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T. R. Glover and D. D. Calvin
Excerpt
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Chapter I

THE KEY OF EMPIRE

§ 1. THE THEME

A quiet old town on the Great Lake, and unprogressive—to the stranger who races through it in his car for some other destination it may seem not unlike the other small towns through which he dashes. There is indeed a certain outward likeness, cultivated by such as love to “keep in line”—let us have (is their feeling) streets of “beautiful homes”, as the Americans call them, lined by well-grown shade-trees and trim lawns without a fence; and then at least one street full of hustling modernity, shoe-parlours, dry goods stores, cinemas, telephone poles, and strings of automobiles, and general tawdriness; add a huge modern school or two, sometimes with 1880 written in every dull line of them. Yes, alas! we have all that; but we have something more—an unusual beauty of scene with open lake and island, a seat of learning, a fortress, a history interwoven with old romance, linking us to great movements of a larger world. A town of three names, Indian, French and English, each recalling great days of our race, heroes of war and peace, men of insight and adventure, soldiers and statesmen—Frontenac, La Salle, Montcalm—and men of less note in the annals of the careless world, who perhaps did as much for mankind in laying the foundations of the British Empire, the “U.E.” Loyalists, who settled Upper Canada, hacked it out of the forest, and then fought for it and kept it British.

§ 2. THE FRENCH KING AND HIS COLONISTS

“His Majesty’s view”, wrote the great Colbert on 17 May 1674, writing on behalf of his master, Louis XIV, “is not

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that you undertake great voyages by ascending the River St Lawrence, nor that the inhabitants spread themselves, for the future, farther than they have already done. . . . He deems it more agreeable to the good of this service that you apply yourself to the clearing and settlement of those tracts which are most fertile and nearest the sea-coasts and the communication with France, than to think of distant discoveries in the interior of the country, so far off that they can never be settled or possessed by Frenchmen.” Statesmen are so obviously sensible and wise; and there was wisdom and sense in this decision; by 1680, we are told, nine thousand French had landed in Canada, and had to the South of them English colonies settled fifty years before with twenty thousand immigrants, colonies daily increasing in numbers, wealth, and power. But a loophole was given by the Minister; Count Frontenac might take possession of countries “necessary to the trade and traffic of the French”, if these were “open to discovery and occupation by any other nation that may disturb French commerce and trade”; and the nation to the South with its Indian allies had been all along and was to remain a great source of disturbance. Furthermore, Frontenac might establish himself in any country that offered France a sea communication from the interior more southerly than the St Lawrence. This gave the great Governor all he needed, and he had already anticipated the concession; our old city was the centre that was to safeguard trade and traffic against any other nation, and to open the door to a great river highway South of the St Lawrence.

“Quelques arpens de neige!” The quip of Voltaire is famous, but he is neither the first nor the last to find men of insight and imagination ridiculous. Founders of colonies and builders of empires have constantly met disaster, and only when they were gone has mankind reaped the fruit of their ideas. Eighty years after Frontenac planted his fort on Lake

