

Pierre-François-Xavier de Charlevoix, *Journal of a Voyage to North-America Undertaken by Order of the French King* (London: Printed for R. and J. Dodsley, 1761), letters III and IV.

From Early Canadiana Online

CIHM no./ICMH no : 32771

Pierre-François-Xavier de Charlevoix was a Jesuit, teacher, and author who came to New France first in 1705. He initially taught French, but eventually would be involved in a range of activities, including assessing the boundaries of the French colonies after the Treaty of Utrecht of 1713 and traveling in search of a western ocean. He spent less than three years in North America, yet his journal contains rich details about the colonial and First Nations societies, geography, wildlife, and missions that were a part of or connected to New France in the early eighteenth century.

(99)

### LETTER III.

*Description of Quebec; character of its inhabitants, and the manner of living in the French colony.*

*Quebec, October 28, 1720.*

*Madam,*

I AM now going to write you some particulars concerning Quebec; all the descriptions I have hitherto seen of it are so faulty, that I imagined I should do you a pleasure in drawing you a true portrait of this capital of New France. It is truly worthy of being known, were it only for the singularity of its situation; there being no other city besides this in the known world that can boast of a fresh water harbour a hundred and twenty leagues from the sea, and that capable of containing a hundred ships of the line. It certainly stands on the most navigable river in the universe.

This great river as high as the island of Orleans, that is to say, at the distance of a hundred and ten or twelve leagues from the sea, is never less than four or five leagues in breadth; but above this island it suddenly narrows, and that at such a rate as to be no more than a mile broad at Quebec; from which circumstance this place has been called which communicates with a very elevated cavalier, on which stands a windmill fortified. As you descend from this cavalier, and at the distance of a musket shot from it, you meet first a tower fortified with a bastion, and at the same distance from this a second. The design was to line all this with stone, which was to have had the same angles with the bastions, and to have terminated at the extremity of the rock, opposite to the palace, where there is already a small redoubt, as well as on Cape Diamond. Why this has not been put in execution I have not learned. Such, Madam, was the condition of the place nearly in 1711, when the English fitted out a great armament for the conquest of Canada, which was cast away through the temerity of the admiral, who, contrary to the advice of his pilot,

went too near to the Seven Islands, where he lost all his largest ships, and three thousand of his best troops.

Quebec is still at this day in the same situation, which you may assure yourself of by the plan in relievo, which M. de Chaussegros de Leri, chief engineer, sends into France this year, to be placed with the other plans of fortified places in the Louvre. After having informed you of what relates to the exterior of our capital, I must now say a word or two with respect to its principal inhabitants; this is its best side, and if by considering only its houses, squares, streets, churches, and publick [*sic*] buildings, we might reduce it to the rank of our smallest cities in France, yet the quality of those who inhabit it, will sufficiently vindicate us in bestowing upon it the title of a capital.

I have already said, that they reckon no more than seven thousand souls at Quebec; yet you find in it a small number of the best company, where nothing is wanting that can possibly contribute to form an agreeable society. A governor-general, with an *etat-major*, a noblesse, officers, and troops, an intendant, with a superior council, and subaltern jurisdictions, a commissary of the marine, a grand provost, and surveyor of the highways, with a grand master of the waters and forests, whose jurisdiction is certainly the most extensive in the world; rich merchants, or such as live as if they were so; a bishop and numerous seminary; the recollects and jesuits, three communities of women well educated, assemblies, full as brilliant as any where, at the lady Governess's, and lady Intendants. Enough, in my opinion, to enable all sorts of persons whatever to pass their time very agreeably.

They accordingly do so, every one contributing all in his power to make life agreeable and chearful [*sic*]. They play at cards, or go abroad on parties of pleasure in the summer-time in calashes or canoes, in winter, in sledges upon the snow, or on skaits [*sic*] upon the ice. Hunting is a great exercise amongst them, and there are a number of gentlemen who have no other way of providing handsomely for their subsistence. The current news consist of a a [*sic*] very few articles, and those of Europe arrive all at once, though they supply matter of discourse for great part of the year. They reason like politicians on what is past, and form conjectures on what is likely to happen; the sciences and fine arts have also their part, so that the conversation never flags for want of matter. The Canadians, that is to say, the Creoles of Canada draw in with their native breath an air of freedom, which renders them very agreeable in the commerce of life, and no where in the world is our language spoken in greater purity. There is not even the smallest foreign accent remarked in their pronunciation.

You meet with no rich men in this country, and it is really great pity, every one endeavouring to put as good a face on it as possible, and nobody scarce thinking of laying up wealth. They make good cheer, provided they are also able to be at the expence [*sic*] of fine cloaths [*sic*]; if not, they retrench in the article of the table to be able to appear well dressed. And indeed, we must allow, that dress becomes our Creolians extremely well. They are all here of very advantageous stature, and both sexes have the finest complexion in the world; a gay and sprightly behaviour, with great sweetness and politeness of manners are common to all of them; and the least rusticity, either in language or behaviour, is utterly unknown even in the remotest and most distant parts.

