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W. H. Parker

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[See table of contents](#)

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QUÉBEC CITY IN THE 1830's

by

W. H. PARKER

Professor of Geography, University of Manitoba

« Québec is the capital not only of the Province of Lower Canada, but of the whole of the British dominions in North America, and as such it is the place of residence for the governor-in-chief and commander of the forces in those colonies. Its natural position, strongly fortified by regular works, renders it almost impregnable ; and its citadel is . . . a parallel in strength with the fortress of Gibraltar.

« Québec is also the most important seaport of British America, excepting probably Halifax. Its harbour, situated upwards of 400 miles from the sea in the gulf, is perfectly safe and calculated to receive the largest fleet. » ¹

This supreme position of Québec in British North America in the 1830's was directly attributable to its geographical location and topography.² It is placed at the point where the river unhesitatingly ends and the estuary unmistakably begins ; any position below Québec could serve only one shore effectively, and because of the approach of the Laurentian and Appalachian uplands to the water's edge, would have lacked a supporting hinterland. The narrowing of the river which, according to Champlain, was the Indian meaning of the word *quebec*, enables the city to serve and unify the land on both sides of the St. Lawrence, and the expanse of good land in the area, again on each side of the river, provided a densely populated matrix in which the town could develop, and added the function of regional administrative centre and market to those of fortress, capital and seaport.

The great Rock of Québec, the Gibraltar of North America, was a natural fortress inviting completion by defensive works, and commanding the passage of the river (photographs I, II, III). By its height, and with the corresponding eminence on the opposite bank, the waters of the river were here well sheltered at a point where they were deep and yet not greatly tidal ; and beneath the cliff on the riverside was land enough for quays, warehousing and human habitation.

As the century progressed, it was the fate of Québec to be overtaken by Montréal as a seaport and industrial centre. But in the 1830's, the St. Lawrence, in its natural state, presented difficulties and delays particularly unwelcome after the long transatlantic voyage. Lake St. Peter had dangerous shallows and St. Mary's Current, below Montréal, could be ascended only with the aid of stream and strong winds.

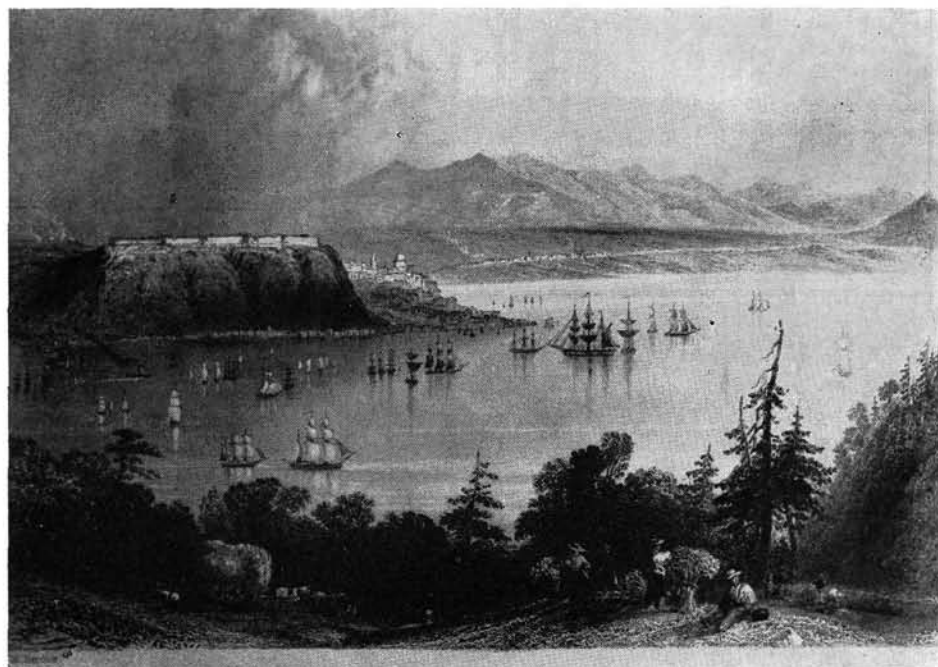
¹ BOUCHETTE, J., *A topographical dictionary of the province of Lower Canada* (London, 1832), under Québec.

