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The Structure of Canadian History

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Preface

The "structure" on which this volume focuses is the story of power: who held it, how, and for what purposes. In our view, the study of history as a whole requires due attention to society's rules, the more fully to appreciate the means and purposes by which society itself is organized. But, since politics does not develop in a vacuum, social and economic themes are developed as well.

For the most part, the work is based on other published materials, monographs, and articles appearing within the last fifteen years. Such sources are acknowledged in several ways. In the body of the text, bold interpretations are mentioned by author and long quotations are cited by volume and page. At the end of each chapter, bibliographical essays are offered to give readers an appreciation of the wider debate — and alternate points of view — on the many issues that are covered all too briefly in the pages that follow. But acknowledging our sources in this manner in no way acknowledges in full the debt we owe to past historians and above all to the latest generation without whose careful archival research the present study would have been quite impossible. Moreover, we realize that we owe the same scholars an apology for the simplification of complex arguments and reduction of detail that has occurred in condensation for grafting onto a larger story in ways that no scholar may originally have intended. Still, in this revised and expanded edition — as with our first attempt at synthesis written some years ago — we hope that the work will spark interest as well as criticism, and continue to be of some use to students in the classroom.

"Discovery . . . does not lead necessarily or immediately to settlement."

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CHAPTER 1

The Invention of the New World

I Old World Background to New World History

The background to Canadian history does not lie in voyages of discovery, in those, say, of Jacques Cartier. For that matter, the wider background to New World history is not to be sought in the voyages of Columbus or even in those of his predecessors. Discovery is but a first step, a prerequisite, a beginning that does not lead necessarily or immediately to settlement. It is salutary for those living in the Americas today to realize how uninterested, in fact, fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe was in what its sea captains had stumbled across. For instance, there were seven reprintings of a world geography reference book in France between 1539 and 1558 (a time that spans France's own early interest in the New World and Cartier's voyages) and in not one of these was any mention made of the New World. The real background, then, to Canadian and New World history after 1492 must be sought in the *invention* of the Americas, that is, in imagining that something could be made out of mere discovery; something so attractive that Europeans would undertake the costly and dangerous task of crossing the Atlantic Ocean and conquering new territory. The nature of the invention may be understood from an examination of European society in the fifteenth century. At the same time, that examination will indicate why, initially at least, the Americas were so small a part of the European consciousness.

The fifteenth century was a time both of contraction and expansion in Europe — or, more precisely, of contraction in the East and expansion in the West. This pattern was to be seen, for instance, in the fortunes of that age-old Christian imperative to go forth and convert the heathen. In the earlier Middle Ages, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Christen-

dom had expanded into the Middle East, successfully taking Jerusalem and the Holy Land. Since then, however, the Islamic enemy had counter-attacked and with their thrusts, especially into the area of present-day Turkey, Christendom had been forced onto the defensive. A singular set-back occurred when Constantinople, the headquarters of Orthodox Christianity, fell to Islam in 1453. Such developments contributed significantly to the diminution of missionary activity in the East. However, the impulse was not completely dead, and it found its outlet in the West in the Iberian peninsula. There the work of centuries was coming to fruition: the Christian reconquest of that area was capped in 1492 when Granada, the last stronghold of the Islamic Moors in Spain, was captured. The period and movement known in Spanish history as the *Reconquista* was now complete.

The pattern of withdrawal in the East and expansion in the West had mundane yet important consequences. Long-established trade routes to the Far East, especially for the all-important spices that made the foul, stinking living conditions and the food of the wealthy slightly more tolerable than they would otherwise have been, were disrupted by these new developments in the Middle East. Western Europeans began to seek to outflank these obstacles; and throughout the fifteenth century the Portuguese in particular were at the forefront of voyages of discovery aimed at finding an all-water route to the wealth of Asia. It was a venture that finally succeeded in 1486 when Bartholemew Diaz sailed beyond the Cape of Good Hope into the Indian Ocean, and in 1498 when Vasco da Gama reached India itself.

Accompanying this Western European search for new trade routes was a psychological development which intensified that search and gave to the discovery, and exploitation of new wealth, a cutting edge never before experienced. The early Middle Ages had known wealthy individuals, of course. There is, for example, record of one William of Duvenwoorde (1290-1353) who was said to have enjoyed an annual income of some 70 000 *livres*, perhaps the equivalent of $1 million today. But William and others like him were not esteemed for their wealth. Indeed, they were distrusted. Wealth was something to be wary of, an exposure to sin in its getting and spending. Predictably, the watchdog of society's morals, the Church, was outspoken in its condemnation of the lust for gain as leading to "damnable avarice, sensuality and pride." In particular, the lending of money with a charge of interest, the very basis of a modern, capitalist economy, was denounced by the Church in the harshest terms. But increasingly in the fifteenth century such attitudes were changing, and the old prohibitions were losing their force. The idea that economics was at most a branch of theology was breaking down, and gradually the more modern idea that economics was an autonomous discipline with methods and ends of its own was taking its place. Wealth was pursued with fewer

reservations deriving from other-worldly or countervailing considerations. And while the common people might never dream of becoming as wealthy as kings or princes, they began in an unprecedented way to see themselves as worthy of riches.

