

## The St. Lawrence : River and Sea

Cole Harris

Volume 11, Number 23, 1967

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/020724ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/020724ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Département de géographie de l'Université Laval

### ISSN

0007-9766 (print)

1708-8968 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Harris, C. (1967). The St. Lawrence : River and Sea. *Cahiers de géographie du Québec*, 11(23), 171–179. <https://doi.org/10.7202/020724ar>

### Article abstract

Dès l'aube de la colonie, le Saint-Laurent a été la voie de l'humanisation des paysages québécois, l'axe privilégié de peuplement de l'Est canadien, le facteur dominant de ses pulsations économiques et politiques. L'auteur, limitant son propos à la période antérieure au régime confédéral (1867), s'interroge sur les facteurs qui ont fait du Saint-Laurent le pôle géographique du Canada français et sur les

« définitions » successives du fleuve, de 1608 à 1867.

De 1608 à 1665, le fleuve fut une *voie de commerce international* des fourrures, de conquête des terres du ponant totalement « extroverti », il était au service des vieux pays, plus que du Canada. A partir de 1665, les efforts de peuplement agricole de Jean Talon lui donnent une importance de premier plan dans la vie de relations à l'intérieur de la Nouvelle-France, dont il est l'unique *route* ; il commence alors à devenir *mer intérieure*. //le restera pour la majeure partie des Canadiens français, jusqu'aux années 1830-1840, tout au long de leur phase de repliement rural, en dépit des activités de commerce international qu'animaient depuis 1765 des entrepreneurs anglophones employant une main d'oeuvre canadienne. Mais la notion de *Saint-Laurent - mer intérieure* s'affirmera presque sans partage, chez les Canadiens français, à partir de 1840. Le commerce du bois, celui des grains, les constructions navales sont entre les mains des Britanniques ; les *habitants* renforcent le caractère autarcique de leur agriculture et de leur genre de vie ; leurs relations avec la France sont à peu près nulles depuis le tournant du siècle. Le concept dominant de *Saint-Laurent - mer intérieure* qui a prévalu alors n'a pas été sans danger pour la nation canadienne-française et pour son insertion dans le monde industriel qui s'épanouissait de part et d'autre de l'Atlantique.

# THE ST. LAWRENCE : RIVER AND SEA

by

Cole HARRIS

*Department of Geography, University of Toronto*

The first Frenchman to describe Canada commented on the might and majesty of the St. Lawrence river ; the first seigneuries were conceded along it ; and until well into the 18th century almost all Canadians lived within three or four miles of its banks. As the population of French Canada rose, more people moved away from the river and, eventually, out of the St. Lawrence valley ; but in paintings, songs, novels, and in many other ways, including the decision to publish this issue of the *Cahiers*, the river has remained a part of French Canadian life. A recent study of Québec from 1760 to 1791 begins with these sentences : « The great river was the centre and heart of all life in the old province of Québec ... The whole rhythm of the country's life, economic and political, was governed by the habits of the river ... »<sup>1</sup> Similar statements are common in the literature on French Canada.

There remains a need to enquire into the ways in which the river was the centre and heart of life in Québec, what the economic and political rhythm of the colony was, and how the river bore upon it. It is one thing to emphasize the importance of the St. Lawrence river, and another to answer these questions which are as complex as any that may be asked about Québec. Perhaps the matter may be clarified if it is approached by way of the improbable question : Is the St. Lawrence a river or a sea ? The word river implies movement and connections with specific places. It leads thoughts outward along an axis. The common comparison of early Canada to an extended main street is an image of the river. The sea suggests a more diffuse connection. The sea is all main streets, the world highway. Alternatively it may be a border if, for one reason or another, people along its shore are cut off from the outside world. Theirs may be thought of as the world of the inland sea. In the short essay which follows, I have attempted to outline very tentatively the relevance of the concepts of the river, the inland sea, and the high sea to an understanding of the changing relationships before confederation of French Canadians with the St. Lawrence.