² This theme is the subject of a brilliant piece of geographical writing by BLANCHARD, Raoul, in *L'Est du Canada français*, II, pp. 159-186.

The population of Québec numbered about 30,000 in 1831 and was slightly greater than that of Montréal. In addition, there was the military establishment of 2,000 men.³ But the next census, held in 1844, showed Montréal well ahead in population :

YEARS	QUÉBEC	MONTRÉAL
1831.....	29,556	27,297
1844.....	32,876	44,093 ⁴

PHOTO I



(From WILLIS, *Canadian Scenery*.)

Québec seen from the opposite bank of the St. Lawrence (c. 1835).

The development of Upper Canada was providing a growing stimulus to the trade of Montréal ; the increased power of steam vessels and the improvement of canals were other factors favouring the upper city as was the fact of its becoming

³ Sketch of the Canadas showing the relative positions of the several military posts (Montréal, 1840), annotated manuscript map in the Public Archives of Canada. The French ambassador to Washington gave the figure as 1,500 in 1837 (see ROQUEBRUNE, *M. de Pontois et la rébellion des Canadiens français in Nova Francia*, iii, p. 247).

⁴ These figures include the population of continuous suburbs.

the temporary capital of the united provinces. But the actual population of Québec was swollen above the census figure in summer by the sailors of the numerous vessels in port, by immigrants pausing on their way to the west, and by

« a considerable number of the citizens of the neighbouring republic . . . attracted by their curiosity to view the noble fortress. »⁵

It was estimated that these tourists, immigrants and sailors together numbered between 5,000 and 10,000.

Although a majority of the resident population were French Canadians, there was a large minority of British extractions, as the following 1844 figures show :⁶

French Canadians		19,386
British Canadians	5,560	13,039
English immigrants	1,347	
Irish immigrants	5,432	
Scotch immigrants	700	
Other Europeans		239
Americans		112
		32,876

In 1831, 581, and in 1844, 684 persons, were described as being engaged in commerce. These, as well as those employed in the various government agencies and offices, were drawn from the English-speaking element mostly, while the French population included a large number of religious persons : priests, nuns, seminarists, etc. The 70 paupers of 1831 (increased to 261 in 1844) as well as many of the labourers, were drawn from the large Irish population.

What kind of city did this mixed population inhabit? « Nothing can exceed the beauty of Québec ! » enthused Godley in 1842,⁷ but Professor Daubeny, from Oxford, considered that it contained few buildings of any size and beauty, and dubbed it « a congeries of second-rate or mean-looking houses ».⁸

The city had — and has — two distinct parts, the *basse-ville* at the foot of the « mountain », washed by the river, and the *haute-ville* above. The two were connected by stairways and by one difficult road.⁹

⁵ HILL, *The Emigrant's Introduction to . . . the British American Colonies* (London, 1837), p. 110.

⁶ The 1831 census does not give this type of information.

⁷ GODLEY, *Letters from America* (London, 1844), i, p. 69.

⁸ DAUBENY, *Journal of a tour through the United States and Canada, 1837-1838* (Oxford, 1843), p. 28.