This intensified interest in trading for wealth, and the search for new routes to that wealth, were directed to Asia. When Columbus sailed due west from Spain in 1492 it was with the determination of avoiding the Portuguese sphere of influence and finding a shorter route to the Spice Islands, China, and Japan. The Americas were not thought to exist; to this day, the name of the islands where he made his first landfalls, the West Indies, serves to underline the fact that Columbus and Europe had made a gigantic miscalculation and had hit upon an unexpected world that was truly new.

The Europeans' miscalculation, of course, did not remain a liability for long. It became apparent that the New World might yield immense wealth of all kinds and became a legitimate alternative to Asia. At the same time, there were millions of souls to be converted to Christianity there by Christian missionary activity. Here, then, were two possible inventions of America. But a third kind of invention took precedence, the background for which is also found in the development of late medieval European society.

Fifteenth-century Europe was changing not only physically and intellectually, but politically, too. Just as early economists had broken free from medieval constraints in order to direct men's minds to the question of how to acquire wealth, so, too, observers of politics had broken free from earlier approaches to statecraft. In place of theologically-structured discussions of the rights and duties of rulers and the ruled, intellectuals increasingly went back to history and sought to show *how* notable rulers had conducted themselves to use their power effectively. At a time when Europe was plagued by a general breakdown of law and order (in England this was the time of the Wars of the Roses, in France the aftermath of the Hundred Years War and a situation where the French Crown controlled only about one fourth of the kingdom) the appeal of political writers such as Machiavelli was enormous. *The Prince*, which he published early in the sixteenth century, is a superb example of a "how to" book. Any medieval discussion of the Christian duty owed by the Prince to his subjects is completely absent; everywhere is advice on how to gain and hold on to power.

The rulers of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries showed themselves to be outstanding Machiavellians. Ruthless, scheming and despotic, they centralized their power and strengthened the royal courts and procedures. Their concentration of power was helped by the technological developments of weapons because the new key to victory in battle was the possession of artillery and professional infantry. Both were costly invest-

ments that only kings and princes could afford. Both developments helped spell the end of the feudal lord on horseback, who could, with his armed retainers defy the ruler and defend himself in his castle. In this new period the feudal noble was transformed into a courtier and the castle gave way to the country house or chateau.

There were those among the nobility who made the transition to the new order of things with relative ease. They made their peace with the king, were rewarded with courtly handouts, and concentrated upon a methodical exploitation of their lands, ceasing to see them as the means of supporting potential troops. But there were many who could not make the adjustment. For them, the newly emerging Europe, increasingly dominated by absolutist kings and merchant princes, was anathema. Their ideals, their glorification of military skills, courage and honor, all built upon a servile base of obedient peasants, had no place in Europe. It became necessary to invent a new world where such ideals could be accommodated.

Spain was the country best placed to invent this new world. There the missionary drive was most vital and the far western search for new trade routes was strongly marked. With Spain the leader in the production of wool and metal wares, the new psychology of wealth was well developed. But the appeal of the feudal *hidalgo,* the knight on horseback, was also deeply entrenched because the *Reconquista* had kept these values to the fore, and the triumphant conclusion of that Holy War had seemed to confirm them.

How could the centralizing kings of Spain tolerate the *hidalgo?* Was there room in a country suddenly at peace for the soldier of fortune? Just at the moment when the reconquest was completed the doors to the New World opened in the minds of those who identified with the life of the fighting nobleman and who imagined ennoblement as legitimate even if it came by conquest of exotic people in a strange new world. If he remained in Europe, the soldier of fortune might be nothing more than a superfluous anachronism; but in the Indies this man — any man — might become a lord of land, of Indians, and of gold. So, the first invention of the New World was not by merchants or kings. The first invention was by Spaniards who envisioned the Indies as a place for advancing themselves by exporting feudalism after it had begun to decline in Europe.