## *The St. Lawrence during the French regime*

Although there were frequent protestations to the contrary, Canada was established primarily for the fur trade for which the lower St. Lawrence was an admirable base. No other site could have been as advantageous except possibly one in Hudson Bay, and because of the difficulty of entry to the Bay, and the concentrations of beaver around the Great Lakes and in the southern fringes of

---

<sup>1</sup> Hilda NEATBY, *Québec, The Revolutionary Age, 1760-1791*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart Limited (1966), p. 1.

the Shield, even Hudson Bay did not have as much to offer. The *Compagnie des Cent-Associés*, which in 1627 has been granted a charter to eastern North America, had been expected to develop the agricultural potential of the lower St. Lawrence by bringing three hundred settlers in 1628 and 4,000 more during the next fifteen years. But agricultural colonization was an unwelcome burden to a company which had been established for the fur trade, and it did little to bring settlers and to develop land. Had the *Compagnie des Cent-Associés* and the company which preceded it made agricultural settlement their primary objective, they would probably have established a settlement to the south as close to Jamestown as possible, and the French or English destiny of most of North America would have been decided very much earlier. But the companies were formed for the fur trade, for which the St. Lawrence was the obvious base, and the side effects of their ventures in the New World had to fit in as best they could.

In these early years the image of a colony dominated by the river is entirely accurate. In spite of Champlain's attempts to establish a broadly based colony, and the enthusiastic comments of Pierre Dubois-Davaugour (the last governor under the jurisdiction of the *Compagnie des Cent-Associés*) that in Canada he had eaten « d'aussy bons melons qu'en Espagne et qu'en Italie »,<sup>2</sup> there was little agriculture. Montréal and Québec were fur trading posts, and the entire colony was an outpost of the trade almost as completely as later on were the fur trading posts farther west. The St. Lawrence led to the fur country and to France. Contacts with the Iroquois, English, and Dutch had revealed that the route was vulnerable, and the marauding of the Kirkes was a warning that the colony could have a marine location.

In 1663 the king revoked the charter of the *Compagnie des Cent-Associés*, and Canada passed under royal control. The king sent his officials to the colony, and for a few years, regular contingents of settlers. The population rose from just over 2,000 people in 1663 to some 4,000 in 1667. A thousand of these settlers lived in Québec, Montréal, and Trois-Rivières; the rest were spread out along the côte de Beaupré, around the Île d'Orléans, and for several miles on either side of Montréal and east of Trois-Rivières. By 1692 the population of Canada was approximately 11,000.

These changes began to alter the relationship of Canadians to the St. Lawrence. In 1665 Jean Talon, the king's first intendant in Canada, had found « une foreste qui estoufe a mon sentiment de belles et riches productions »,<sup>3</sup> but slowly in the ensuing years the forest was pushed back and agriculture extended. In his brilliant *Histoire économique et sociale du Québec, 1760-1850*,<sup>4</sup> Fernand Ouellet argues that when the agricultural collapse in the early 19th century broke the bonds of empire, French Canadians began to treat the St. Lawrence as an inland sea. It is probable, however, that agriculture along the lower St. Lawrence was never well connected to empire, and that as it developed in the last four decades of the 17th century the sway of the river began to be undermined.

<sup>2</sup> Davaugour au ministre, 1661, AC, C 11 A, Vol. I, 356-7.

<sup>3</sup> Talon au ministre, 4 Oct., 1665, AC, C11 A, Vol. II, 199-223.

<sup>4</sup> Fernand OUELLET, *Histoire économique et sociale du Québec, 1760-1850*, Montréal and Paris, Fides (1966).

To be sure, the fur trade still dominated the life of the colony, and in the height of the second Iroquois war agriculture was virtually impossible in its more westerly parts. Nor was the distinction between habitant and *coureur de bois* as sharp as Saunders,<sup>5</sup> Clark,<sup>6</sup> and others have suggested. Many farmed one year and spent the next in the fur country, while others who operated cabarets (really farm houses where *l'eau de vie* could be obtained) traded with Indians who came to the lower St. Lawrence. Yet, an alternative occupation to the fur trade had been established. Farming supported the farmer and his family, and often supplied a modest surplus which was sold in Québec or Montréal, or occasionally to peddlers who were beginning to tour the countryside. Whereas the fur trade placed Canada on a route between the interior of North America and the metropole, agriculture tended to isolate the colony from either.

