Readings in
Canadian Social History
Volume 1

ECONOMY AND SOCIETY DURING THE FRENCH REGIME to 1759

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Economy and Society During the French Regime, to 1759

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Abbreviations

AN	Archives Nationales, France
AQ	Archives du Québec
BRH	*Bulletin des Recherches historiques*
CHR	*Canadian Historical Review*
IOI	Pierre-Georges Roy, *Inventaire des ordonnances des intendants de la Nouvelle-France*, 4 vols. (Beauceville, 1919)
JDCS	*Jugements et déliberations du Conseil souverain de la Nouvelle-France, 1663-1716*, 2 vols. (Quebéc, 1895-91)
OCGI	Pierre-Georges Roy, éd., *Ordonnances, commissions, etc., etc., des gouverneurs et intendants de la Nouvelle-France, 1639-1706*, 2 vols. (Beauceville, 1924)
PAC	Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa
RAPQ	*Rapport de l'Archiviste de la Province de Québec*

General Introduction – The Series

The emergence of social history has been perhaps the most significant development of the last fifteen years in Canadian historical writing. Historians young and old have brought new approaches and new perspectives to Canada's past, revealing areas previously overlooked and offering new interpretations of old areas. The result has been what historian Ramsay Cook has called the discipline's "golden age." This five-volume series of readers in social history is intended to make the fruits of that "golden age" readily available to teachers, students, and general readers.

Modern social history is an approach rather than a specific subject matter. Where once social history was seen as what was left over after political and economic history was written, social history now is a "global" discipline, which can embrace politics and economics as well as the history of social groups or charitable institutions. The ideal of social history is to write the history of society, to study all of the ways in which people, groups of people, and classes of people interact to produce a society and to create social change. Such a global picture may never be drawn but its goal of an integrated history underlies recent study in Canada. The social historian, then, may write about a small subject over a limited period of time. However, that historian must be conscious of the links to the larger reality; of how local politics, say, indicate the relations of social classes, how they react with ideological assumptions of provincial politicians, how they affect local social customs.

It is a new field and that means its effort has been scattered. Canadian social history has embraced everything from the study of women's groups to computer analysis of population changes to the history of disease. It also has been marked by some sharp differences of opinion. The editors of this series, as practitioners and partisans, make no claim to objectivity in assessing these differences. Broadly, some historians treat social history as an extension of previous historical writing and share its assumptions about the general sweep of Canadian development: its liberal-democratic character; its fluid class structure; its peaceful and orderly growth. Others, however, break from that interpretation and argue for a different picture: a more rigid and influential class structure; a greater degree of conflict and violence; an emphasis on the working class. Which interpretation will prevail remains to be seen. The essays chosen for the series attempt to present as many viewpoints as possible, but the overall structure clearly reflects the judgement of the editors, which favours the second approach, the "working class" approach.

Rather than being structured along the traditional political divisions, the volumes in the series have been organized around dates which seemed most appropriate to social history:

I New France to the Conquest, 1760

II Pre-Industrial Canada, from the Conquest to the end of the imperial economic system, 1760 to 1849

III Canada's Age of Industry, from the coming of the railway to the full flowering of industrialism, 1849 to 1896

IV The Consolidation of Capitalism, from the beginnings of economic monopoly to the Great Crash, 1896 to 1929

V The Emergence of the Welfare State, from the origins of large-scale state intervention to the present, 1930 to 1981.

Again, the internal divisions of the volumes have been chosen to illustrate basic themes that represent building blocks in social history. Not all themes could be included and some historians might argue with the particular choices made here. We would suggest several rationales for the selection: these themes seem important to us; the volume of writing and research on them, completed and underway, suggests that many others find them

important; and they have proven useful in teaching social history.

Different periods and the availability of good literature require some variance from volume to volume. The general structure, however, is consistent. Each volume begins with an essay on the major economic developments of the period, for we work from the assumption that changing economic forms underlie most social changes. The second theme is that of social structure and social institutions, of the classes and groups of Canadian society and the way in which they interact. This theme will embrace subject matter as diverse as politics, religion, and landholding patterns.

Certain groups have emerged to centre stage historically in recent years. One is workers, the third theme in each volume. Workers and their work have been perhaps the area of richest development in historical writing in the last decade; social history has made its most profound impact in reshaping historical knowledge in this area. The fourth theme is one in which social history has had a similarly important influence, if only because interest in it is so recent. That is violence and protest, now receiving close attention from historians, sociologists, and criminologists. Violence and protest involved many Canadians and touched the lives of many more, and therefore are significant in their own right. However, they also provide a sharply defined picture of the structures and values of the society in which they occurred. The things people consider important enough to fight and protest about give us some indication of the values of particular groups. The attitudes of the leadership of society emerge in the fifth theme, social control. This theme studies the checks placed on violence and protest and inappropriate behaviour, as well as the institutions created to mould appropriate behaviour.

