

French Canadians and the Beginning of the War of 1812: Revisiting the Lachine Riot

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Historians have generally claimed that, during the War of 1812, unlike in earlier periods, French Canadians eagerly rallied to the British cause and willingly fought to defend British North America from American invasion. Nearly all studies of French-Canadian participation in the war, however, focus on the Battle of Châteauguay in 1813, and few examine the first year of the war. A close look at French Canadians' reactions to the outbreak of the War of 1812 would indicate that they were hardly unanimous in their support. A detailed study of the largest and most violent act of resistance — a riot that broke out at Lachine at the beginning of July 1812 — reveals some of the reasons why so many habitants refused to perform their militia duty.

Les historiens ont généralement soutenu que, pendant la guerre de 1812, contrairement aux périodes précédentes, les Canadiens français se sont alliés avec enthousiasme à la cause britannique et ont volontairement combattu pour défendre l'Amérique du Nord britannique face à l'invasion américaine. Mais presque toutes les études consacrées à la participation canadienne-française à la guerre portent sur la bataille de Châteauguay, en 1813, et très peu sont consacrées à la première année de la guerre. Un regard sur les réactions des Canadiens français suite au déclenchement de la guerre de 1812 démontre que ceux-ci étaient loin d'offrir un appui unanime. À travers une étude détaillée de l'acte de résistance le plus important et le plus violent contre la guerre — l'émeute qui éclata à Lachine au début du mois de juillet 1812 — l'auteur cherche à élucider des raisons permettant d'expliquer pourquoi les habitants refusèrent d'accomplir leur devoir militaire.

WHEN WAR broke out between Britain and the United States at the beginning of the summer of 1812, Lower Canada was in turmoil. Military leaders

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were unable to muster the militia in the numbers that they had hoped, American agents were in the country preaching the message of defiance to British rule, and riots and mutinies spread across the province. On July 1, 1812, merely a week after Lower Canada learned of the American declaration of war,¹ a disturbance developed at Lachine that was so grave that Montreal military and political leaders feared the beginning of civil war. For two days, the men of Pointe Claire and the surrounding communities, many carrying arms, took to the streets in open protest against the actions of military officials. The crowd succeeded in freeing one prisoner who had refused to present himself for militia duty, and many men were prepared to march to La Prairie and “liberate” all the members of the community who had been drafted into the Select Embodied Militia. Only by firing into the crowd were the authorities able to put an end to the incident.

This outbreak of rebellion at Lachine, like the larger context of French-Canadian resistance to militia duty during the War of 1812, has been largely forgotten. Since at least the mid-nineteenth century, historians have conflated French-Canadian participation in the war with the mythic repression of an American invasion at the Battle of Châteauguay in 1813.² In his history of the French-Canadian militia, for example, Benjamin Sulte mentions the riot at Lachine — “le seul incident fâcheux de ce genre” — but goes on to state that “notre élément accompli son devoir en conscience”, making it clear to the reader that French Canadians sparkled at Châteauguay.³ The victory at Châteauguay, and the fact that the French-Canadian elite supported the war from its beginning, has led many historians to conclude that French Canadians in general remained loyal throughout the conflict.⁴ According to Arthur Lower,

1 According to Stephen Sewell, the “war was known at Montreal and at Queenston in Upper Canada by private expresses, in six days after its declaration at Washington [June 18, 1812], and at Quebec and York, the seats of Government, in twenty four hours more”. Veritas [Stephen Sewell], *The Letters of Veritas, re-published from the Montreal Herald, containing A succinct narrative of the military administration of Sir George Prevost, during his command in The Canadas; Whereby it will appear manifest, that the merit of preserving them from conquest belongs not to him* (Montreal, printed by W. Gray, July 1815), p. 7.

2 French-Canadian participation in the Battle of Châteauguay is by far the most studied aspect of the war in Lower Canada. For the principal works on the battle, see Martin F. Auger, “French Canadian Participation in the War of 1812: A Social Study of the *Voltigeurs canadiens*”, *Canadian Military History*, vol. 10, no. 3 (Summer 2001), pp. 23–41; Michelle Guitard, *The Militia of the Battle of Châteauguay: A Social History* (Ottawa: Minister of the Environment, 1983); Benjamin Sulte, *La bataille de Châteauguay* (Quebec: Renault, 1899); Victor Suthren, “The Battle of Châteauguay”, *Canadian Historical Sites: Occasional Papers in Archaeology and History*, no. 11 (1974); Ernest Cruikshank, “Record of the Services of Canadian Regiments in the War of 1812, Part IV: The Canadian Voltigeurs”, *Canadian Military Institute: Selected Papers from the Transactions*, vol. 10 (1900). For a look at de Salaberry, see Patrick J. Wohler, *Charles de Salaberry: Soldier of the Empire, Defender of Quebec* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1984).

3 Benjamin Sulte, *Histoire de la milice canadienne-française, 1760–1897* (Montreal, 1897), pp. 27, 32.

4 One important study of French Canadians and the War of 1812 does not follow these general historiographical lines, however. See Luc Lépine’s excellent, yet unpublished, MA thesis, “La participation des Canadiens français à la Guerre de 1812 (Université de Montréal, 1986).

“when summoned to arms”, French Canadians “fought bravely against the invader”.⁵ Fernand Ouellet, for his part, argues that, in “resisting the invaders, the people felt they were defending their interests and protecting their cultural heritage”.⁶ Finally, Martin Auger, the historian who has most recently written on the subject, states that the “impressive participation in the war effort helped redefine the military character of French Canadians” and “dissipated the British authorities’ fears that French Canadians were disloyal subjects”.⁷ The disturbances in the summer months of 1812, according to this reading, are mere aberrations, exceptions to the general willingness of French Canadians to rally to arms and defend the British flag.