During the last sixty years of the French regime settlement spread for more than two hundred miles along either bank of the St. Lawrence, and the population rose to more than 60,000. These were also years when the fur trade arched in a broad crescent from the lower St. Lawrence to Louisiana and almost to the Rocky Mountains. It employed a larger labour force than ever before but, as the population rose along the lower St. Lawrence, a steadily smaller percentage of Canadians. Many in the fur trade had forsaken an agricultural life for good, and as more and more Canadians depended on agriculture for a livelihood, the division between the world of the river and that of the inland sea was reinforced. Although some peas were sent to France, and wheat or flour, peas, and meat were shipped more regularly to Louisbourg and the French possessions in the West Indies, these markets consumed a small fraction of the Canadian agricultural output. The many attempts to establish hemp, a crop that could have tied Canadian agriculture closely to empire, did not succeed because of the habitants' inexperience with it and the high costs of shipments to France. For similar reasons, attempts to establish industries in the colony were never very successful. The Atlantic and France were much less a part of the habitants' world than the interior of North America, but for the increasing percentage of the habitants who were not involved in the fur trade the image of the interior was also beginning to fade.

In the summer of 1759 Wolfe's fleet transformed the St. Lawrence into an extension of the high seas as had the appearance of British warships in the gulf since the days of the Kirkes. French privateers had also treated Québec as an ocean port but otherwise the St. Lawrence was not an extension of the high sea during the French regime.

#### *The St. Lawrence in the aftermath of the conquest, 1760-1802*

Although its European outlet had changed, the St. Lawrence continued to function as a route between the interior of North America and Western

<sup>5</sup> R. M. SAUNDERS, *The Emergence of the Coureurs de Bois as a social type*, in *Canadian Historical Association Report* (1939), pp. 22-33.

<sup>6</sup> S. D. CLARK, *The Social Development of Canada*, University of Toronto Press (1942), Chapter I.

Europe. The fur trade was interrupted only briefly by the conquest, and not at all by the Royal Proclamation of 1763, which in theory sealed off the West; even after Jay's Treaty in 1794 traders from the lower St. Lawrence operated south of the Great Lakes, while the old hinterland had been enlarged to the northwest. Fur exports from Canada reached their highest levels in the 1790's. In the immediate aftermath of the conquest, most of this trade remained in French Canadian hands, but by the end of the century almost all the entrepreneurs in the fur trade were of British background, as were those in shipbuilding, the timber trade, and the fishery. The labour force in each of these enterprises was predominantly French Canadian, but at the managerial level the St. Lawrence had become a British river.

These conclusions have been carefully documented,<sup>7</sup> but the question remains of the meaning of the St. Lawrence for French Canadians. The point of view of the nationalistic historians is essentially that the St. Lawrence became an inland sea. Cut off from France, overridden by an alien culture, and progressively excluded from the upper levels of the commercial world, French Canadian society turned inward and backward to cherished values from the French regime. On the other hand, Fernand Ouellet argues that the conquest replaced one mercantile, monarchic and aristocratic tradition with another. French Canadians transferred allegiance from a French to an English king; clerics and the seigneurs welcomed Murray's and Carleton's support for the seigneurial system; and all levels of French Canadian society benefited by connections with the larger markets of the British empire. In the prosperous years of the 1790's and the aftermath of the French revolution, French Canadian enthusiasm for British institutions and values verged on anglomania. Most simply, Ouellet's is an argument for the importance of the concept of the St. Lawrence as a river during the last four decades of the 18th century.

