain communications concerning spies and agitators, who were said to be canvassing the Province in favour of the United States. It was also during these debates that the French Canadian group proposed that the finances of the country be left in the hands of the people of Canada, because if England had reason to complain of their persistent deficits from year to year in the Treasury of Lower Canada, it was due to the fact that the expenditures were unreasonable, and members of the House of Assembly pledged their words that they knew how to curtail these expenses and had the means to do so, but they were not listened to and, furthermore, were looked upon as malcontents or even rebels, whilst they were only reformers. Sir James again dismissed the House on the judge question.

Amidst these troubles the celebration of the victories of the British Arms raised the soul and hearts of the population. The battles of the Nile, Trafalgar, Talavera, were celebrated by the whole of the Lower Canadian population with the utmost manifestation of loyalty. *Te Deums* were sung in the churches, sermons preached from the pulpits, and the Bishop of Quebec, Mgr. Plessis, issued circulars to encourage his flock in that direction. It must be observed here that some 50 or 60 priests of high education had found refuge in the province during the years 1795-98, after their exile from France by the Revolution. They were certainly all monarchists, and as they found in Lower Canada a people who were already by their antecedents of monarchial

temperament they made good use of a soil so well prepared for them. All the news coming from France was commented on by them, and the horrors of the Revolution depicted in a vivid manner, all the more impressive if we consider that the orators had been witnesses of most of the facts related in their sermons. Some amongst us might think that on the Consulate coming into power, with Bonaparte at its head, the mind of the French Canadians would be rather changed or tendered shaky. But, we must remember that Bonaparte and his friends were looked upon by the Canadians at large as the continuators of the revolutionary system; therefore the banquets in honour of Nelson and Wellington were attended with enthusiasm and *God Save the Queen* sung in French everywhere. Even songs were composed to commemorate the great actions which had taken place on the other side of the ocean. *Nelson est mort au sein de la victoire*, became so popular that in a book of sacred songs published in 1816, at Quebec, I find one of the canticles headed this way "Sing to the tune: Nelson est mort au sein de la victoire."

Now for a bit of contrast, let us see what was going on in the political circles. The newspaper "*Le Canadien*" in the absence of any debates in the Legislative Assembly (during recess), attracted the attention of Sir James, because it was advocating all the time the reforms above mentioned, and although its language was extremely moderate compared with that of our press at the end of this century, the Governor took objection to the criticisms which he considered were directed against himself personally, and one day a squad of soldiers invaded the printing office, removed the type and the press to a place of safety, whilst other detachments of troops proceeded to the arrest of the printer and the editors, who were all put into gaol without any other formality. Thus Mr. Bedard, who had first voted for the suspension of the *Habeas Corpus* was the first to feel the effects of the new measure. His rank of Lieutenant-Colonel in the Militia was taken from him and his colleagues were dealt with in the same manner, with this exception though, that the latter on being offered afterwards to rejoin their homes accepted the invitation, but Bedard remained in gaol calling for his trial, and he refused absolutely to go unless he had been confronted with a regular tribunal. This sort of things of course did not increase the majority of the Governor's friends in the Legislative Assembly. Strange to say, during the debates of these years, there are very few mentions made of the Executive Council, unless sometimes when we hear an expression of contempt towards it from some of the Members of the Lower House.

One of the main grievances that the Americans entertained against England was the smuggling going on, on the Canadian frontier which separates us from the States of New York, Vermont, Connecticut, New Hampshire and Maine. Hardly any

settlers had been yet established on that long line cutting through the primeval forest, and it was comparatively an easy work to carry goods from the south shore of the St. Lawrence to the entrance of any of those States. The English vessels from the ocean sailed up the St. Lawrence to Lake St. Peter, distributing the goods they carried all along the way, or at one determined spot according to the requirements of the trade. Part of that trade was the smuggling business, and the Americans very soon complained that they were flooded with English articles, when they expected to run their market with manufactures of their own. This state of things prevented forcibly the development of the American industry. Mr. Madison then could point out, as he did, the Henry negotiations, the Right of Search on board of vessels and the smuggling over the Canadian frontier, as three main grievances of his nation against the British Government.

Don't you think this state of affairs was pretty annoying to the Americans? In fact, they had their hands full of complaints, but as they were on friendly terms with the France of Bonaparte who had sold them Louisiana, they deserved to feel a TOUCH of the British opposition in trade and diplomacy.