At the beginning of the War of 1812, however, French Canadians did not unconditionally and universally respond to the raising of the militia and the government’s call to loyalty. A close reading of the trial records of those charged in the largest collective act of resistance, the Lachine riot, helps us to explain some of the reasons why so many *habitants* refused to fight and why the appeals to loyalty made by the colonial administration, the French-Canadian bourgeoisie, and the clergy had such little effect. In this sense, I build on Jean-Pierre Wallot’s previous work on the Lachine riot, the one existing study of the disturbance.⁸ Although Wallot provides an important detailed account of the rebellion, he makes little effort to understand the riot from the perspective of the insurgents. For him, the collective act of resistance can be explained by the particular “circumstances” that prevailed at Lachine and by the fact that “partout et toujours, en guerre et surtout en paix, les hommes

5 A. R. M. Lower, *Canadians in the Making: A Social History of Canada* (Toronto: Longmans, Green, 1958), p. 177.

6 Fernand Ouellet, *Lower Canada 1791–1840: Social Change and Nationalism* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1980), p. 106; see also his *Economic and Social History of Quebec, 1760–1850: Structures and Conjectures* (Ottawa: Institute of Canadian Studies, 1980).

7 Auger, “French Canadian Participation in the War of 1812”, p. 23. The War of 1812 in Upper Canada has been subject to very different historiographical treatment. For nearly 50 years, Upper Canadian historians have been challenging the myth that, during the War of 1812, the inhabitants of the province were overwhelmingly loyal to the British government and, through the militia, played a central and decisive role in defending against American invasion. In 1958 C. P. Stacey delivered his well-known address to the annual meeting of the Ontario Historical Society that rejected the “militia myth”. The paper, “The War of 1812 in Canadian History”, can be found in Morris Zaslow, ed., *Defended Borders* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1964). The classic history of the War of 1812 in this genre is J. MacKay Hitsman, *The Incredible War of 1812: A Military History*, updated by Donald E. Graves (Toronto: Robin Brass Studio, [1965] 1999). The theme has recently been taken up in the many works of Donald Graves, the leading military historian of the War of 1812. For an important study that challenges the stereotype of a British-loving, Upper Canadian elite, see Jane Errington, *The Lion, the Eagle, and Upper Canada: A Developing Colonial Ideology* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1987). For a social history of the War of 1812 in Upper Canada that demonstrates the general lack of enthusiasm of Upper Canadians for war, see George Sheppard, *Plunder, Profit, and Paroles: A Social History of the War of 1812 in Upper Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994).

8 Jean-Pierre Wallot, “Une émeute à Lachine contre la ‘conscription’ (1812)”, *Un Québec qui bougeait. Trame socio-politique du Québec au tournant du XIX^e siècle* (Montreal: Fides, 1973). The study originally appeared in the *Revue d’histoire de l’Amérique française*, vol. 18 (1964–1965).

n'aiment pas se faire enrégimenter".⁹ The only sustained study of the Lachine riot therefore paradoxically offers a lengthy discussion of the event itself, while paying little attention to the *habitants*' motivations and downplaying the event's importance in the larger context of resistance that swept Lower Canada.

Loyalty

The disaffection that prevailed in the French-Canadian countryside, and the possibility of a widespread refusal to perform militia duty, did not come as a surprise to the English-speaking colonial elite. According to F. Murray Greenwood, during both the closing years of the eighteenth century and the years leading up to the War of 1812, members of the English-speaking elite were incessantly worried about the loyalty of rural French Canadians and thought constantly about how they would react in the face of foreign invasion.¹⁰ In the spring of 1812, just months before the outbreak of war, Sir George Prevost, Governor in Chief and commander of British forces in North America, knew that it was necessary "to act with great caution" in his plans to mobilize for war, as the "seeds of disaffection and disorder have been sown among [French Canadians]".¹¹

Prevost was therefore greatly reassured by the fact that the various factions of the French-Canadian elite also preached loyalty and patriotism in the face of American aggression. The old aristocratic families saw the war as a chance to revive a fading military glory,¹² and both the clergy and the bourgeoisie, for differing reasons, backed the mobilization for war. For the clergy, the war was an opportunity to demonstrate its loyalty to the British government, and its support for the war fit into a long tradition of collaboration with the various colonial administrations. Priests were therefore ordered to remind the *habitants* that "notre religion sera en danger de se perdre par la présence de ces ennemis qui nous menacent, et qui sont sans principes et sans moeurs". The *habitants* had to feel "plus que jamais la douceur des liens qui les attachent avec tant d'avantages pour eux au Gouvernement paternel de la Mère-Patrie".¹³ At least one influential member of the clergy — Jean-Jacques Lartigue — employed the language of nationalism in his attempt to

9 Wallot, *Un Québec qui bougeait*, pp. 108, 135.

10 Greenwood cites much evidence indicating that the English-speaking elite was right in thinking that, if French troops had invaded in the opening years of the nineteenth century, the loyalty of French-Canadian *habitants* was far from assured. F. Murray Greenwood, *Legacies of Fear: Law and Politics in Quebec in the Era of the French Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press for the Osgoode Society, 1993), pp. 199-201.

11 Prevost to Lord Liverpool, April 20, 1812, cited in Lépine, "La participation des Canadiens Français à la Guerre de 1812", p. 26.

12 Ouellet, *Lower Canada 1791-1840*, p. 102.

13 "Lettre Circulaire, Vic. Gén. Deschenaux à messieurs les curés, juin 29, 1812", in *Mandements, lettres pastorales et circulaires des Évêques de Québec* (publié par M^{gr} Têtu et l'abbé C.-O. Gagnon), vol. III (Quebec: Imprimerie Générale A. Coté et Cie, 1888), pp. 86-87.

convince *habitants* to fight.¹⁴ *Habitant* men had not only to “spill their blood” for the “honour of the King”, he argued, but also for “l’honneur de cette brave nation canadienne à laquelle nous nous glorifions d’appartenir”.¹⁵ *Habitants* had to fight to prove that they were worthy children of the “Canadiens” who had fought so bravely in the past.¹⁶ Lartigue’s appeals to nationalism relied on a gendered language that pit masculine strength against feminine helplessness.¹⁷ British blood, he said, would flow in Lower Canada’s fields, and that blood would not be spilt to protect the British Isles, but to defend “vos femmes, vos enfants, vos parents, vos propriétés, votre Religion, vos temples, en un mot, tout ce qui vous est le plus cher”.¹⁸ If French Canadian men wanted to avoid the shame of having their women and children defended by British soldiers, it was crucial that they respond to the call to arms.¹⁹