Probably the most realistic picture lies somewhere between these views. It is difficult to imagine either that the river suddenly dropped out of French Canadian life or that the image of an inland sea, which had been growing clearer since the last 17th century, was wiped out. The French Canadians who worked in the shipyards, the fur trade, or the lumber camps were cogs in a British mercantile system. Their livelihood revolved around the river, although as the population of French Canada rose rapidly in the last decades of the 18th century, they probably became a steadily smaller percentage of the French Canadian labour force. Even more than during the French regime, farming was the French Canadian way of life. Ouellet points out that exports of agricultural products, particularly of wheat, rose rapidly during these years, and argues that agriculture along the lower St. Lawrence became tied to empire,<sup>8</sup> but his case is far from conclusive. It is not clear that agricultural output rose on the ordinary farm, or that a larger percentage of the agricultural production of the lower St. Lawrence was exported. Surpluses may have come from the fertile land on a fringe of newly cleared rotures rather than from the older farms along the St. Lawrence.

---

<sup>7</sup> OUELLET, *op. cit.*, chs. 3-5; NEATBY, *op. cit.*, pp. 219-20.

<sup>8</sup> OUELLET, *op. cit.*, chs. 10-12.

Before more can be said about the connections between agriculture and empire during this period, we need to know more about the agriculture along the lower St. Lawrence.

During the French regime the weakness of French seapower had occasionally opened Canada to the high seas, but Wolfe's fleet had no successors. Between the conquest and the American revolution traders from the British colonies to the south appeared at the port of Québec, although this connection was almost completely broken after 1783. With only one deep sea port and a long and difficult entrance to it through the Gulf of St. Lawrence, shipping to and from the colony was relatively easily controlled. The British navy and British preferential tariffs sealed Québec from most of the outside world. Goods were shipped from Québec to Britain or, in smaller quantities, to other British colonies, but these were the shipments of a river port.

*The St. Lawrence from 1830-1840.*

Well before the merger of the Northwest Company with the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821, the St. Lawrence fur trade had dried up. The Northwest Company was admirably suited to territorial expansion but not to steady competition, especially when its lifelines extended from Montréal to the Pacific. Although well after 1821 French Canadians provided much of the manpower of the trade, few of the voyageurs maintained any connections with the lower St. Lawrence. To some extent the fur trade had been replaced by the timber trade which, as a result of the Napoleonic Wars and a stronger imperial preference, had expanded rapidly during these years. Ouellet estimates that as much as one eighth of the French Canadian labour force may have been employed in the lumber camps, the sawmills, and in rafting timber to Québec. Yet only a very small fraction of the old fur trading hinterland of the lower St. Lawrence had been reestablished. The world of the lumber trade was the Ottawa valley, or the sawmills within seigneurial lands or adjacent to them in the Shield or the Appalachian Highlands. The image of the interior of North America in the collective consciousness of French Canadians had been fading since the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, but in this period it disappeared altogether. For French Canadians the St. Lawrence led no further west than to the lumber camps along the upper Ottawa.

At the same time, French Canadian connections with the North Atlantic were further weakened. At the entrepreneurial level, the timber, grain, and shipbuilding trades were almost entirely in British hands. The labour force remained French Canadian, and that employed in the timber trade or in shipbuilding remained a part of an imperial commercial system. But in these years of agricultural collapse, the story of which has been superbly told by Ouellet,<sup>9</sup> Québec became an importer of agricultural produce. Although Ouellet may have exaggerated the importance of the agricultural connections with empire in the earlier period, he is undoubtedly right that in these years it disappeared almost entirely. French Canadian agriculture became more nearly self-sufficient; it

---

<sup>9</sup> OUELLET, *loc. cit.*

supported the farmer and his family and a portion of the urban market. For most French Canadians the St. Lawrence led nowhere. It had become more completely an inland sea than ever before or since.

At this time French Canadian nationalists incorporated the image of the inland sea in their distinctive version of the North American myth of the garden. Commerce, they argued, was demoralizing and self-defeating in the long run. The great commercial cities of antiquity had fallen into ruin. So in time would the British commercial edifice in Canada. Enduring values and a virtuous life were possible only on the land; the French Canadians in the timber trade had abandoned such a life for a debauched one in the lumber camps. There were antecedents of this attitude in the countless denunciations by officials and clerics in Canada during the French regime of the way of life of the *coureurs de bois*, but then criticism was directed at the conduct of the trade rather than at trade itself. In rejecting commerce and the river for the simple life on the land, French Canadian nationalism made a virtue of what had become fact.