II The Spanish Prototype of Colonization by Conquest

The islands of the Caribbean did not, however, provide the Spaniards with an ideal setting for enacting their invention of America. A generation

later, after first landing in the West Indies, they undertook the conquest of Mexico in 1519 and in so doing established the prototype of New World occupation. Later, other Spaniards would apply the formula to Peru and the English and French would attempt the same project further north. Everyone came to accept this first invention of the New World as the most plausible. The salient features of the Spanish subjugation of Mexico are therefore important to Canadian history because it is the Spanish precedent that makes intelligible Jacques Cartier's apparently foolhardy quest for the Kingdom of the Saguenay twenty years later. Cartier and the others were not fools. Emulating the Spanish example of colonization by conquest, they came away with less, quite simply, because in the north there was less to take.

The great attraction of Mexico was that it was organized as an advanced civilization under Aztec rule in such a way as to satisfy the three needs of European expansion. The need for missionary work was pointed up by the nature of the Aztec religion, calling for human sacrifice on a massive scale. Then there was Aztec wealth. The Aztecs lacked metal tools and any domesticated animals other than poultry, but they did practice horticulture, and farming was a technological advance that made others possible. Their capital, Tenochtitlan, on the site of present-day Mexico City, was a metropolis with more than a quarter of a million inhabitants (contemporary London had some 50 000). Not only was it impressive in scale, it was also built of stone, the dominant structure being a huge pyramid at the center, crowned with a sacrificial altar. Here was every sign of wealth with an apparent abundance of gold and silver. Finally, since the Aztec empire was a complex hierarchical ordering of peoples, it could be taken over in its existing form. All the Spaniards had to do was to take the place of the Aztec overlords. The *hidalgo* would have his peasantry ready-made.

What increased the attractiveness of Mexico was the fact that the appetizing prize was sufficiently flawed internally that its ability to withstand external aggression was limited. The technological deficiencies hinted at above meant that the Spaniards enjoyed immense military advantages. The invaders possessed artillery and horses, which together gave them a mobility and a power infinitely superior to their enemy's. Also, the Aztec empire embraced recently conquered people who would be eager to rally to the Spaniards as a means of gaining revenge. Above all, Aztec society was psychologically unprepared to confront invasion because Aztec religion had become self-defeating. Human sacrifice had been practised on such a massive scale (the coronation of a new emperor might be marked by as many as 80 000 sacrifices) that the population could not have been expected to defend the regime spontaneously. More important, perhaps, was the fact that the population had been conditioned to be extraordinarily obedient and passive, since one principle of selection for sacrifice was criminality, often of a minor kind. For such a people, the

substitution of one ruling class for another would be largely a matter of indifference. Then, too, Aztec society was assailed by fears of imminent destruction. There had been three successive crop failures between 1505 and 1507 and in this frightening setting rumors of doom circulated widely. Prophecy had foretold that the world would end one day; now signs and omens from various sources pointed to fulfillment. In 1511 a comet confirmed the worst fears of many.

By 1515 garbled tales of the sighting of strange, bearded men with fair skins began to filter through to Tenochtitlan. In that year a trunk that was washed ashore provided confirmation for the rumors. When the Emperor Montezuma opened it he found, in addition to unusual jewelry and trinkets, clothing abnormally large and a frightening weapon. This last was clearly a sword, but it was not carved of wood and set with obsidian chips; instead it was made entirely of an unknown substance.

Everything that supported the mood of doubt and vague apprehension served also to rejuvenate the myth of Quetzacoatl, the god who would come in the fullness of time to slay the emperor and forbid human sacrifice. The prophecy foretold that "when the world is become oppressed, when it is the end of the world, at the time of its ending, he will come to bring it to an end."

Given these various factors, the march of the Spaniards from the coast to Tenochtitlan was easily accomplished in less than six months under their leader, Cortés. The emperor Montezuma was convinced that Cortés was Quetzacoatl, and when the invading force reached the capital he abdicated and surrendered his empire. Even when the Aztec nobility repudiated Montezuma's act and attacked the Spanish, the new order was not seriously imperiled. Cortés and a small remnant of his orginal force escaped to the territory of Indians hostile to the Aztecs. In the following year, thanks to clever tactical maneuvering, superior weaponry, and the backing of his Indian allies, Cortés successfully defeated the nobles' rebellion.

By 1521, in a mere two years, a force of some six hundred men had defeated and entirely subdued an empire of over twenty million people. After subjugation came serfdom and baptism. Individual Spaniards received lordship over villages of Indians; they became *encomenderos*. Cortés himself became a feudal lord with supreme authority over his vassals and their serfs. The conquest had succeeded brilliantly. These invaders, the *conquistadores*, were enriched and ennobled. The New World had proved worthwhile; in particular, a handful of Europeans had invented it as their opportunity to revitalize a way of life which was slipping away in Europe. Soon others would attempt the same adventure farther north.