Unlike the support of the war by the Catholic clergy, that provided by the Parti Canadien, the party of the French-Canadian bourgeoisie, was a result of a new climate of cooperation in the Lower Canadian Assembly. In the early years of the nineteenth century, the Assembly had become increasingly polarized along linguistic lines, and two antagonistic newspapers had been founded that nurtured the ideological divisions in the province: *Le Canadien* articulating the concerns and interests of the French-Canadian middle class,²⁰ and the *Quebec Mercury* voicing the English-speaking merchants’ desire to “unfrenchify” the province. As the first decade of the century wore on, the

14 By employing nationalist rhetoric, Lartigue’s appeal to loyalty differed from those of other members of the clergy, including Bishop Plessis. For Ouellet, when “Plessis addressed French Canadians he was addressing the Catholic faithful and Catholic subjects”. Lartigue’s use of nationalist language was, therefore, “an innovation”. Ouellet, *Lower Canada 1791–1840*, p. 101.

15 “Sermon de M. Lartigue”, p.s.s., July 5, 1812, Pointe Claire, p. 303.

16 “Sermon de M. Lartigue”, July 12, 1812, Lachine, p. 308.

17 For a look at the gendered nature of the public language of Upper Canada during the war, see Cecilia Morgan, *Public Men and Virtuous Women: The Gendered Language of Religion and Politics in Upper Canada, 1791–1850* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996). The gendered nature of “loyalty” and “patriotism”, Morgan argues, cannot be separated from the power structures of Upper Canadian society, and can be at least partly explained by the fact that patriarchy and paternalism “were central features of early Upper Canadian society” (p. 54). While no comparative study yet exists that explores the gendered nature of public language in Lower Canada, there is reason to believe that, during the War of 1812, the Lower Canadian elite employed similar metaphors of feminine helplessness and the need for male citizens to fend off the danger of an American invasion.

18 “Sermon de M. Lartigue”, July 12, 1812, Lachine, p. 307.

19 Father Boucher also used highly gendered rhetoric to denounce deserters. Deserting “à sa femme,” he argued, “c’est déserter à l’ennemi.” By associating women and the enemy, Boucher was attempting to convince members of the militia that they had to defend something larger than their families and their local communities and that anything less was submitting to the enemy. Boucher to Plessis, Laprairie, November 15, 1813, cited in Guitard, *The Militia of the Battle of Châteauguay*, p. 60.

20 According to historian Denis Monière, the consolidation of the Parti Canadien in the Assembly and the establishment of *Le Canadien* as its political organ symbolized the formation of a new ‘class’, the petty bourgeoisie, with its own nationalist ideology. Denis Monière, *Le développement des idéologies au Québec : des origines à nos jours* (Montreal: Québec/Amérique, 1977), p. 122.

Parti Canadien became locked in a fierce battle with the anglophone merchant class in the Assembly, the Executive Council, and especially (after 1807) Governor Sir James Craig.²¹ With war fast approaching, the British government recognized the danger of the political divisions in the colony and appointed Sir George Prevost to take over as governor in 1811. Almost immediately, Prevost began to pursue a policy of conciliation with Lower Canada's French-speaking elite. Fluent in French and open to compromise, Prevost balanced his patronage appointments between members of the French-Canadian elite and the Anglo merchants, and he restored prominent French-Canadian leaders to their positions as officers in the militia.²² Believing that if French-Canadian leaders supported the colonial government then *habitants* would naturally follow suit,²³ he appointed three French Canadians to the Legislative Council and increased the status of Bishop Plessis, head of the Roman Catholic Church in the colony.²⁴

Because of Prevost's efforts, and because members of the Parti Canadien believed that the interests of the French-Canadian nation were best served by remaining in the British Empire,²⁵ the Parti Canadien did not block the war effort in the Assembly, and the *Militia Act* was passed with its support. The French-Canadian bourgeoisie felt that it was in the best interests of the nation to remain loyal to the British government; to continue to enjoy British liberty,²⁶ it was necessary to fight off the immoral and excessively democratic American republic. In February 1812 the Lower Canadian Assembly presented Prevost with an address that spoke of "la loyauté, l'unanimité et le zèle des Sujets Canadiens de Sa Majesté",²⁷ and in the province's newspapers the bourgeoisie attempted to convince French Canadians that they were a distinct people who lived well under British rule.²⁸ "Denis", for example, wrote in the *Montreal Gazette* in July 1812, "Nous sommes sujets Anglois, sous la domi-

21 Yvan Lamonde, *Histoire sociale des idées au Québec, 1760–1896* (Montreal: Fides, 2000), p. 53.

22 For an account of the above developments, see Helen Taft Manning, *The Revolt of French Canada, 1800–1835: A Chapter in the History of the British Commonwealth* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1962).

23 On May 19, 1812, Prevost told both the House of Assembly and the Legislative Council, "You have wisely bestowed much of your labour upon the improvement of the Militia System; from the Law which you have passed upon this subject, and from the increased means you have thereby afforded me for the defence of the Province, I confidently look forward to fresh proofs of the loyalty, zeal and public spirit of its inhabitants" (*Montreal Gazette*, June 1, 1812).

24 Hitsman, *The Incredible War of 1812*, p. 30. See also Taft Manning, *The Revolt of French Canada*.

25 See Ouellet, *Lower Canada 1791–1840*, pp. 102–104.

26 For a look at how British liberty and the British constitution were seen by the Parti Canadien, see Lawrence Smith, "Le Canadien and the British Constitution, 1806–1810", *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 38, no. 2 (June 1957), pp. 93–108.