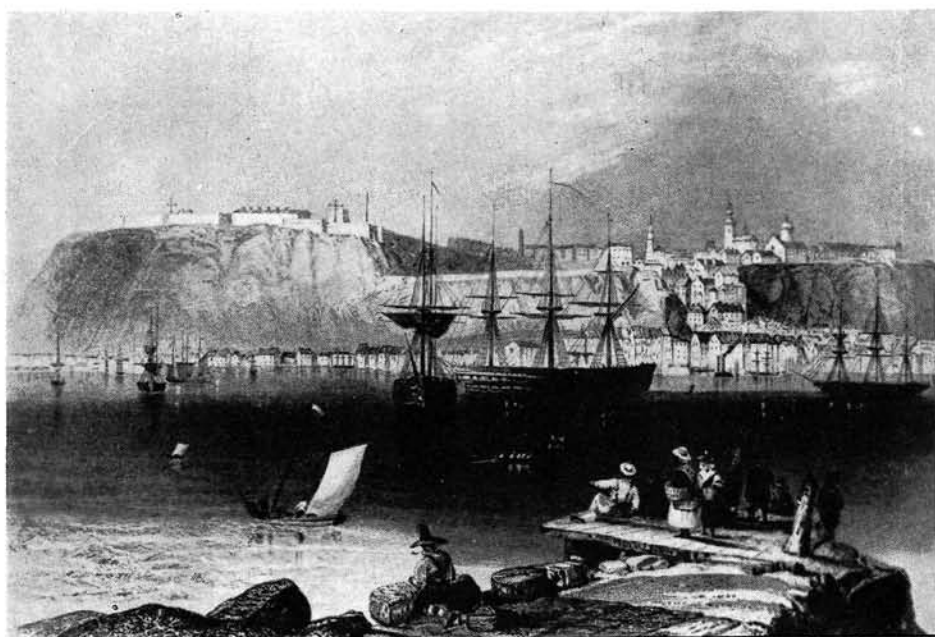
⁹ Rue de Montagne, shown on the plan as coming up between the buildings lettered A and B.

The lower town, overcrowded and dirty, had all the noises, sights and smells of a busy seaport, and sometimes fascinated but more often offended its summer visitors :

« It is withal a complete puddle, noisy and bustling, filled with people of every shade and shape, tribe and tongue. »¹⁰

« As this quarter is the resort of sailors, lumbermen, and newly arrived emigrants, it presents a fearful scene of disorder, filth and intemperance ; and we thought that in this comparatively short drive of less than an hour, we saw more of poverty, raggedness, dirty and disorderly dwellings, and taverns and spirit shops with drunken inmates, than we had witnessed in all our three years' journey through the United States. »¹¹

PHOTO II



(From WILLIS, *Canadian Scenery*.)

Québec, showing the Citadel, and the upper and lower towns (c. 1835).

The upper town, as containing the chief public buildings and the homes of the well-to-do, was a very different place, « one of the cleanest cities in the world »,¹² and « a tolerably handsome old-looking town ». ¹³ It

¹⁰ WILKIE, D., *Sketches of a summer trip to New York and the Canadas* (Edinburgh, 1837), p. 251.

¹¹ BUCKINGHAM, *Canada, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and the other British Provinces in North America* (London, 1843), p. 231.

¹² BONNYCASTLE, *The Canadas in 1841*, i, p. 54.

¹³ WILLIS, *Canadian scenery* (London, c. 1840), ii, p. 10.

was itself of dual character. The northern sector, along and around St. John street.

« may be considered as the mercantile part . . . being inhabited chiefly by merchants, retail traders, artisans and numerous tavern-keepers »

whereas the southern part, along St. Louis street,

« is much more elevated, airy and agreeable, and by far the pleasantest part of the town, and as such, most of the superior officers of the provincial government and people of the first rank reside there. »¹⁴

PHOTO III



(From WILLIS, *Canadian Scenery*.)

Québec, looking over the lower town and the river St. Lawrence from the upper town (c. 1835).