Along with workers, the other group to receive due attention from social history is women. No area, perhaps, was so neglected for so long as the study of women, outside of occasional writing on the suffrage movement. Recently, however, there has been a flood of literature, not just on feminism and women's organizations, but on women's productive and reproductive work. In a field devoted to creation of an integrated picture of society, this is a welcome and exciting development. Some of the trends in women's history, and some of the major achievements, are illustrated in these volumes.

The structure adopted here is offered as a useful one which will open to teachers and to students an exciting area of Canadian studies. It makes no claim to comprehensiveness; it is very much a starting point for that study. The additional readings suggested will help to move beyond that starting point and to introduce the controversies which cannot be reflected adequately in the small number of essays reprinted here. These volumes, however, do serve as a report on some approaches we have found helpful to students of social history and on some of the best literature available in this new field. More, they are collected on the premise that the investigation of social change in Canadian history, the ideas exposed and the questions raised, may allow students to understand more fully the nature of the Canadian society in which they live.

M.S. Cross
G.S. Kealey
Halifax and
St. John's,
July, 1981

Introduction to Volume 1

New France often has seemed a place apart, the very antithesis of our world. The land of the voyageurs, the Jesuit martyrs, the nobility symbolized by dashing Count Frontenac, it was an intrusion of the mediaeval past into a new world of progress. That it failed, then, was less surprising than that it lasted so long. This picture of New France and its appendage, Acadia, has begun to fade as closer examination reveals a country which was certainly unique, as all countries are, but equally "normal" in its development; it grew with its own logic. This volume presents some of the results of this re-examination.

New France was born out of commercial ambition, for Champlain was an agent for the fur and mineral seekers when he planted colonies at Port Royal in 1605 and Quebec in 1608. Commerce would remain the rationale of New France, a large part of its purpose in the eyes of the mother country. That made it typical of colonies, for Canada would exist as a staple-producing plantation, sending furs and timber and wheat to France and then to England until the mid-nineteenth century. That was not all of New France. To most of her people it was a home and a farm, and the vagaries of international trade and empires were relatively unimportant.

The imperial authority did have a decisive role in the life of New France, however. Competition with the Dutch and the English for furs and the transfer to the colonies of European quarrels meant that New France was perpetually at war. This shaped the colony in many ways. The presence of large numbers of

soldiers gave a military cast to its life and added the sophistication and aristocratic views of the officer class. The military also injected large sums of money into the economy and became as important an economic factor as the fur trade. A further stimulus came with the construction of the great fortress at Louisbourg, on a remote tip of what is now Cape Breton Island, beginning in 1720. The fabulous expenditures on the fortress, which amazed and horrified French officialdom, brought prosperity to New France. All of these advantages of the war machine were balanced by the insecurities under which the *Canadiens* were forced to live. The war that knew no end made the colony subject to invasion, as it was when the Kirke brothers captured Quebec, and took Champlain prisoner, in 1629, as it was in 1690 when Frontenac faced down an invading force from the English colonies, as it was when Louisbourg fell in 1745 and again in 1758. And as it was in 1759 when the British attacked the St. Lawrence heartland and took Quebec and, the following year, Montreal.

Despite the military threat the lower classes of New France undoubtedly enjoyed a better material existence than they could have hoped for in old France. It was symbolic of their improvement and their ambitions that they thought of themselves not as peasants, as they would have in Europe, but as *habitants*. Land was readily available and the feudal dues were low. The towns and Louisbourg provided markets for any agricultural surplus. And they had the outlet of the fur trade which provided ready employment for hundreds of young men. The fur trade also represented travel and adventure. Where French peasants were tied to the land, the Canadian *habitants* had a whole continent to wander. Life often was better for the town workers, as well, since the government attempted to attract skilled labour to the colony by making it much faster and easier for men to achieve the status of master artisans than was true at home.