27 The address is printed in the *Montreal Gazette*, March 9, 1812.

28 Even if we take into account the fact that many newspapers may have been read aloud in various communities, however, there was a significant limitation on their effectiveness. Between 1760 and 1820, only 16 per cent of Lower Canada's population was literate, and the literacy rate varied greatly depending on one's sex, class, and place of residence (literacy rates were highest for English-speaking men living in cities). Lamonde, *Histoire sociale des idées au Québec*, p. 67.

nation du meilleur des Rois, dont la main libérale n'a cessé de verser sur nous des bienfaits, et dont le Ciel n'a prolongé le règne, que pour le bonheur des peuples confiés à ses soins." It was time, he continued, to show "que nous ne sommes pas des ingrats" and to preserve the honour of the name "Canadien". *Habitants* had to fight "pour la défense de la patrie et de l'honneur" because, if they did not, "il n'y aura plus pour nous d'honneur, de patrie, de bonheur, ni d'espérance".²⁹

Resistance

Both the bourgeoisie and the clergy appealed to the rhetoric of loyalty and patriotism to convince *habitants* to rally to arms and fight for the larger interests of religion and nation. Despite their best efforts, however, they had little success in convincing *habitants* of the need to fight. Resistance to militia service was nothing new for French Canadians, and their failure to respond to militia duty in 1812 fit into a larger pattern of non-cooperation that stretched back at least to the beginning of British rule.³⁰ Between 1779 and 1783, for example, 40 per cent of all criminal prosecutions in the district of Montreal were for militia offences.³¹ When in 1794 the government attempted to raise the militia in anticipation of war with the United States, there was widespread refusal to comply with the law. The situation was aggravated by rumours that the British were planning to send young French Canadians to fight abroad.³² In the district of Quebec, 34 of 42 parishes rejected the law, and in Montreal 500 people gathered to protest openly at Côte des Neiges.³³ Four parishes even mounted armed patrols to ensure that the 1794 militia law could not be enforced.³⁴

29 "Denis", *Montreal Gazette*, July 27, 1812. Captain Perrault, for his part, attempted to recruit volunteers for the Canadian Voltigeurs by telling *habitants*, "braves et loyaux compatriotes", that "le sang qui animait vos pères coule encore dans vos veines". *Habitant* men had to fight for "le salut de vos propriétés et de votre Religion, la sureté et le repos de vos familles", as well as for the great honour of the King. But the real interests that the *habitants* would be defending were the interests of the nation. Speaking of the Voltigeurs, Perrault announced proudly, "Des *Canadiens* seuls entrèrent dans ce corps; et vos Officiers seront tous *Canadiens*, pris dans la Milice. Aucune autre personne née hors de ce pays, ne pourra être admis [...] c'est pour nous seuls et notre Province que ce corps est formé" (Capitaine Perrault, "Voltigeurs Canadiens", *Montreal Gazette*, May 11, 1812).

30 For further discussion of resistance to militia duty and other instances of "collective action" in early French Canada (although focusing mostly on New France), see Terrence Crowley, "'Thunder Gusts': Popular Disturbances in Early French Canada", *Historical Papers* (Canadian Historical Association, 1979), pp. 11–32.

31 See Donald Fyson, "The Judicial Prosecution of Crime in the Longue Durée: Quebec 1712–1965", in Jean-Marie Fecteau and Janice Harvey, eds., *La régulation sociale entre l'acteur et l'institution : pour une problématique historique de l'interaction* (Quebec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2005), pp. 85–119.

32 Greenwood, *Legacies of Fear*, pp. 81–82.

33 Lamonde, *Histoire sociale des idées au Québec*, p. 44.

34 Crowley, "'Thunder Gusts'", p. 29. Further discussion of the 1794 riots can be found in Greenwood, *Legacies of Fear*, pp. 80–83.

As another war with the United States was fast approaching, however, the shortage of British regular troops in the province meant that the government had little choice but to mobilize the militia. In 1812 the *Militia Act* was strengthened, militia expenditures were increased from £2,500 to £12,000, and the three components of the militia were mobilized. The Sedentary Militia, composed of all able-bodied men between the ages of 16 and 50, was meant to protect the home front, and it began drilling throughout the spring and early summer of 1812. The Select Embodied Militia, composed of conscripts between the ages of 18 and 30, was charged with the defence of border regions, and 2,000 men were conscripted in May 1812 to serve for a three-month period. Finally, the third component of the Lower Canadian militia was composed of volunteer corps, the most well-known of which was the Canadian Voltigeurs.³⁵

Lack of popular support for the war deeply concerned British leaders and raised the Americans' expectations of an easy victory. When the order was issued for the conscription of 2,000 men, military and civil leaders realized how far those feelings of disaffection had reached. According to Stephen Sewell, conscription "occasioned great discontents over the Province".³⁶ Word of Lower Canada's militia problems even spread to New York state, and the state's governor, Daniel Tompkins, was understandably excited about the news. In a letter to General P. B. Porter, Tompkins transcribed information that he had received: "a large number of Canadians were at Lackeane [Lachine] to be drafted for Military service, but refused to bear arms & that the troops at Montreal were sent to that place, ... there was very considerable firing supposed to be between the troops sent out of Montreal & the Militia."³⁷ Then, writing to Colonel R. Macomb, Tompkins stated that, in the fighting between the militia and the regulars, eleven members of the militia had been killed and that, in the case of an invasion, half of the militia would desert and join the American side.³⁸

While Tompkins was obviously wrong in his assessment that half of the militia would join the American invaders, there were reasons for him to be encouraged. When the government attempted to conscript men into the Select Embodied Militia, *habitants* throughout the colony failed to report for duty. Resistance to militia duty was, as in earlier periods, largely a rural phenome-

35 Auger, "French Canadian Participation in the War of 1812", p. 24; Guitard, *The Militia of the Battle of Châteauguay*, p. 11.