The suburbs of St. John and St. Louis were the westward extensions of these two sectors, beyond the city walls. One writer, describing the upper town as « cold and lofty » and, in relation to the lower, as « claiming that kind of superiority which some heads have been said to assert over the inglorious belly », concluded :

« to speak the truth, neither has much to boast of on the score of either beauty or convenience ». ¹⁵

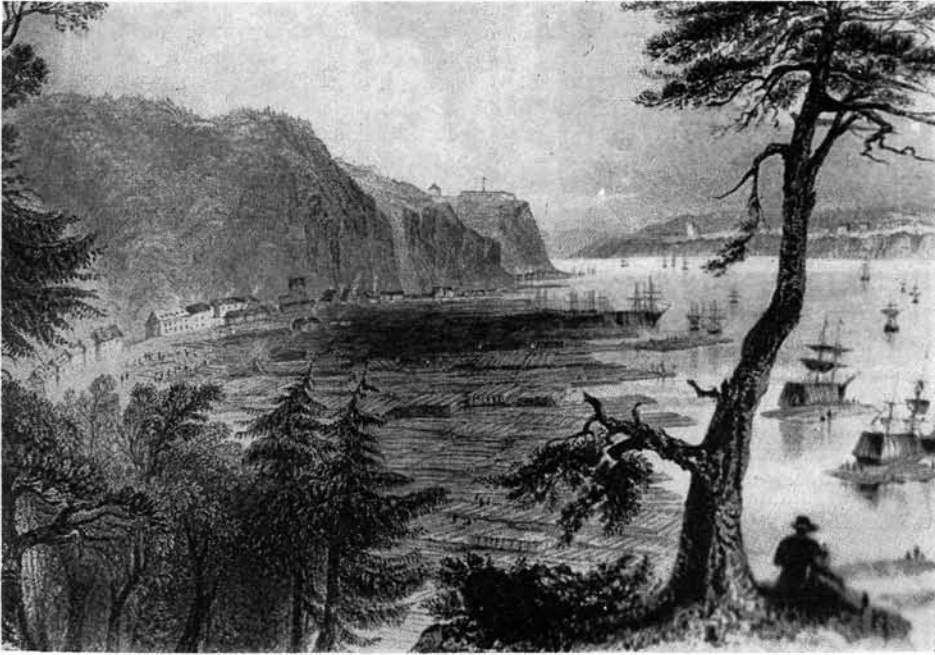
¹⁴ BOUCHETTE, *The British Dominions in North America* (London, 1831), i, p. 253.

¹⁵ Quoted in WILLIS, *op. cit.*, i, p. 123.

A third part of the town, distinct from the *basse-ville* and *haute-ville*, was the suburb of St. Roch, which had developed between the river St. Charles and the northern side of the Québec platform. It was an industrial district and growing rapidly,¹⁶ with accommodation « suited only to the lower ranks ».¹⁷

The streets of Québec were narrow and irregular, particularly in the lower town.¹⁸ In the upper town, the principal streets were 32 feet wide, the side streets only 24 to 27 feet.¹⁹ Lord Durham spoke of the « disgraceful state of the streets, and the utter absence of lighting » which he attributed to the lack of

PHOTO IV



(From WILLIS, *Canadian Scenery*.)

Sillery cove above Québec, showing the timber awaiting exportation to Britain. Cape Diamond and the Citadel in the back ground (c. 1835).

any municipal authority to take care of such matters.²⁰ Buckingham condemned the streets as

« wretchedly paved in the centre, still worse provided with sidewalks, and not lighted with lamps at night ».²¹

¹⁶ BOUCHETTE, *op. cit.*, i, p. 259.

¹⁷ WILLIS, *op. cit.*, ii, p. 12.

¹⁸ ARFWEDSON, *The United States and Canada in 1832-1834* (London, 1834), ii, p. 343 ; LOGAN, *Notes of a journey through Canada and the United States of America* (Edinburgh, 1838), p. 20.

¹⁹ BOUCHETTE, *op. cit.*, i, p. 253.

²⁰ LORD DURHAM, *Report on British North America* (1902 edition), p. 81.