Things were at this particular point, when Sir James was recalled to England. He left Quebec on the 19th of June, 1811, leaving Mr. Dunn as administrator of the Colony, and Lieutenant-General Drummond to command the forces. In the month of August, 1810, Baron de Rottenburg had replaced Colonel Brock as commandant at Quebec, Brock being sent to Upper Canada. On the 4th of June, 1811, the latter was made Major General. He was at that time busily engaged in putting the Upper Province in a state of defence, with 1,500 regulars. His frontier extended on 1,300 miles without any fortress or engineering resources.

The whole of the regular army was divided as follows: 445 Artillery men, 3,783 Soldiers of the Line, 1,226 Fencible; all told, 5,454 men.

Napoleon prohibited the entrance of English goods into European territories, even to the neutral nations. The British Government then passed an order in council counteracting the effects of the French decree. The Washington authorities joined the Emperor of the French and took no notice of the English manifesto. This was visibly a preparation for war.

Sir George Prevost arrived at Quebec on the 14th September, 1811, and went to Montreal, St. John's, Chambly, Sorel, without delay, besides taking notes and gathering information on all the points of the defences of Lower Canada.

A regiment (the 4th) Of Incorporated Militia was formed during the autumn season by a draft and the men readily joined, for they thought very little of the Yankee, remembering as they did of the old wars, so easy to them against an inexperienced foe.

Songs and speeches solved the question before hand.

On the 9th October, 1811, General Brock succeeded Sir Francis Gore as President and Administrator of Upper Canada. Next month Mr. Madison, President of the United States, officially called the citizens to arms. This was responded to with alacrity. Congress voted large sums of money for the enrolment of several corps. General Brock who had made application to take military service in Europe now decided to remain in Canada. The winter Of 1811 12 was occupied by the United States authorities in getting ready for war. General Brock gathered up all material the army, the volunteers and the militia men of Upper Canada had been provided with from the imperial stores. On the 21st February, 1812, the Quebec Legislature opened. The public accounts of the preceding *Calendar* showed a little over £75,000 revenue and £49,000 expenditure, leaving a surplus - such practice has not, however, been continued in that province. The vessels cleared at the ports of Quebec in 1811 numbered 532 with a tonnage of 116,687; of these 37 had been built that year in Quebec, representing 12,688 tons. This state of prosperity was largely due to the fact that England required the use of all the resources of her colonies, and Canada was paramount in the matters concerning lumber, ship building and wheat growing, the three staple articles required at that time.

Sir George Prevost, in his address to the Legislature, congratulated the nation on the success of the British arms in Spain and Portugal, from which the French had been chased away. He made the remark that the unfortunate and trying events of the last few years in Europe had not affected the inhabitants of Canada who remained as quiet as ever, and somewhat as foreigners to these strange troubles. He said that England, although enjoying an isolated geographical position, had been dragged into the great movement which carried all the other nations. He seems to have had no notion of the understanding between the United States Government and Emperor Napoleon in regard to Canada. The last agreement between the two powers in question was entered into just about that date. Sir George, having reminded the Canadians of the happy life they had led heretofore, asked them, through the Legislature, to take immediate steps to resist any possible aggressive action directed against the country. The House, to a man, responded that they were ready, and some of the speakers on that occasion observed that the people of the country were altogether with the *new* Governor General, making thus a rather ungratifying allusion to poor Sir James Craig. The new Governor answered that the things of the past were forgotten, and the present occurrences were far more serious on account of the threatening war.

John Henry made his reappearance with his claim of £500, hoping fully to create some disturbances in the administration,

but Prevost with a cold rebuke referred him to England and cleared the province of the responsibility of Sir James Craig's hasty interference in the Massachusetts business. Meantime, the Lower House in Quebec kept up an open fire on the late administration. This was pure diplomacy, good policy also; because after recording their vote of loyalty to the Crown in view of an approaching war, the majority of the members desired to express their unwillingness to have a repetition of the abuses of the past. This made a good deal of noise, but it seems that both the Executive and the Legislative Assembly understood one another beforehand, and as the members had been elected in most cases to remonstrate against the doings of Sir James, all parties were fully satisfied.