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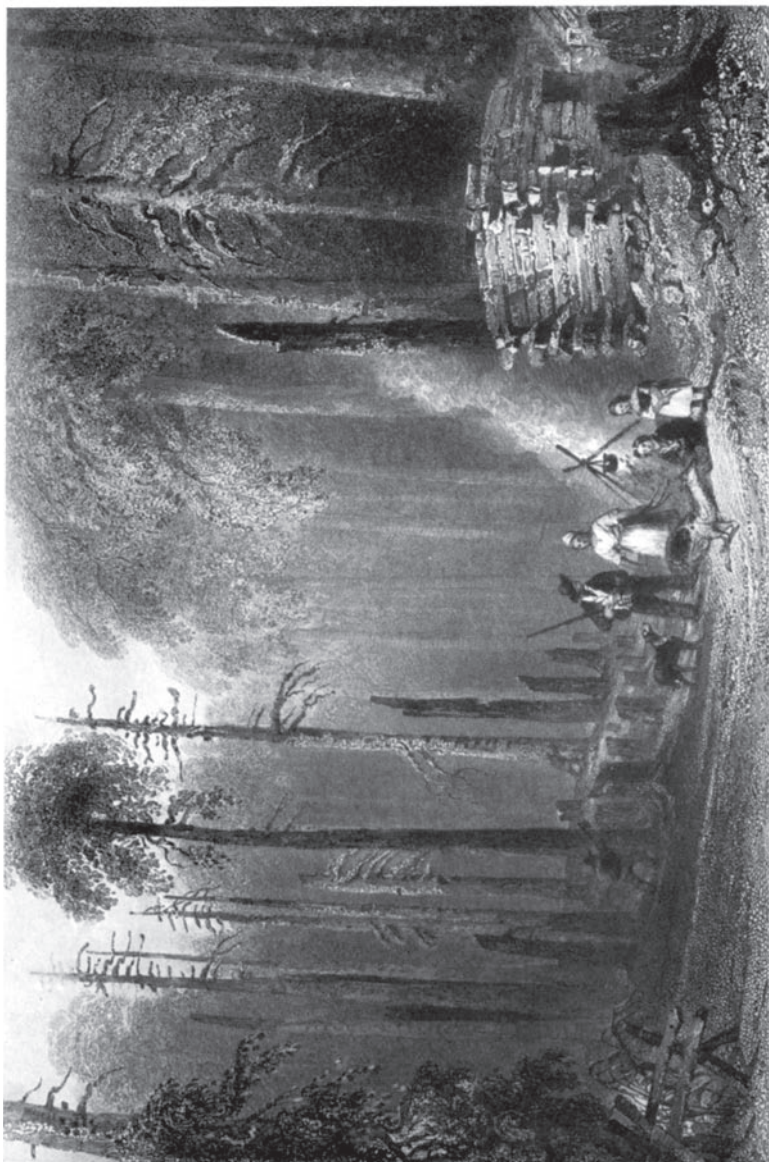
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Plate I



A First Settlement

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Ontario, England and France (Sir John Seeley reinforces Burke in this view) found in the fur trade one at least of the supreme causes for the Seven Years War. The fur trade was not among the reasons for the great Puritan emigration in 1628, perhaps not among the chief grounds for the occupation of Quebec by the French; but it soon became clear how significant the trade was. But the fur trade meant trapper and hunter, and the ranging of the forests and the lakes, ever farther and farther afield; the beaver would not, like the ducks in the nursery rhyme, “come and be killed”. There was competition, fierce and keen, out in the wild; for peace was not the chief ambition of the Indian tribes; and the early settlers in Quebec in 1608 under Samuel Champlain had chosen the wrong side. They had allied themselves with the Hurons, and marched South with them to ravage the lands and villages of the Iroquois, who then realized for the first time the significance of fire-arms. The Iroquois were an intelligent race, already federated in their “Five Houses” by Hiawatha (or the historical fraction of Hiawatha), and they were quick to learn the lesson of this invasion. Fire-arms, and beaver-skins—and first the Dutch traders and later the English at the mouth of the Hudson; the Iroquois put two and two together, and the French for a century and a half had reason to lament Champlain’s mistake, while the Hurons were practically harried out of existence.

The St Lawrence was the proper route for the fur trade, not the Hudson; but if the Iroquois were not controlled, if they were allowed to range to the North of what is now Lake Huron, and West of the Illinois where Chicago stands, Albany and New York would get the furs, not Montreal and Quebec. Frontenac’s predecessor had seen this, and, with the gradual growth of knowledge of the Great Lakes, it became clearer that there must be some system of forts to keep the Iroquois out of these wider lands and to intercept

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the trade. Not everybody saw this; there was the argument for concentration, for strengthening and developing the colony already in being, which needed all the fostering it could have; the Roman clergy were divided—some troubled about the morals of the eager young men who broke away from farm and parish and became *coureurs de bois*, some apostolically eager for regions beyond; and there were commercial jealousies. Everybody who could contribute to the paralysing of enterprise found means to ply their arguments in Paris.