²¹ BUCKINGHAM, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

and Logan states that

« deep ruts were of frequent occurrence, and the limestone side-pavements were ill-constructed, the stone being placed without any regard to smoothness of surface, so that, unless continually on the look-out, a person is liable to stumble or fall almost every step. »²²

William Kelly, writing in 1837, ascribed the high mortality rate of the city to lack of sanitation, paving and drainage :

« The public sewers are in such a state that some houses, in one of the principal streets, are scarcely habitable at times, in consequence of the stench proceeding from the sewers... The suburbs, with few exceptions, beyond the streets that form thoroughfares or avenues to the country, have neither the advantage of sewers or paving. »

« After the melting of the snow in April and May, several streets in the flat suburb of St. Roch are no better than slough ; and very offensive sloughs too, from the accumulation of filth that was hidden by the snow in winter. Such places, when acted on by the summer's sun, must give out very noxious effluvia. »²³

To the hazards and inconveniences already detailed were added in winter the further nuisances of snow and slush, and the alternate freezing and thawing, to cope with the pedestrians had to be equipped with « cloth or carpet boots, galoshes with spikes to their heels, iron-pointed walking sticks ». ²⁴

Besides horse-drawn vehicles, dog-carts were a feature of the Québec street-scene ; merchants used them to bring their goods up from the port and lower town.²⁵

« Die Häuser sind alle von Stein erbaut. »²⁶ The predominance of stone buildings, and the absence of brick and timber (except in the suburbs where wooded houses were the rule)²⁷ was a distinguishing feature of Québec.²⁸ Buildings were two or three stories high, with steep roofs, usually shingled but often covered with tin,²⁹ and « in general destitute of architectural beauty ». ³⁰ The shops were « small, mean, and greatly inferior to those of Montréal and Toronto ». ³¹

The government and ecclesiastical buildings, many dating from the xviith century, stood in the upper town. They were commodious and substantial,

²² LOGAN, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

²³ KELLY, W., *Medical statistics of Lower Canada, 1837*, in *Transactions of the literary and Historical Society of Québec* (Québec, 1837), iii, pp. 210-211.

²⁴ WILLIS, *op. cit.*, i, p. 122.

²⁵ MACKENZIE, *Sketches of Canada and the United States* (London, 1833), 180 ; FOWLER, *Journal of a tour through British America* (Aberdeen, 1832), pp. 75-76.

²⁶ BROMME, *Reise durch die Vereinigten Staaten and Ober Kanada* (Baltimore, 1834-1835) ii, p. 449.

²⁷ BOUCHETTE, *op. cit.*, i, p. 259.

²⁸ BONNYCASTLE, *op. cit.*, i, p. 45.

²⁹ BOUCHETTE, *op. cit.*, i, p. 253.

³⁰ BUCKINGHAM, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

« without much pretention to architectural merit »,³² and built of the same dark limestone as most of the houses. Around the Market Place were grouped the Catholic Cathedral, the Seminary — « a collegiate institution for the gratuitous instruction of the catholic youth of Canada »³³ — and the Barracks. Around the Grand Parade (*place d'Armes*) were the Anglican church, the court-house, and the site of the Château St. Louis, the fortified house of French governors since Champlain, which had burned down in 1834, exposing a fine view of the St. Lawrence.³⁴ The legislature of Lower Canada met in an old building on the other side of Rue de Montagne, but a new Parliament House was building.³⁵

PHOTO V



(From WILLIS, *Canadian Scenery*.)

The Falls of Montmorency below Québec, a favorite spot for picnic parties in the 1830's.

Other large buildings were the Hôtel Dieu hospital near the north wall, and the Ursulines convent.

The market was held daily and produce from the whole region, as well as from the north — and south — shore regions of the estuary, was brought there to satisfy the needs of the city and garrison. It was the economic hub of the

³² WILLIS, *op. cit.*, ii, p. 10.

³³ *Ibid.*, i, p. 126.

³⁴ The site is now occupied by the Château-Frontenac hotel.