36 Veritas [Stephen Sewell], "To the Editor of the Montreal Herald", April 1815, in *The Letters of Veritas*, pp. 8-9.

37 Governor Tompkins to Genl. P. B. Porter, Albany, July 8, 1812. The governor expressed the same sentiments in a letter to General Hall on July 8, 1812. In Daniel D. Tompkins, *Public Papers of Daniel D. Tompkins, Governor of New York, 1807-1817*, vol. 3, introduction by Hugh Hastings (Albany: J. B. Lyon Company, 1902), pp. 21-23.

38 Governor Tompkins to Col. R. Macomb, Albany, July 11, 1812, in Tompkins, *Public Papers of Daniel D. Tompkins*, pp. 26-27.

non.³⁹ The vast majority of those conscripted to the Select Embodied Militia (87.6 per cent) were drawn from rural parishes, and 77 per cent were listed as either farmers or rural labourers.⁴⁰ Rural farmers and labourers, worried about bringing in the harvest and helping provide for their families, had little interest in joining the Select Embodied Militia and consequently did not respond well to the conscription order. Of the 2,000 men conscripted, only 1,332, or 66 per cent, ever reported for duty.⁴¹

The Riot at Lachine

The riot that broke out on the first of July at Lachine was a manifestation of this larger reluctance of rural farmers to perform militia duty.⁴² The incident began when a group of residents asked the local officer of the militia, Captain Thibodeau, if their parish could be exempt from conscription for the Select Embodied Militia. The request was not taken seriously, and tensions rose when, in the parish of Pointe Claire, only 26 of the 59 men conscripted reported for duty (and four of these deserted almost immediately).⁴³ The com-

39 In the cities, the situation was different. When the Canadian Voltigeurs, the colony's most celebrated volunteer corps, began looking for men to volunteer for service, the unit's officers looked to the urban unemployed. Of the volunteers for the Voltigeurs, 82 per cent were classified as either craftsmen or urban labourers, and 61.2 per cent were drawn from an urban environment (farmers accounted for only 3.6 per cent of the volunteers). This is not to say, of course, that corps drawn mostly from urban areas did not experience their own problems. The Voltigeurs, for example, had significant difficulties with insubordination and with desertion. In June 1812 de Salaberry wrote distressingly of troubles in the corps: "It is truly mortifying to me", he wrote, to have to report "a mutiny of that part of the Corps raised in the district of Montreal, encamped on Crown land of Chambly". Soldiers complained about the short allowance of bread and provisions and feared being enlisted into the regular British army. The rumours were so widely diffused and the discontent so widespread that, according to Jacques Viger, a captain in the Voltigeurs, there were even "de murmures et de menaces de quitter en masse". While the corps did not massively desert during the mutiny at Chambly, persistent desertion did seriously hurt the unit. In June 1812, 22 members of the Voltigeurs illegally left the corps, followed by 38 more in July. By the end of the conflict, the Voltigeurs counted 299 cases of desertion, amounting to roughly 42.7 per cent of all those who had enlisted. Guitard, *The Militia of the Battle of Châteauguay*, pp. 28–31; de Salaberry at Chambly to Freer, June 18, 1812, in William Wood, ed., *Selected British Documents of the Canadian War of 1812*, vol. 1 (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1920), pp. 314–315; Lépine, "La participation des Canadiens Français à la Guerre de 1812", pp. 97–100; Auger, "French Canadian Participation in the War of 1812", p. 31.

40 Guitard, *The Militia of the Battle of Châteauguay*, p. 31.

41 When men did report for duty, moreover, they were not always entirely obedient. In an incident completely disconnected from the riot at Lachine, on August 13, 1812, a riot broke out at Pointe-Levy. One member of the militia, François Roi, refused to wear his uniform. Cries and yells ensued, and members of the militia began to revolt. Two companies of regular British soldiers were sent to the region to crush the mutiny, and 29 men finished by deserting. Lépine, "La participation des Canadiens Français à la Guerre de 1812", pp. 111–129.

42 Resistance to militia duty, of course, spread far beyond the borders of Lower Canada. For a look at how Upper Canadians responded (or failed to respond) to militia duty, see Sheppard, *Plunder, Profits, and Paroles*.

43 See National Archives of Canada [hereafter NAC], Collection Baby, MG 24 L3, vol. 43, testimony of Captain Thibodeau, August 20, 1812, pp. 28316–28318. See also testimony of Colonel St. Dizier, August 20, 1812, p. 28313 (all testimonies quoted hereafter are found in this collection).

mander of the battalion, Colonel St. Dizier, sent Major Leprohon, along with two captains and 30 militiamen, to the region to apprehend the deserters and to restore order. The party marched to the parish and arrested Lèveillé, a *habitant* who had persistently ignored demands that he present himself for militia duty. But when Lèveillé was brought to Captain Binet's custody for detention, a group of men surrounded the carriage in which he was being held and demanded his release. Feeling that it was impossible to defy the angry and armed crowd, Major Leprohon released the prisoner, and the crowd yelled out "vive le roi" in celebration of its first victory.⁴⁴

Realizing their collective power, groups of *habitants* went from parish to parish attempting to convince as many men as possible to assemble at Lachine, sometimes with the help of intimidation. In the most extreme cases, some witnesses claimed to have been threatened with having their houses burnt down if they did not comply with the crowd's wishes.⁴⁵ The next morning, on the first of July, a crowd gathered at Lachine that contained *habitants* from all of the parishes of the region (St-Charles, Pointe-Claire, Ste-Geneviève, Île-Bizarre, Ste-Anne, Vaudreuil, Les Cèdres, and Coteau, among others), and two representatives were sent to Montreal to find out the "truth" about the *Militia Act*.⁴⁶ The crowd grew to about 400 men, roughly 200 of whom were armed, and some talked about gathering as many as 1,500 the following day. At various points during the demonstration, the crowd yelled "vive le roi", prompting Chaboillez, a government agent, to reply that the *habitants'* cheers for the King were blasphemous.⁴⁷

As the crowd grew more and more agitated, members of the Committee of Montreal⁴⁸ worried about the explosive potential of the outbreak and the possibility of a chain reaction throughout the region.⁴⁹ There was no option, Committee members reasoned, except to crush the rebellion. They decided that magistrate Thomas McCord should go to Lachine accompanied by the light company of the 49th Regiment, a detachment of artillery, and two field pieces. As soon as he arrived, McCord chastised the crowd for its behaviour;

44 NAC, Collection Baby, MG 24 L3, vol. 43, "Jugement du Juge Panet dans une cause de mutinerie à Lachine" [hereafter "Jugement du Juge Panet"], p. 28290. See also Wallot, *Un Québec qui bougeait*, pp. 110–111.