A bucolic image of Canada before the conquest, and some of the institutions—particularly the *Coutume de Paris* and the seigneurial system—which were inherited from that period, became focal points of this nationalism. French Canadian thought had become retrospective, and the French regime emerged as a golden age of beneficent seigneurs and parish priest, and happy, dependent habitants. There were many ironies in this view. Canada had been established for the fur trade, that is, for commerce, and the fur trade had been a mainstay of the colony through the French regime. The provisions of the *Coutume de Paris* which were designed to protect scarce land were largely irrelevant when land was abundant, as it was in most areas throughout the French regime, and were by-passed in fact if not in law. This was even more true of the seigneurial system. The attempt to establish a landed aristocracy when land was virtually free and the peasantry could not be controlled, had failed. The legal structure of Canadian seigneurialism began to acquire social and economic significance only as the population pressure on land increased, and for the most part this was after the conquest. The French regime to which the nationalists looked back nostalgically may in fact have corresponded more closely to the merchants' ideal.

#### *The St. Lawrence from 1840 to Confederation*

The Act of Union at the beginning of this period, and confederation at its end, reflected the re-emergence of the St. Lawrence as a river. Although the group of British merchants was still most committed to the river, French Canadian opinion had become less recalcitrant on questions relating to commerce. Whereas before the rebellion of 1837 the *parti canadien* and its successor the *parti des patriotes* had systematically blocked legislation for the improvement of roads and for the canalization of the St. Lawrence, both projects were pursued during the 1840's. The 1850's were years of railway construction. Railways and canals connected Québec to a portion of its old hinterland, but they also reflected the vulnerability of the St. Lawrence route. Almost two centuries before, officials in Canada had urged the purchase or conquest of New Amsterdam in

order to give Canada a year-round port and to eliminate the competition of the Hudson River route to the interior. Competition from this route had intensified over the years, and the St. Lawrence canals and railways of the 1840's and 1850's were belated responses to the Erie Canal and to American railways. Although the merchants were the principal supporters of these improvements, many French Canadians accepted the fact that the agricultural shortage had become a chronic condition, and that trading links with Ontario were essential. To the east, the continued expansion of the timber trade, shipbuilding, and the general commercial prosperity of the 1850's tied the colony more closely to the North Atlantic.

Within Québec, years of agitation by the merchants, and the increasing uneasiness of the habitants in the face of rising *cens et rentes* and other seigneurial charges, led in 1854 to a bill which paved the way for the gradual abolition of the seigneurial system. The decline of the seigneurial system was balanced in the thought of French Canadian nationalists by a stronger attachment to the land, an attachment which was thoroughly traditional and anti-commercial. «Emparons-nous du sol» became an ideology which guided the work of the colonization societies and the pens of French Canadian writers. Because agriculture was nearly self-sufficient this ideology was not related to the image of the river. Indeed, as it led French Canadians to take up land in the Cantons de l'Est, in the Laurentian Shield, and around lac Saint-Jean, the St. Lawrence came to play very little part in many French Canadian lives.

At this time there may have been a slight opening of the colony towards the high seas. This connection, which had never been strong, was broken after the conquest by the might of the British navy and the efficiency of British mercantilism. With the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 and the negotiation a few years later of reciprocity with the United States, Québec became a more international port. English speaking merchants still controlled almost all of its trade, and its principal connections were still along the axis of the river. Nevertheless, the events of the 1840's and 1850's probably had introduced a weak image of the St. Lawrence as an extension of the high sea in the consciousness of French Canadians.

### Conclusion

Although the name of St. Lawrence, the patron saint of couriers, appears to be highly appropriate for a large river which once led *coureurs de bois* and now leads deep sea shipping towards the heart of the continent, in the mind of French Canadians the St. Lawrence has not always been a river. Well before the end of the French regime, it was treated by many as an inland sea, and occasionally as an arm of the high sea. Each of these images of the St. Lawrence reflects a French Canadian outlook.