³⁵ BUCKINGHAM, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

whole eastern half of the province, and the livelihood of thousands of the *habitants* depended on its existence :

« The crowds of carters, with their wives and families, bringing in the productions of the surrounding country, their brawlings and vociferations in bad French and broken English, from a scene of noise and confusion, amid which appear a few Indian squaws, and the gentlemen of the city and garrison going round to make purchase. Every kind of provision is abundant and cheap, except fish. »³⁶

Although various fortifications had been erected at Québec from its foundation in 1608 onwards, the great ramparts marked on the plan west of the city, and the Citadel at the southern end, were begun in 1820 as part of the costly defensive measures then undertaken in various parts of British America against the American threat ; it was sometimes asserted within the province that these measures were part of a design to hold down the native population by force.³⁷ By 1837, parts of the Citadel were still unfinished. The garrison consisted of three regiments of the line, and there were 300 pieces of canon disposed around the ramparts.³⁸ An « inclined plane » connected the Citadel with the government wharf at the bottom of the cliff ; by its building materials and supplies for the Citadel were hauled up on rails by a stationary steam engine.³⁹

The wharves and warehouses were in the lower town and extended southwards along the St. Lawrence bank from the St. Charles estuary. The excellence of the port was demonstrated by the fact that the largest ships could come alongside these wharves to unload. An area called the *cul de sac* (between wharves 17 and 18 on Plan) formed a dry dock and ships could be there « conveniently laid aground to receive any necessary repairs ». ⁴⁰ The principal landing place for passengers was between Queen's and McCallum's wharves (16 and 17 on Plan) and much inconvenience was caused by

« numerous rafts of firewood that are brought down the river for the use of the city, and moored hereabout, sometimes to complete obstruction of the passage. »⁴¹

In the open season frequent ferries crossed to the opposite bank. One type was a « small boat, the paddles of which are driven by horses » and which ran half-hourly ; another was the steam-ferry which also plied « every half-hour, making the trip in 10 or 15 minutes ». ⁴² Besides the regular ferries, numerous boats were constantly coming and going, carrying the country people and their goods.

³⁶ WILLIS, *op. cit.*, ii, p. 11.

³⁷ BIGSBY, *The shoe and the canoe* (London, 1851), i, pp. 200-201.

³⁸ ROQUEBRUNE, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

³⁹ BOUCHETTE, *op. cit.*, i, p. 255.

⁴⁰ BOUCHETTE, *op. cit.*, i, p. 256.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² LOGAN, *op. cit.*, p. 30 ; WILLIS, *op. cit.*, i, p. 12.

In winter, the great hope was that the *pont* would form, that is that the river would freeze over solidly so as to enable a road to be made.

« marked with beacons . . . over which hay, firewood, with other bulky articles, are transported abundantly and at reduced prices. »⁴³

The formation of the *pont* was widely welcomed on both sides of the river :

« by the country people, owing to the prospect of bringing their produce readily to market ; and by those of the town, from the hope of a reduction in prices. »⁴⁴

However, this freezing took place only occasionally, although the channel between the Île d'Orléans and the north bank always froze, to the advantage of the islanders. More often, the river was not completely frozen, but encumbered by great blocks of ice ; then the boatmen

« contrive with ropes and iron-pointed poles to raise their vessels upon the surface of the masses, and drag them along until they find open water. »⁴⁵

Apart from the large Cape Diamond brewery in the lower town, the industries of Québec lay to the north, along the St. Charles and in St. Roch suburb. Shipbuilding was the leading occupation here and 6,000 men were engaged directly or indirectly in this trade.⁴⁶ About thirty ships a year were built, some of them quite large (5,000 and 6,000 tons) and at least one became famous ; this was the *Royal William*, launched in 1831, and said to be the first ship to have crossed the Atlantic by unaided steam.⁴⁷ Other industries of Québec were iron and brass founding, coopering, brewing and soap-making, and these were mostly related to the products of the region's farms and forests.⁴⁸

The « society » of Québec was « more gay and polished than is usual in colonial cities ».⁴⁹ Its « style and tone » were higher than at Montréal and equal to Toronto, but there was no social mingling of the English and French. Lord Durham heard of

« but one house in Québec in which both races met on pretty equal terms. »⁵⁰

⁴³ WILLIS, *op. cit.*, ii, p. 12.

⁴⁴ HEAD, G., *Forest scenes and incidents in the wilds of North America* (London, 1838), p. 163.