45 Hyacinthe Groux, for example, stated that Prégeau had told him that, if he did not go to Binet's house, "il mettrait la feu à la maison et grange des père et mère du temoin" (testimony of Hyacinthe Groux, August 21, 1812, p. 28321).

46 Wallot, *Un Québec qui bougeait*, pp. 113–115. The two representatives, Captain Thibodeau and François Rapin, took an inexplicably long time to return from Montreal, and only arrived after the crowd had been dispersed by the military.

47 See testimony of Chaboillez, September 22, 1812, pp. 28334–28335.

48 The Committee of Montreal was formed of the members of Lower Canada's Executive Council who resided in Montreal.

49 James McGill heard word that 500 people had gathered to protest against conscription at Ste. Geneviève, behind Pointe Claire, at the same time as the incident at Lachine. See Stanley Brice Frost, *James McGill of Montreal* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), pp. 140–141.

when the crowd refused to disperse, he read the *Riot Act* and instructed Major Plenderleath, the commanding officer, to order that an artillery round be fired above the heads of the rioters.⁵⁰ The crowd responded with small arms fire, prompting the troops to fire another volley, first above the heads of the rioters and then directly into the crowd; remarkably, only one man died and another was seriously wounded. The following day, 450 members of the Montreal militia marched to Pointe Claire and then to St. Laurent, arresting 24 of the rioters (bringing the total number to 37), and others came to Montreal on their own to turn themselves in.⁵¹ The militia that marched to the disturbed regions, commanded by Captain John Richardson, was composed of roughly equal numbers of French- and English-speaking soldiers.⁵² The use of militia drawn from one segment of the population to quell problems in another region openly displayed some of the cleavages of Lower Canadian society. That an urban militia unit, composed of a large number of anglophones, marched into a rural and francophone region must have reinforced the *habitants*' feeling of being repressed by an outside and alien force.

As a result of the riot, 15 of the insurgents were charged and brought to trial at the Court of the King's Bench in Montreal. The trial took place on August 19 to 21 and September 22, 1812, and the defendants were all found guilty.⁵³ A close analysis of the trial records of those arrested during and after the protest reveals a great deal about the tense climate that existed in Lower Canada in the summer of 1812. What becomes clear is that the rural *habitants* conceived of loyalty in a drastically different way than did their middle-class counterparts or the Catholic clergy.⁵⁴ While the French-Canadian elite wor-

50 See the description of the riot in the *Montreal Herald*, July 4, 1812.

51 Robert Christie, *Memoirs of the administration of the colonial government of Lower Canada by Sir James Henry Craig and Sir George Prevost: from the year 1807 until the year 1815: comprehending the military and naval operations in the Canadas during the late war with the United States of America* (1818), pp. 44–45.

52 Frost, *James McGill of Montreal*, p. 141.

53 Jacques Trottier, Louis Paiement, and Noël Legault dit Deslauriers were found guilty of “riot and rescue” and sentenced to two years in prison with fines ranging from £20 to £100 and were bound over to be of good behaviour. Eustache Beneche dit La Victoire, Jean-Baptiste Prégeau, Pierre Chamailard, and Bazile Legault Desloriers were convicted for “inciting persons to assemble riotously and seditiously and to oppose His Majesty’s government and the Execution of the law and certain Statutes of this Province”. They were given sentences ranging from one to two years in prison and fines of between £15 and £25 and were bound over to be of good behaviour. Joseph Sicard, Luc Courville, François Courville, Guillaume Mallet, Jean-Baptiste Thivierge, Joseph Brunet, Bernard Courville, and Joseph Binet were found guilty “de s’être illicitement assemblés à Lachine, avec quatre cents autres personnes, armés de fusils, et d’être restés ainsi et armés pendant quatre heures, au grand danger du Gouvernement de Sa Majesté”. They were sentenced from one to two years in prison, fined from £10 to £100, and bound over to be of good behaviour. Wallot, *Un Québec qui bougeait*, pp. 127–128.

54 It almost goes without saying that Lower Canada’s English-speaking elite was worried and appalled by the incident. Robert Christie used similar language, referring to the crowd as a “mob” and to the insurgents as “deluded men”. Christie, *Memoirs of the administration of the colonial government of Lower Canada*, p. 45.

ried about defending the French-Canadian nation, the rural *habitants* were deeply disturbed by the infringement upon community values and the breaking of a moral contract between the rulers and the ruled.

For Judge Panet, the judge of the trial, the riot was despicable and reprehensible, and he refused to believe that it reflected the true sentiments of the *habitants*. In his judgement, he paternalistically chastised the rioters for not realizing that their revolt would be met with determined resistance on the part of those who had a stake in the existing social system.⁵⁵ It was even more astounding, he noted, that the *habitants* did not realize how well off they actually were under the British government; if they needed proof, he told them, they need just consult their fathers. Panet could not understand how

l'idée d'une guerre civile a t'elle pu entrer dans l'idée d'un Canadien. Les Canadiens qui vivent si heureux sous le gouvernement Britannique, sans taxes, sans impôts, protégés dans leur religion qu'ils exercent librement ou plutôt qu'ils négligent beaucoup trop, cette religion qui n'enseigne que des devoirs que vous ne remplissez qu'imparfaitement. Depuis 52 ans que vous vivez sous le gouvernement actuel, quelles plaintes ozeriez-vous faire contre ce gouvernement?⁵⁶