III French Attempts to Seize a Northern Mexico

Not surprisingly, the conquerors of Mexico published their exploits, and found an eager audience in Europe. In time their works were translated into other languages (two Englishmen, Richard Hakluyt and Robert Eden, were leading translators). In this way, a large following learned of the fabulous wealth and opportunities of the New World, now portrayed as a paradise densely populated with guileless and loving people who lived on the produce of a bountiful nature. Since they were no match for artillery and muskets, Europeans had nothing to do but to move to America, master the people, and enjoy sumptuous leisure by putting their Indian serfs to work for them. Englishmen, Frenchmen, and others resolved to imitate the Spanish example in those parts of the New World not yet effectively occupied by Spain or Portugal.

First, there were scouting ventures. For instance, Henry VII of England sent John Cabot to Newfoundland in 1497 and Francis I of France sent Verrazano to explore the North Atlantic coast in 1524; but more ambitious undertakings began only after the additional incentive of more Spanish conquests in the manner of Cortés. After news of Pizarro's conquest of Peru in 1530, the French decided it was time that they broke Spain's monopoly in the New World. Pizarro had succeeded with only two hundred men (more proof that Cortés' feat had not been simply a lucky accident). As a result, in 1534 Francis I commissioned a decayed squire from Brittany, Jacques Cartier, to "discover ... countries where it is said that he should find great quantity of gold and other valuable things." It should be added that Cartier also believed he might find a northwest passage to Asia and the Spice Islands.

Cartier's expedition reached North America too late in the summer of 1534 to do more than stake a claim to the territory. North of what is now called Anticosti Island, Cartier encountered a tremendous current which led him to believe that the channel leading west might be a river running out of northern Asia. He also made contact with the native people, enough to dismiss them as "the sorriest folk there can be in the world." Unlike the Indians Cortés and Pizarro had plundered, the northerners "had not anything above the value of five sous, their canoes and fishing nets excepted." Since the season was turning cold and provisions were running low, Cartier decided to return to France with two captive natives, train them as interpreters, and persuade his patron to support a second voyage. Columbus had used such means to gain further support from his patrons after his first voyage. Cartier hoped that the tactic would also be sufficient to maintain the interest of his king.

Cartier's hope was confirmed. Even though he returned with nothing more than two unhappy Indians and the unsolved mystery of what lay

beyond the Gulf of St. Lawrence, Francis I agreed to support another expedition with sufficient provisions to stay over the winter. On the voyage of 1535, Cartier commanded three ships rather than the two of 1534 and he arrived in the Gulf early enough for extensive exploration. At the spot where the sea narrowed to what was evidently the mouth of a river, he found a village, Stadacona (the site of what was later called Quebec). The place was the home of the two Indians, now interpreters. All were welcomed. Then, with roughly one third of his men, he continued up river as far as was navigable. Stopped by rapids, he found himself at a town site called Hochelaga. Like Stadacona, the village was no more than a collection of bark longhouses surrounded by corn fields. The appearance of the place — and the people — was hardly encouraging. But Cartier climbed a hill above Hochelaga, a promontory he named Mount Royal (or Montreal) and, from this vantage point, the explorer beheld a panaroma that was awe-inspiring in comparison with the village below or with the rocky coast of Labrador, which he had decribed as "the land God gave Cain" on his previous visit. From Mount Royal, Cartier said that he could see "for more than thirty leagues round about." Between the Laurentian and the northern Adirondack mountains he saw "the finest land it is possible to see." The valley before him looked "arable, level, and flat." And in the midst was the river, "large, wide and broad." He was disappointed that it was not navigable any farther; still, he found himself imagining the St. Lawrence Valley as a land hospitable to farming, and he saw the site of Hochelaga as the location of an entrepôt for the whole continent. Here at Mount Royal he was already about a thousand miles from the Atlantic Coast (see map 1.1) and according to his guides, this water highway could take a traveler another thousand miles inland. What of the interior though?

With gestures and signs, his guides from Hochelaga gave information that the explorer had almost abandoned hope of obtaining. "Without our asking any questions or making any sign, they seized the chain of the Captain's whistle and a dagger-handle of yellow copper-gilt like gold ... and gave us to understand that both came from up that river." The waterway to which they pointed was the Ottawa River. But they could not venture further. It was too late in the summer and, without benefit of appropriate boats, the traveling would have been doubly difficult. So Cartier descended the St. Lawrence to Stadacona and rejoined the rest of his company encamped there.

Over the long winter the French learned more about the interior. They learned it was well populated and the people were wealthy. The chieftain in Stadacona, Donnacona, was eager to please the French by telling them whatever they wanted to hear. Thus, Cartier determined to return to France to win command of an adequate expeditionary force to take the