Of a sudden there came a proposal from the Governor to renew or revive the bill to suspend the *Habeas Corpus* Act, and the House voted unanimously in favour of it, headed by Bedard who had suffered so much from the effect of the first measure in that line. It would seem that the Americans were again sending French emissaries to Lower Canada to move the minds of the people against England, as they had done in 1775, for the House was asked to legislate on that point, but to no purpose, as the Legislative Council did not agree with the Legislative Assembly. I cannot say why. The Militia Bill passed the Lower House after debate. Finally the Governor was empowered to enroll 2,000 men *between the ages of 25 and 40* for three months, but in case of invasion or imminent danger he could retain them under arms during one year, after which half of them were to be replaced by recruits. Moreover the Governor was authorised to make a levy en masse of all the militia men of the province, without acceptance of any substitute, with a proviso that no militia man would be put in the English army without his consent. For this purpose the House voted £12,000, one half for drill and training of local militia; the other half for the ordinary expenses resulting therefrom. The sum of £20,000 was appropriated for various services connected with the safety of the Province. £30,000 were placed at the disposal of the Governor General on the day of the declaration of war between England and the United States. Sir George Prevost signed on the 15th April, 1812, an ordinance to raise a corps of light infantry soon afterwards called the Voltigeurs, which he placed under the command of Major de Salaberry, recently arrived from the West Indies, where he had served under the orders of Sir George himself.

It is a remarkable feature of Canadian history, that the cadets of the best French families we had two hundred years ago, and who were selected by Louis XIV to receive commissions in the French Army in Europe, mostly all came back to Canada at the first bugle sound, and led the militia of their native land against the Iroquois or against the English troops with such supe-

rior prowess and skill. It is useless to say that these militia men of old were officered by French captains; those captains were of Canadian birth, but they had served their time in the regular army, they understood their own country, their countrymen, and knew much about their neighbours also. The same with the young men who entered the British Army under the auspices of the Duke of Kent, from 1792 to about 1800 and who were recalled to Canada for the war of 1812. These men who had seen so many sieges and battles around the world, during the terrible period of 1792 to 1811, came back home full of experience, having obtained their promotion on active service, and well remembered by everybody in what they could still call their home. Their arrival aroused the population. They had come to defend the sacred soil of Canada. They were received accordingly. Sir George Prevost had styled de Salaberry, "le Marquis de la poudre a canon." This was known throughout the Province. On the first appearance of the posters advertising for the enrolment of men of good character to serve under Major de Salaberry, the office was full of applicants, but one of the intended Voltigeurs proved to be rather rough, and de Salaberry soon accommodated him with a pair of black eyes. The next morning some one asked the unfortunate fellow the reason of this, and he answers squarely: "The man who did this to me, is not a mocking bird." In forty hours, the corps was ready. We have now 80 cadets in the British Army from the Royal Military College of Canada; I hope they will be as useful to our community in case of need, as were the cadets of Louis XIV and the protégés of the Duke of Kent.

The Legislature of Lower Canada was prorogued on the 19th of May, 1812, with the warm thanks of the Governor General, who immediately proceeded to Upper Canada, with a view to obtain full information on the defensive resources of the country. He had previously reinstated in their position the officers of the militia, and he felt that on going to the other province, he left behind him a perfect spirit of loyalty and quietness. Security is the word which best expresses the feeling of the population of Lower Canada, for they were at home in every sense of the word they had defended that home against the Iroquois and the English for nearly two centuries, and they were prepared to fight it out against anyone, not because they were soldiers, for they had lost the habits of the camp, but their traditions were there, and they stood by them, knowing that no enemy could touch their land, unless, as in the days of the conquest, they were attacked by masses of good troops. But, as for the Yankees, our people in Lower Canada had made up their mind, these folks are not up to the mark. They even composed a son, on that very point, showing that no Yankee need apply for the possession of Canada they looked upon the country as their own, and were ready to fight for it. Ready to sing and ready to fight, is the char-

acteristic of the French Canadian.

On the first of May, 1812 the Washington Government seized some English vessels in their ports, and on the 18th of June, made their declaration of war. That same day Napoleon also declared war against Russia, and immediately marched across Germany for that purpose. The news from Washington arrived in Quebec on the 24th June, and on the 26th, General Brock who was on the Niagara frontier and who had previously arranged with Sir George Prevost that no aggressive hostilities would take place on the part of the British troops, or the Canadian militia, sent orders to Lake Huron to attack Michilimakinac an American fort at the entrance of Lake Michigan. This was a pretty risky piece of business, but the fort having been carried in a brilliant manner, the Governor General sent his compliments to the General for this first and successful action of the war. It had been decided that the American citizens who happened to be in Lower Canada, were to leave the province on the first of July, but they were granted an additional fourteen days. On the 5th of July, the regulars having all left Quebec for the front, the local militia replaced them for garrison duty and a few days afterwards the same thing was done in Montreal. An order to raise and equip all the men able to bear arms in the province was issued on the 6th July, and on the 16th the Legislature met again, one day before the taking of Michilimakinac. At the end of July, the bulk of the militia were sent home, and the military authorities kept the incorporated battalions only, together with some small corps of cavalry, the Voltigeurs of Salaberry and a detachment of voyageurs nearly all taken from the men, in the employ of the North West Fur Company. The Legislature, having passed several bills in view of the circumstances, was adjourned on the 1st August.