Unable to believe that the insurgents could really have wanted to destroy the very government that “fait notre bonheur”, the judge attributed the actions of the *habitants* to an “error” that had resulted when ill-intentioned people manipulated and took advantage “de l'ignorance et de la crédulité des gens de la campagne pour les tromper et les rendre coupables”.⁵⁷ For members of the French-Canadian middle class, the insubordination of the *habitants* was at once both incomprehensible and infuriating. A correspondent of Jacques Viger, captain in the Canadian Voltigeurs, lashed out at the leaders of the insurrection: “Que le diable les berce et ils dormiront bien.”⁵⁸

Members of the Catholic clergy were also greatly disturbed and felt it necessary to reinforce the message of loyalty and submission that they preached to the people. In the days following the protest at Lachine, Lartigue was sent to Lachine and Pointe Claire to preach the message of submission and obedience. Lartigue felt that he had to trace for the *habitants* “la ligne de vos devoirs”. He spoke of “la fidelité, l'amour, l'obéissance que vous devez à votre légitime souverain & au Gouvernement bienfaisant qui protège cette

55 According to Judge Panet, “Mais si vous vous revoltiez, croyez vous que vous pouriez le faire sans éprouver de la résistance de la part de ceux qui sont attachés au gouvernement et interessés à la conservation de leurs biens, de leurs familles et de tout ce qu'ils ont de cher au monde” (“Jugement du Juge Panet”, p. 28296).

56 “Jugement du Juge Panet”, pp. 28296–28297.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 28298.

58 Archives du Séminaire, Québec, Fond Viger-Verreault, MA Saderdache Bleue, vol. 2, P32/0–140, p. 152, H. Heney to Jacques Viger, September 29, 1812.

Province”.⁵⁹ Even when the government was unjust, the *habitants* had to respect and obey its authority because submission to authority was “la volonté de Dieu”.⁶⁰ What had the British government not given the French-Canadian people, he asked? Had they forgotten that it was their religious duty to submit to all those who governed them? To ensure that there was no misunderstanding, Lartigue concluded his speech at Pointe Claire by asking all of the parishioners to repeat slowly after him a heartfelt declaration of their loyalty to their beloved King.⁶¹

While many sources outline what exactly took place at Lachine, the significance and impact of the violent occurrences, and the motivations of those involved, remain obscure and unexplored. Historians have generally portrayed the Lachine riot as being of little importance.⁶² For contemporaries, however, both insurgents and members of the ruling classes responsible for suppression of the riot, the event was neither secondary nor harmless. The defendants and other witnesses claimed that they were protesting because they thought that the *Militia Act* had not been properly passed, and, most argued, they just wanted to know “the truth”. This explanation, while not wholly untrue, does not do justice to the complexities of the rioters’ motivations. Judge Panet emphatically rejected this excuse. For Panet, the evidence pointed to a premeditated insurrection:

[I] paraît que le cri général et uniforme dans presque tous les quartiers du haut de l’isle de Montréal a été il n’y aura point de Milice incorporée, nos jeunes gens ne marcheront point – c’est-à-dire nous n’assisterons point le Gouvernement et le Souverain qui protègent ce pays heureux depuis tant d’années et qui nous ont procuré le pain et le bonheur. La preuve que l’opinion était générale sur ce refus de laisser marcher les jeunes gens, se trouve constatée par une foule de témoignages dans les différentes poursuites.⁶³

Panet brushed aside the insurgents’ claim that they did not know whether the *Militia Act* had been properly passed, saying this defence “n’était qu’un vain prétexte que vous ne pouvez appuyer d’aucune bonne raison. Vos officiers de

59 “Sermon de M. Lartigue”, p.s.s. July 5, 1812, Pointe Claire, p. 303.

60 “Sermon de M. Lartigue”, July 12, 1812, Lachine, p. 308.

61 “Sermon de M. Lartigue”, p.s.s., July 5, 1812, Pointe Claire, pp. 304–305. After the riot at Lachine, the bishop sent a letter to the clergy thanking them, on behalf of the governor, for their efforts in forcing the *habitants* to join the militia and to help quell the disturbances: “Son Excellence le Gouverneur en Chef désire que je vous fasse connaître sa parfaite satisfaction de l’assistance qu’il a reçue de votre part, tant dans la levée des milices, que dans le maintien de la subordination, qui règne parmi elles” (“Lettre Circulaire, J. O. Ev. de Québec à messieurs les curés”, October 6, 1812, p. 93).

62 For Fernand Ouellet, the events at Lachine deserve merely a passing mention as an isolated event “without any great general significance” (Ouellet, *Economic and Social History of Quebec*, pp. 237–238). According to Michelle Guitard, the Lachine riot was “secondary in the whole picture” of recruitment (Guitard, *The Militia of the Battle of Châteauguay*, p. 30).

63 “Jugement du Juge Panet”, pp. 28284–28285.

Milice doivent vous avoir informés que les lois de Milice étaient en pleine vigueur.” If the object of the gathering was simply to present a petition, he asked, why was it necessary to advance into the city with upwards of 500 men armed with sticks and guns?⁶⁴ After a close examination of all the evidence on the subject, the judge concluded that the object of “tous ceux qui sont rassemblés à la Chine était de vous opposer à la loi de Milice et au gouvernement qui vous appelait, en vertu de cette loi à la défense de votre pays menacé par l’ennemy”. Even worse, he argued, some of the insurgents had begun talking about starting a civil war.⁶⁵

Judge Panet was not the only one to feel that the events at Lachine represented an extremely dangerous situation that needed to be handled with force. In Stephen Sewell’s 1815 collection of letters to the *Montreal Herald*, he described the state of the Montreal militia at the beginning of the war. While mentioning that the Sedentary Militia marched in Montreal’s Champ de Mars throughout the opening months of the conflict, Sewell pointed to the significant problems in conscripting the Select Embodied Militia. Sewell thought it important to point out that, without a swift application of military force (a decision made in Prevost’s absence), the consequences of the riot at Lachine could have been disastrous. From the moment that the insurrection was crushed, he stated, “matters took quite a different turn”. Had the Montreal Committee of the Executive Council not immediately resorted to force, or had the Committee waited for Prevost’s return, “the infection of insurrection might have spread like wild fire, and Pointe Claire and Nouvelle Beauce, been joined together by the intermediate parishes; for the multitude of every country is giddy, and there are always self styled Patriots ready to blow the coals”.⁶⁶