The case is very different as I am informed with respect to our English neighbours, and to judge of the two colonies by the way of life, behaviour, and speech of the inhabitants, nobody would hesitate to say that ours were the most flourishing. In New England and the other provinces of the continent of America, subject to the British empire, there prevails an opulence which they are utterly at a loss how to use; and in New France, a poverty hid by an air of being in easy circumstances, which seems not at all studied. Trade, and the cultivation of their plantations strengthen the first, whereas the second is supported by the industry of its inhabitants, and the taste of the nation diffuses over it something infinitely pleasing. The English planter amasses wealth, and never makes any superfluous expence [sic]; the French inhabitant again enjoys what he has acquired, and often makes a parade of what he is not possessed of. That labours for his posterity; this again leaves his offspring involved in the same necessities he was in himself at his first setting out, to and extricate themselves as they can. The English Americans are averse to war, because they have a great deal to lose; they take no care to manage the Indians from a belief that they stand in no need of them. The French youth, for very different reasons, abominate the thoughts of peace, and live well with the natives, whose esteem they easily gain in time of war, and their friendship at all times. I might carry the parallel a great way farther, but I am obliged to conclude; the King's ship is just going to set sail, and the merchantmen are making ready to follow her, so that, perhaps, in three days time, there will not be so much as a single vessel of any sort in the road.

*I am, & c.*

LETTER

(115)

LETTER IV.

*Of the Huron village of Loretto. The causes  
which have prevented the progress of the French  
colony of Canada. Of the current money.*

*Quebec, Feb. 15, 1721*

*Madam,*

I AM just returned from a little journey or pilgrimage of devotion, of which I shall give you an account; but I must in the first place inform you, that I was mistaken when in the conclusion of my last letter I had told you, that before three days were over, the road of Quebec would be empty. A ship belonging to Marseilles is still there, and has even found the means of being so under the protection of the ice with which the river is covered. This is a secret which may have its use. It is good to have resources against all accidents that can happen.

The captain of this vessel had taken up his anchors on the second of September towards evening, and after falling down the river about a league, he came to anchor again, in order to wait for some of his passengers, who came on board after it was quite dark. He gave orders to have every thing ready as soon as it should ebb water, and went early to bed. About midnight, he was

wakened with the news that the vessel was filling with water; he caused north, and go out of its own accord, when it ought to have displayed itself with the greatest activity, they have behaved at the approach of our people, as an experienced pilot does at the sight of an unavoidable tempest. They wisely gave way to the storm, and afterwards, without interruption, repaired the damages their settlements had received from it; and by this conduct, though continually worsted in Newfoundland, whether they acted on the offensive or defensive, they have always carried on an incomparably greater trade than their conquerors, and have at last remained the sole masters and peaceable possessors of that island.

We have behaved still worse in Canada; this great and rich province has been for a long time divided amongst several private persons, none of whom have enriched themselves, whilst the English have made immense profits by the fishery on its coasts. The settlements which these proprietors have made, wanting solidity, and they themselves being destitute of a regular plan, and the one destroying the other, they have left the country nearly in the same condition in which they found it, and in a state of contempt and neglect from which it has not recovered till the moment we lost it. Our enemies were the first who made us sensible of its value.

The only trade to which this colony has been long reduced, is that of furs; and the faults committed in it are past number. Perhaps, our national character never showed itself in a stronger light than in this affair. When we discovered this vast Continent, it was full of wild beasts. A handful of Frenchmen has made them almost entirely disappear in less than an age, and there are some the species of which is entirely destroyed. They killed the elks and mouse-deer merely for the pleasure of killing them, and to shew their dexterity. They had not even the precaution to interpose the authority of the prince to stop such a flagrant disorder. But the greatest mischiefs arose from the insatiable avidity of private persons, who applied themselves solely to this commerce.

They arrived for the most part from France, with nothing but what they had on their backs, and they were impatient to appear in a better situation. At first this was an easy matter; the Indians knew not what riches were contained in their woods, till the rapaciousness with which their furs were bought up made them acquainted with it; prodigious quantities were got from them for trifles, which many would not have been at the trouble to gather together. Even since they have had their eyes opened with respect to the value of this commodity, and have acquired a taste for something more solid, it was for a long time very easy to satisfy them at a small expence [*sic*]; and with a little prudence this trade might have been continued on a tolerable good footing.

Nevertheless, we should be puzzled to name but one family at this day which has grown rich by this traffick [*sic*]. We have seen fortunes equally immense and sudden, rise up, and disappear almost at the same time, not unlike to those moving mountains mentioned by travellers, which the wind raises or throws down in the sandy desarts [*sic*], of Africa. Nothing has been more common in this country than to see people dragging out a languishing old age in misery and disgrace, after having been in a condition to settle themselves on an honourable footing. After all, Madam, those fortunes which private persons, who never deserved them, have failed of acquiring, are not worthy of the publick's [*sic*] regret, if the bad consequences had not fallen upon the colony, which, in a short time, was reduced to the condition of seeing a spring,

from whence so much riches might have flowed into its bosom, entirely dried up or diverted into another channel.