⁴⁵ WILLIS, *op. cit.*, ii, pp. 12-13.

⁴⁶ BLANCHARD, *L'Est du Canada Français* (Montréal, 1935), ii, p. 205.

⁴⁷ BLANCHARD, *op. cit.*, ii, p. 204.

⁴⁸ FAIRPLAY, *The Canadas as they now are*, (London 1833), p. 36 ; BROMME, *op. cit.*, iii, p. 449.

⁴⁹ MURRAY, *Historical and descriptive account of British North America* (Edinburgh, 1839), i, p. 251.

⁵⁰ LORD DURHAM, *Report*, p. 26.

Although the French were « often superior in manners and habits », they were « in some degree disdained by the ruling people, which they do not well brook ».⁵¹ « Society » was made up of

« the vice-regal court, the ministers of religious, the numerous members of the Colonial Legislature, the courts of law, the French gentry coming in from their seigniories, the professions, the large garrison. »

and

« the truly respectable and hospitable class of resident merchants and their families who, although overworked in summer, are permitted in winter to indulge in a well-earned repose. »⁵²

Bigsby praised the behaviour of the garrison, whose men and officers were « in a high state of efficiency and discipline ».⁵³

At the other end of the social scale in Québec were the « fever-stricken, naked and friendless Irish . . . who year after year are thrown in shoals upon the wharfs of Québec from ships which ought to be called « itinerant pest-houses » . . . These poor creatures, on landing,

« creep into any hovel they can, with all their foul things about them . . . The filthy and crowded state of the houses, the disgusting scenes going on in them, can only be guessed by a very bold imagination. I have trod the floor of one such house, almost over shoes in churned and sodden garbage, animal and vegetable. It required dissecting-room nerves to bear it. »⁵⁴

The entertainments available were conspicuous neither for quality nor variety. There was one good theatre and one inferior, « scarcely at all attended by the gentry of either race », and concerts were occasionally given by visiting companies from Britain and the United States.⁵⁵ The circus was the most popular amusement with the French Canadians, and American troupes visited the city ; at one of these performances Logan saw a dog ascend a ladder and « a small pony picked up a basket when desired and selected a certain card out of six ».⁵⁶ In summer, pleasure parties visited beauty spots in the vicinity, such as the Montmorency and Chaudière Falls, and races were held on the Heights of Abraham.⁵⁷ In winter, the Canadian capital exhibited

« a perpetual flow of dinners, balls, concerts, governor's receptions, picnic parties, etc., for gentlemen of good fortune. For the poor soldier, and the labouring class generally, the only recreation . . . was that of the dram-shop and canteen. »⁵⁸

⁵¹ MURRAY, *op. cit.*, i, p. 251.

⁵² BIGSBY, *op. cit.*, i, p. 26.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, i, pp. 23-24.

⁵⁵ BUCKINGHAM, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

⁵⁶ LOGAN, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁵⁷ Lady DURHAM, *Canadian Journal* (published by the Literary and Historical Society of Québec in 1915 ; the journal relates to 1838), p. 16 ; DAUBENY, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-30.

⁵⁸ BIGSBY, *op. cit.*, i, p. 26.

Those interested in natural philosophy might join the Literary and Historical Society, founded in 1824 ; very few of the papers were historical or literary, but geological, meteorological, medical, etc. The Scottish inhabitants had, since 1835, their St. Andrew's Society.⁵⁹ There were two libraries and six bookshops for those of literary inclination, and several newspapers. These included the *Official Gazette*, *Québec Gazette*, *Quebec Mercury*, and *Le Canadien*.⁶⁰

There were four or five hundred establishments where spirituous liquor was sold, patronized, according to Buckingham, mainly by Irish immigrants.⁶¹



⁵⁹ Le MOINE, *The Scot in New France, 1535-1880* (Montréal, 1881), p. 53.

⁶⁰ FOWLER, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

⁶¹ BUCKINGHAM, p. 261.