The organization of the American army was not an easy matter, for the lack of good officers, stores and equipment. This accounts partly for their non interference with Lower Can; they were also under the impression that the French Canadians would join them as soon as the English had been driven from Upper Canada.

General Hull, who had been taken prisoner at Detroit, arrived in Montreal on the 6th September and was sent to Quebec with other prisoners from his army.

By that time it became apparent that large bodies of troops were moving from the State of New York toward the frontier of Chateauguay, St. Regis, Lacolle, Odelltown or Four Corners. The cavalry from Montreal were sent to patrol in that direction and were soon followed by some infantry of the militia, the Voltigeurs and the voyageurs. By a general order of the 1st October, the whole of the militia was again called to arms. A general movement was made by the American troops during that

month; they seem to have tried in earnest to invade the two provinces at once. This I attribute to the news coming from Russia purporting that Napoleon by a successful march had reached the vicinity of Moscow. This was pretty correct, but no one yet dreamed of the fearful state of the French Army. On the other hand the Americans, whilst encouraged by the above information, saw that it would be wise, considering the season of the year, to dash into Canada and secure winter quarters before the winter set in; but they were repulsed along the whole line and had to withdraw. The affairs at St. Regis, 23rd October, Lacolle, 17th and 20th November have been described by the historians of the period.

Napoleon was then at Moscow and his prestige at its zenith, but when the Legislature assembled at Quebec on the 29th December the French army was in the act of crossing the Niemen and re entering Poland. Its frightful state of disorganization must have been known to Europe and America, although Sir George Prevost in his speech from the throne did not allude to the possible downfall of the great disturber of nations. Active preparations for the campaign of 1813 were made during the winter. To the surprise of our people the Americans were very slow at the beginning of the summer. It was evident that they calculated upon the movements of Napoleon in Germany where he was battling against tremendous odds. After the victories of Lutzen and Butzen, which at the first glance looked like a great reverse for the French, the hostilities on our frontiers became serious. It was then near the beginning of fall. The months of September and October, 1813, were full of events. The whole of Upper Canada was occupied by the enemy with the exception of the small tract of country between Kingston and the Cedars, but in a few days several engagements in our favour took place, and the battles of Chrysler's Farm and Chateauguay brought the campaign to an end, inasmuch as the result of the battle of Leipzig in Saxony showed at that moment that the star of Napoleon was decidedly on the decline.

It has been said that at that juncture the American Government was willing to accept peace but that they were prevented from making any such offer by the politicians of Massachusetts who had large contracts for the supply of the army and did not wish to curtail their chances to make money.

In the spring of 1814 it was known everywhere that Napoleon was hemmed in between his capital and Champagne; therefore our neighbours did very little in the way of annoying us, and by the middle of June when they heard that fourteen of the best Peninsular regiments had arrived in Quebec they lost all hope of succeeding in their attempt to wrest Canada from Britain. From that hour it may be said the Lower Province was no more engaged in the war, notwithstanding the expedition of

Sir George Prevost against Plattsburg and the keeping afterwards of a contingent of the militia under arms until 1815.

During the whole period of the war, Lower Canada not only stood loyally by the British crown, but being the sole channel of communication with the sea, became really the base of operations from which troops and supplies were constantly sent to the scene of hostilities in the sister province. Thus it appears clearly that each province had a distinct role to play, and that by helping each other they contributed very materially, with the assistance of England, to the happy termination of a struggle which threatened us with danger and disaster. ■

Benjamin Sulte was a French-Canadian who had a remarkable career as a journalist, writer, office holder and historian. Born in 1841, he had joined the Canadian Militia and, after a brief stay in the School of Military Instruction in Quebec, eventually received his captain's certificate.

He was involved in the campaign against the Fenians, and afterwards, entered the Department of Militia and Defence to become chief clerk, a position he would hold until 1903.

Mr. Sulte was a member of, notably, the Institut Canadien-Français of Ottawa, the Cercle des Dix in that city, the Société Historique de Montréal, and the Royal Society of Canada. A gifted speaker and a tireless researcher, he was undoubtedly the most prolific writer of his time, having authored countless articles during his life – more than 3,500 by his own estimate in 1916.



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