§ 3. LA SALLE AND LA CHINE

But when we look back, we find another series of ideas altogether. What had been the real intention of Columbus? Not to find America, North or South, but to sail to Cipangu, to Japan, to the Orient. Seventeen centuries before him a Greek geographer had maintained that the world was spherical, and therefore, if you could sail out of Spain and keep for ever to the same latitude (this is not a modern term), you would come to the Indies—only the world was so big and the ocean so great that you probably could never get across it; but, he was quite clear, if you *could* cross the Atlantic Sea, *there* was Eastern Asia. Eratosthenes had a very fairly true idea of the circumference of the earth; later on another and less accurate computation reduced the figure, and on this later estimate Columbus relied; the reduction had been taken out of the unsailed sea; he would not have to go as far as Eratosthenes had supposed. So he sailed, and he found, as we all know, lands which he, till he died, believed to be Asiatic; and the inhabitants are called Indians to this day.

But other men realized that the *Novus Orbis* was not the ancient Asia, and that, whatever charms the Spaniards might find in half-way houses as rich as Mexico and Peru, the real goal was beyond. They too were as eager for gold as the

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Spaniards; but, failing lands of gold, which were continually promised and never reached, was there no strait that would take them to the East? Up the coast sailed Cabot, Verrazano, Hudson, Jacques Cartier, looking for a strait; down the coast sailed Amerigo, dotting the shore of Brazil with the names of the saints on whose days he touched; none of them, save Magellan to the very far South, found a strait, and a very awkward strait he found. If there were no straits, was there no other means of getting at the East? There was, as the great sonnet of Keats reminds us, even if he saw the wrong man “silent upon a peak in Darien”. The Spaniards held the Isthmus of Panama, and, but for incursions of Francis Drake and his kind, they controlled the Pacific. They slowly made their way up the Pacific coast, past the dangerous Isle (no isle, but they thought so) to which was somehow attached the name borrowed from some old romance—California; some trade was established with China. Once a year a galleon went up past British Columbia to Alaska, crossed the narrow seas there, and coasted down Asia to China, traded and came back the same way. But it was not till the period of American independence—and then to anticipate English and Russian aggressions—that the Spanish settlements in Alta California were made—San Diego (1769), San Francisco (1776).

No strait but Magellan’s, no isthmus but Panama; was there no other way? There were rumours, which gave hope. Behind the English colonies lay a great mountain range; somewhere, if you set out from the right colony, Virginia or Carolina, and climbed the range, you might get a glimpse Westward of another sea. Men said so; but no reliable European had yet seen it. But even if, just on the other side of the Cumberland gap, rolled the Pacific, that did not help the French. Nor were the English very sure of it, or they would not, in that sixteenth century and onward, have

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devoted so many men and ships to the quest of the North West passage, and the North East passage. True, the North East explorers found a way to Russia, an unexpected trade route; but beyond the White Sea they did not get far; and Russia was not the Orient.

Jacques Cartier in 1534 opened up for the French what might prove a more hopeful route—a route actually in use to-day, but not quite what was wanted then. The St Lawrence Gulf and River could be navigated to Montreal, and in 1608 Samuel Champlain made the small beginning of a great achievement; he planted his little colony of Quebec. In 1642 Maisonneuve founded Montreal on its island, below the inlet of the Ottawa and the impossible rapids, later on to bear the name Lachine. A hundred and sixty miles away was a huge freshwater lake, the name of which was to be decided. In a map of 1688 it is *Lac Frontenac, ou Ontario et Skaniadorio, ou St Louis*; and elsewhere the Lake of the Iroquois. Beyond this was another larger lake, inaccessible by water, cut off by a great cataract that might be spelled (and was spelled) *Onguiaahra*, or more simply *Ongiara*, which after about 1676 took its final form. To the North were other great lakes; but the goal lay Westward after all, and from the West came rumours of a Great Water. It must be the Pacific. The Creator, according to Champlain, had put the calculation of longitude beyond the power of man. The East coast of America was fairly mapped; the Spaniards knew something of the West coast, whatever they revealed of it; how far apart were the West and the East coasts? And till long afterwards geographers and seamen were haunted by the idea of a Strait of Anian. Suppose you carry your goods to a point beyond the rapids just above Montreal, you can sail to the far end of Lake St Louis or Ontario; there you will have to portage round Niagara, and Lake Erie is open to you; how far then will it be to the Great Water, and will there be no