Of the three images, the least important until recently has been that of the St. Lawrence as an extension of the high seas. Only now and then, as when hostile warships sailed up the Gulf, when French or Canadian privateers used Québec as a base of operations, or when the strict pattern of colonial trade within



a mercantile system was relaxed, had settlers in New France or later in Québec any reason to view the St. Lawrence as an arm of the sea and Québec city as a seaport. Otherwise, theirs was an interior colony. Whereas New Englanders looked to the North Atlantic, almost every corner of which was known to merchants operating out of Boston, Salem or Newport, French Canadians knew little of this world. Lacking a broad eastern outlook, they were out of touch with the changing social and intellectual currents of the North Atlantic world and, partly because they were out of touch, they tended to rely on institutions and ideals from their past.

The colony began to lose contact with the North Atlantic in the early years of royal government when its population rose rapidly and agriculture gained a firm foothold. Never well connected to markets in the North Atlantic or in the interior, agriculture fostered an image of the St. Lawrence as an inland sea. This image has been an aspect of French Canadian thought for three hundred years, but it was strongest in the first half of the 19th century when farming no longer produced a modest surplus for export. As Paul Veyret has aptly remarked,<sup>9</sup> it has been possible for French Canadians to live in isolation in a « région de passage ».

The image of the St. Lawrence as a river has also tended to narrow the horizons of French Canadian thought. River traffic and hence the direction of trans-Atlantic shipping could be relatively easily controlled; for this reason it was possible for the French and later for the British to extend the axis of the St. Lawrence across the Atlantic. The river led to the channel ports and on to Paris and Versailles or, later, to Bristol and London, that is, back to the heart of the imperial and mercantile systems. In this sense for both French and English Canadians the river connection has been profoundly conservative.

Today in Québec the old options remain, but electronic communications have made the world of the high seas a highly competitive, and perhaps an overwhelming alternative to the other two. Yet it must not be forgotten that for three centuries and more the images of the river and of the inland sea maintained a unique North American people. The challenge in contemporary Québec is to balance the three.

#### RÉSUMÉ

*Dès l'aube de la colonie, le Saint-Laurent a été la voie de l'humanisation des paysages québécois, l'axe privilégié de peuplement de l'Est canadien, le facteur dominant de ses pulsations économiques et politiques. L'auteur, limitant son propos à la période antérieure au régime confédéral (1867), s'interroge sur les facteurs qui ont fait du Saint-Laurent le pôle géographique du Canada français et sur les « définitions » successives du fleuve, de 1608 à 1867.*

*De 1608 à 1665, le fleuve fut une voie de commerce international des fourrures, de conquête des terres du ponant; totalement « extroverti », il était au service des vieux pays, plus que du Canada. À partir de 1665, les efforts de peuplement agricole de Jean Talon lui donnent une importance de premier plan dans la*

<sup>9</sup> P. VEYRET, *Un cas d'isolement : Les Canadiens français*, dans *Mélanges géographiques offerts à Ph. Arbos*, Institut de géographie de Clermont-Ferrand (Paris, 1953), pp. 293-99.

*vie de relations à l'intérieur de la Nouvelle-France, dont il est l'unique route ; il commence alors à devenir mer intérieure. Il le restera pour la majeure partie des Canadiens français, jusqu'aux années 1830-1840, tout au long de leur phase de repliement rural, en dépit des activités de commerce international qu'animaient depuis 1765 des entrepreneurs anglophones employant une main d'œuvre canadienne.*

*Mais la notion de Saint-Laurent – mer intérieure s'affirmera presque sans partage, chez les Canadiens français, à partir de 1840. Le commerce du bois, celui des grains, les constructions navales sont entre les mains des Britanniques ; les habitants renforcent le caractère autarcique de leur agriculture et de leur genre de vie ; leur relations avec la France sont à peu près nulles depuis le tournant du siècle. Le concept dominant de Saint-Laurent – mer intérieure qui a prévalu alors n'a pas été sans danger pour la nation canadienne-française et pour son insertion dans le monde industriel qui s'épanouissait de part et d'autre de l'Atlantique.*

---