The working class of non-agricultural workers was small in New France, at least as conventionally calculated. However, there was a huge proletariat both inside and outside the colony, that is, the Indians. They were progressively integrated into the economy but kept outside both physically and socially. They were the labourers who manufactured the colony's most valuable product, the beaver pelt. Controlled by the French monopoly on trade goods and often by force of arms, they progressively were stripped of their independence and reduced from

merchants, of sorts, to simple workers. As such their economic value to the French was enormous. However, they gave much more. Indian technology, clothing, and food helped the whites to learn quickly how to survive in a severe climate. The natives were the shock troops in the colonial wars and in the continuing struggle with the Iroquois. All the Indians paid a heavy price for their alliances with the French. They suffered heavy losses in war. They disrupted their lifestyles, neglecting agriculture and traditional hunting to pursue the beaver. They were physically debilitated by the twin European curses of disease and alcohol. The Huron, in 1649, paid the ultimate price as their nation was destroyed by the Iroquois. Finally, with grim inevitability, faced with the technologically superior and constitutionally more aggressive whites, the Indians lost their land and their freedom.

The central institution of New France was the New World variant of feudalism, the seigneurial system. As Cole Harris makes clear in the first essay in this volume, the institution changed drastically when transported to Canada. The basics remained. A seigneur was granted a substantial plot of land, which he in turn let to peasants or *censitaires*, as they were known in Canada. In return they agreed to pay certain dues to the seigneur, grind grain at his mill for a fee, and pay other dues and taxes. The short supply of tenants in New France and the government's desire to attract population by easing the conditions for *censitaires* meant that dues were much less onerous than in France. Another major difference from the Old World was in the topography of farm lots. The desire of all to have access to the river, either the St. Lawrence or the Richelieu, created the familiar Quebec strip farms, long narrow lots extending miles back from the river front. Out of that grew certain characteristics of French Canadians. Contact with neighbours could be maintained along the river, without concentrating into villages. This failure to establish villages meant a social life very different from rural France. It meant that it was more difficult for government to exert control over the population. And the strip farms, in the long run, would prove less efficient and would contribute to future agricultural problems in Quebec.

These factors helped create the social structure discussed in the essays by Trudel and Ouellet. While historians still debate how open this society was, how independent the people were, there is no argument that it was far more liberal than the parent French society. The differences were often highly visible. Some

Canadiens aped Indian fashions, with elaborate costumes, tobacco smoking, and freer manners. Horses, unattainable luxuries for French peasants, were symbols of independence in Canada. Critics complained that *habitants* wasted their resources buying these playthings instead of practical oxen or sheep. That, however, missed the spirit of men who no longer were peasants.

New France was never a colony of settlement in the same sense as the British colonies along the Atlantic seaboard. Yet it had some of the characteristics of an established country, among them the three flourishing towns of Quebec, Montreal, and Trois-Rivières and, in Acadia, the fourth large urban centre around the fortress of Louisbourg. Small in absolute terms, the urban population nevertheless represented a larger percentage of the total population than in most western countries. The skilled workers, whose organizations are described by Peter Moogk, were therefore an unusually significant factor in the colony. So, too, were the voyageurs. By the nature of their wandering life and the understandable lack of written records, it is impossible to develop more than a general picture of the social history of the fur traders. Their influences on New France cannot be doubted, however. It was through them, in large measure, that Indian technology was transmitted to the French, all of those artifacts and skills which allowed the European to function in the Canadian climate. They pushed the colony into its reckless expansion west and into conflict with its neighbours. And, with nearly every family having one or more members involved in the trade, their attitudes and lifestyles – unique to this new world – must have infected most habitants.

Few countries have lived so intimately with violence as New France. In 1609 Champlain fired on a party of Iroquois and began the ceaseless war of the next century and a half. It needs little analysis to establish that war profoundly affects a society and that constant war must have done much to shape society in New France. That violence should have spilled over into civil life is quite natural, as Terence Crowley shows in his essay on popular disturbances. The ragtag army, badly paid and fed, treated with brutality by its officers and often with contempt by civilians, was an obvious source of domestic disorder. So, too, were the people themselves in times of economic distress or food shortage. It is perhaps a measure of the success of New France that there was not more violence. The economy was able to

satisfy most needs most of the time, so that the endemic protest over economic conditions which marked old France was not a factor in Canada. The political and judicial systems were flexible enough to absorb discontent. The result was that, if anything, New France was less prone to domestic disorder than its successor, nineteenth-century Quebec.