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rivers running into it? Find the river that runs into the Great Water, and you have your route, all French, to China. That was the dream of La Salle; and Colbert wrote that, “after the increase of the colony, there is nothing more important for that country and his Majesty’s service than this discovery of a passage to the South Sea”. But the Mississippi brought La Salle back by a long, weary, and difficult way to the Atlantic. The only China he ever found was his farm by the side of the rapids; La Chine his mocking neighbours called it, and Lachine it remains. The taunt keeps the memory of a great story and of a great man; and however he felt about it himself, a later day counts it all to his honour.

La Salle found no route to China, but he learnt how easy it was to link the St Lawrence with the Mississippi. It had not been easy for him; but he had shown how France might forestall “discovery and occupation by any other nation that may disturb French commerce and trade”. A fort where the St Lawrence leaves Lake Ontario; a fort at Niagara; a colony at or near the mouth of the Mississippi; these for a beginning, easily to be made, and the gap gradually to be filled. New Orleans in name, in tradition, and to some extent in speech, is French to this day, a colony from Canada planted by one of the great house of Le Moyne. But the key position was obviously a fortress on the Ontario strand where Kingston stands. Whether you think of the control of the Iroquois, of the route to China, or the checking of English expansion, a fort on Lake Ontario was the first step, every way necessary. And two great men achieved it.

§ 4. THE FOUNDING OF FORT FRONTENAC

In 1672 Count Frontenac came out to govern the little colony of Canada, with its French population of something under 7000 persons, and this in spite of much fostering and the thoughtful export of brides. No wonder that French historians

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of that century hardly mention the country. No wonder that wise statesmen were against scattering so small a population over a huge continent.

Frontenac had come to Canada, by all accounts, a ruined man of fifty-two. Marriage and property had gone wrong; and, as with so many, there was nothing for him but the colonies. He also had the gift of incurring enmity, by luck or by management. But, with all his limitations, he was a man, and he knew a man when he saw him, and saw with the eyes of a soldier and an empire-builder. His predecessor had seen that it was desirable to have a French fort where the St Lawrence leaves Lake Ontario; Frontenac built it. And when a weak successor destroyed it, Frontenac on his return to Canada, the only French governor twice sent out, rebuilt it.

On 3 June 1673 he set out from Quebec, and taking a look at various posts along the river, he reached Montreal on 15 June. On the 30th, with a force of some 400, French and Indian, in 120 canoes and two flat-boats, he set out to navigate the river. The rapids involved prodigious labour, in which Frontenac himself took a hand. The expedition was to succeed. He writes to France of “the most beautiful piece of country that can be imagined”, the river strewn with islands, forest-clad with oak and other hardwoods—the river banks no less charming with forest and meadow and wild flowers; it might be improved by some clearing, he added. The beauty of the river is famous in spite of clearing.

On 12 July they reached the head of the river, and rounding Cedar Island saw the site that was to be historic. There was an alternative; might not some point up on the Bay of Quinte serve better? But no! Here the Cataraqui fell into the Lake, and the St Lawrence left it, and here should be the fort. The historians of the old city love to linger over the scene, the summer day, the great flotilla, the Count (an artist in the use of pomp), and the gathering of Indians, and—while “pre-