Its great plenty was the beginning of its ruin. By means of accumulating beaver skins, which has always been the principal object of this commerce, so great a quantity were heaped up in the warehouses that no vent could be found for them, whence it happened, that the merchants declining to buy any more, our adventurers, called here *Coueurs de Rois*, or hunters, took the resolution of carrying them to the English, and many of them settled in the province of New York. Several attempts were made to put a stop to the progress of these desertions, but to little effect; on the contrary, those who had been led by motives of interest, to take refuge among their neighbours, were kept there by the fear of punishment; and the vagabonds, who had acquired a taste for a wandering and independant [*sic*] life, remained amongst the savages or Indians, from whom they were no longer distinguishable but by their vices. They frequently had recourse to amnesties to recal [*sic*] those fugitives, which were at first of little consequence; but in the end being managed with prudence, they produced part of the effect promised from them.

Another method was made use of which was still more efficacious; but those people who were zealous for good order and the advancement of religion, found the remedy worse than the disease. This was to grant permission to those in whom they thought they could repose confidence to trade in the Indian countries, and to prohibit all others from going out of the colony. The number of these licences was limited, and they were distributed amongst poor widows and orphans, who might sell them to the *Traders* for more or less, according as the trade was good or bad, or according to the nature of the places to which the licences granted the liberty of trading; for they used the precaution to specify those places, to prevent too great a number from going the same way.

Besides those licences, the number of which was regulated by the court, and the distribution of which belonged to the governor-general, there were others for the commandants of sorts, and for extraordinary occasions, which the governor still grants under the name of simple *Permissions*. Thus one part of our youth is continually rambling and roving about; and though those disorders, which formerly so much disgraced this profession, are no longer committed, at least not so openly, yet it infects them with a habit of libertinism, of which they never entirely get rid; at least, it gives them a distaste for labour, it exhausts their strength, they become incapable of the least constraint, and when they are no longer able to undergo the fatigues of travelling, which soon happens, for these fatigues are excessive, they remain without the least resource, and are no longer good for any thing. Hence it comes to pass, that arts have been a long time neglected, a great quantity of good land remains still uncultivated, and the country is but very indifferently peopled.

It has been often proposed to abolish those pernicious licences, not with a view of hurting the trade, but even of rendering it more flourishing, and for that purpose to make some French settlements in proper places, where it would be easy to assemble the Indians, at least for certain seasons of the year. By this means, this vast country would be insensibly filled with inhabitants, and perhaps, this is the only method by which that project which the court has so long had at heart of *Frenchifying* the Indians, that is the term they make use of, could be brought about. I believe, I may at least affirm, that if this method had been followed, Canada would have been at

present much better peopled than it is; that the Indians drawn and kept together by, the comforts and conveniencies [*sic*] of life, which they would have found in our settlements, would not have been so miserable, nor so much addicted to a wandering life, and consequently their numbers would have encreased [*sic*], whereas they have diminished at a surprising rate, and would have attached themselves to us in such a manner that we might now have disposed of them as of the subjects of the crown; besides, that the missionaries would have had fewer obstacles to encounter with in their conversion. What we now see at Loretto, and amongst a small proportion of the Iroquoise, Algonquins, and Abenakis, settled in the colony, leaves, no room to doubt the truth of what I have advanced, and there are none of those who have had the greatest intercourse with the Indians, who do not agree, that these people are not to be depended on, when they are not Christians. I want no other example, but that of the Abenakis, who, though far from being numerous, have been during the two last wars the chief bulwark of New France against New England.

Besides this project, Madam, which I have been just now explaining to you, is as old as the colony; it was formed by M. de Champlain its founder, and has been approved of by almost all the missionaries I have known, whose painful labours in the situation things have long been in, produce no great good effects, at least in the distant missions. It would be now, indeed, too late to resume this design with respect to the Indians, who disappear in a manner as sensible as it is inconceivable. But what hinders its being followed with respect to the French, and enlarging the colony by degrees, till it should join to that of Louisiana, and thus strengthen the one by the other? It has been in this manner, that the English, in less than a century and a half have peopled above five hundred leagues of the country, and formed a power upon this Continent, which when we view it nearly we cannot, but behold with terror.

Canada is capable of furnishing many articles for a trade with the West-India islands, and sometimes actually sends thither no mean quantity of flour, planks, and other timber proper for building. As there is, perhaps, no country in the whole world, which produces more sorts of wood nor of better kinds, you may judge what immense riches may be one day drawn from it. It appears that very few persons are well informed with respect to this point. Nor am I, as yet, sufficiently informed myself, to be able to enter into a more minute detail; I am somewhat better acquainted with what relates to the oil-trade, and shall have occasion to speak of it very soon: As I am in a hurry to finish this letter, I have only time to conclude what relates to the commerce of this country in general.

VOL. I. K No-