Attempts to establish French dominance over the culture of the Indians are the subject of Bruce Trigger's essay on the Jesuits and the Hurons. Social control, to prevent deviant behaviour and to instill the values of society in the population, is practised in all nations. In New France, as in Huronia, the Church was one of the most important institutions of social control. Under François de Laval-Montmorency, Bishop Laval after 1674, the Church militant attempted to control the moral behaviour of the people and to bend the government to its will. By the end of his episcopacy in 1688 it was clear that Laval had failed to impose a stern Christian morality on the colony. To the end, however, the Catholic Church was an important check on the licence of a frontier society. Government, likewise, was a factor in checking the excesses of such a society. French law crossed the Atlantic with the settlers and assured that the controls of civilization reached out into the wilderness. The elaborate royal government and the military establishment also served as agents of social control, creating a fine balance between France and America in the style of the colony and, probably, in the minds of the people.

The final section, in Calvin Martin's "ecological" study, is concerned with the most pervasive influence on the life of New France, the native peoples. The French made contact with natives from the beginning, from Cartier's first voyage in the early sixteenth century. They made contact with a great variety of Indians: the warlike farmers, the Iroquois; the primitive, wandering Montagnais; the lords of the plains, the Cree; the stubborn and intelligent hunters, the Micmac. These and many more suggest that there was no single pattern of relationship, for the native peoples were as diverse as the European nations. Nor is it enough to feel humanitarian sorrow at what was done to them. It is clear that Indians were conscious actors in the drama. For example, the history of the colony might have been different if Champlain had not been forced to take sides in Indian politics and to do so without adequate knowledge of the implications. He was drawn into war against the Iroquois, the most efficient

and implacable war machine on the continent. Joining into the quarrels of its neighbours with the Iroquois doomed New France to suffer a continuing onslaught which bled away its strength. Obviously it is true that the force of white civilization and over-rapid changes it demanded eventually wrecked most native cultures. However, as with the origins of the wars after 1609, the Indians were not passive victims and they influenced the French perhaps nearly as much as the French influenced them.

New France was a world distant in time from our own and distant in many of its social forms. Although vast in geographical terms, as it spilled its traders across North America, it was small in population, limited in economic activity. That makes it a particularly useful area for historical study. In these narrower social and economic perimeters it is easier to measure the impact of various factors. It is easier, in fact, to see how a society is constructed and what contributes to its evolution. Perhaps we even can see how, from the strange plantings of that dim and distant past, our present began its growth.

I
Economic Overview

The economy of New France usually is seen to be synonymous with the fur trade. The trade accounted for the colony's too-rapid expansion across the continent, fur companies supplied the government before direct royal rule was established in 1663, and competition for furs helped keep New France in almost continuous war with England and her colonies. Its importance makes the fur trade an underlying theme in many of the essays in this book and its general outlines are the subject of H.A. Innis's influential book, *The Fur Trade in Canada* (Toronto, 1962), an excerpt from which is found in volume 2 of this series.

The fur trade, however, enriched only outsiders. For the bulk of the population the most important economic activity was agriculture. Cole Harris's description of the organizational form for agriculture, the seigneurial system, is comprehensive; here we reproduce some of his treatment of its direct impact on the life of the people. It was a unique system as it developed, nearly as different from French feudalism as it was from the freehold agriculture of the English colonies. The seigneurial system survived the Conquest and persisted until it finally was abolished in 1854 and replaced by individual, freehold tenure of land.

Harris employs certain French terms throughout. The basic linear measure was the *arpent*, 192 feet. Eighty-four *arpents* made a league of about three miles. A square *arpent* represented five-sixths of an acre. Grain was measured in *minots* of 1.05 bushels. The *roture* was the land grant made to a *habitant*.

FURTHER READING:

More on the fur trade is found in E.E. Rich, *Montreal and the Fur Trade* (Montreal, 1964). For a survey of agriculture, see H.M. Thomas, "Agricultural Policy in New France," *Agricultural History*, IX (1935), 41-60, and E.R. Adair, "The French-Canadian Seigneury," *Canadian Historical Review* [*CHR*], XXXV, 2 (1954), 187-207. International trade is discussed in Dale Miquelon, "Havy and Lefebvre of Quebec: A Case Study of Metropolitan Participation in Canadian Trade, 1730-60," *CHR*, LVI, 1 (1975) 1-24, while an important theoretical discussion of the economy is L.R. MacDonald's "France and New France: The Internal Contradictions," *CHR*, LII, 2 (1971), 121-43.

Works in French include Louise Dechêne's much acclaimed *Habitants et marchands de Montréal au XVII^e siècle* (Montréal, 1974); Jean Hamelin, *Economie et Société en Nouvelle-France* (Québec, 1960); and Marcel Trudel, *Les Débuts du régime seigneurial* (Montréal, 1974).

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