From the Perspective of the Insurgents

In all of their attacks on the actions of the *habitants*, members of the French-Canadian middle class, the clergy, and Judge Panet made no attempt to understand the rioters’ motivations. Judge Panet believed that the “simple” *habitants* had been tricked by “ill-intentioned leaders”, and Lartigue simply felt that the parishioners were not behaving as good Catholics. What neither considered was that the insurgents were acting according to their own understandings of the world and of their communities. With few primary docu-

64 *Ibid.*, pp. 28285, 28292. Judge Panet, after listening to many witnesses recount their versions of the events, rejected the argument that the *habitants* were just trying to petition the government. Thomas McCord, for example, told the *habitants* that they were not following the proper procedure for a petition and that he would be happy to petition on their behalf if a small group came to see him the following day. In response to McCord, “ils ont répliqué qu’ils voulaient avoir leur gens et qu’avec requête ou sans requête ils les auraient toujours” (Transq. par Mr. Stewart, testimony of Ante Lange, September 22, 1812, p. 28331).

65 “Jugement du Juge Panet”, pp. 28294–28295. According to the testimony of Pierre Roi de Lapensée, a militia captain, when he asked whether the rioters were planning to go as far as civil war, the rioters responded, “Ma foi, oui ... nous croyons bien que ça viendra là” (testimony of Pierre Roi de Lapensée, August 19, 1812, p. 28306).

66 Sewell, “To the Editor of the Montreal Herald”, April 1815, in *The Letters of Veritas*, pp. 10–11.

ments written by the largely illiterate *habitants*, it is impossible to reconstruct an accurate understanding of their views of society and of social relations more generally. In the case of the rural *habitants* who openly defied the authority of the British Crown and of their own clerical leaders at Lachine, the trial records of those charged in the incident offer a rare glimpse into the *habitants*' understanding of the world.

Many historians have explored the meaning of popular disturbances for the poor and have probed the role that the popular classes play in the larger workings of the social system. For E. P. Thompson, all elements of society contribute to form a "structured set of relations, in which the State, the Law, the libertarian ideology, the ebullitions and direct actions of the crowd, all perform roles intrinsic to that system, and within limits assigned by that system".⁶⁷ In Lower Canada at the beginning of the nineteenth century, as in eighteenth-century England, the hegemony of the ruling class "did not envelop the lives of the poor",⁶⁸ and the popular classes played an important role in the larger social system. Often, protests acted as an outlet for popular grievances, and they served to warn officials of growing discontent among the masses. Terrence Crowley demonstrates that popular disturbances in early French Canada were both common and, in a way, necessary to the functioning of the social system. At various points in the eighteenth century, crowds assembled to demand lower food prices, an end to forced labour, and redress for various other injustices. Crowds often had a gender dimension; "bread riots" in both Europe and North America were composed largely of women,⁶⁹ just as other crowds, like the one in the Lachine riot, were predominantly composed of men. For Crowley, crowds in early French Canada "were not simply spasmodic reactions of mindless people succumbing to momentary whims or losing themselves in the collective identity of the crowd", but were composed of people who sought "remedy to immediate but well-defined grievances".⁷⁰ Seeing collective acts of violence in the early nineteenth century from the light of contemporary elites, as "deluded mobs", therefore, is at once a distortion of the historical record and an insult to those who lived through the period.⁷¹

While it is impossible to know for certain what led the *habitants* to defy

67 E. P. Thompson, "Eighteenth-century English Society: Class Struggle Without Class?", *Social History*, vol. 3, no. 2 (May 1978), pp. 161–162.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 163.

69 Crowley, " 'Thunder Gusts' ", pp. 19–20. See also E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century", *Past and Present*, no. 50 (February 1971); Barbara Clark Smith, "Food Rioters and the American Revolution", *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, vol. 51, no. 1 (January 1994), pp. 3–38.

70 Crowley, " 'Thunder Gusts' ", p. 23.

71 According to Scott See, moreover, to "many people in western Europe and North America, a worthy cause might provide justification enough for collective violence". He continues, "Riots were used as a social or moral weapon, a tool to insure the rights of the common folk." Scott See, "Nineteenth-Century Collective Violence: Toward a North American Context", *Labour/ Le Travail*, vol. 39 (Spring 1997), pp. 25–26.

military authorities at Lachine, partial answers lie in the trial records of the apprehended insurgents. The court records are full of “character” witnesses who testified that the defendants were of “good character”. When speaking of Eustache Beneche *dit* La Victoire, charged with inciting persons to riot, for example, a witness for the defence, Jacque Sarazin, stated that “le prisonnier a toujours joui d’un bon caractère et appartient à une bonne famille”.⁷² Joseph Martin, for his part, vouched for Louis Paiement, charged with “riot and rescue”, by stating that Paiement was “un jeune homme de bon caractère qui a toujours fait son devoir”.⁷³ And M. Gauthier began his testimony by stating that Luc Courville, arrested for his presence at the riot, was the father of nine children and had “un caractère sans reproche”.⁷⁴

Among those present at the demonstration was at least one captain in the militia, Captain Binet.⁷⁵ He was at the assembly for the majority of the day and, although he claimed to have attempted to persuade the *habitants* to leave,⁷⁶ was clearly complicit in the events that took place.⁷⁷ It is interesting, however, that the *habitants* convinced Binet to take part in the assembly, not the other way around. According to Jacques Trottier, who was later found guilty of “riot and rescue”, he and a few others “ont arrêté chez le Capitaine Binet pour l’engager d’aller avec eux”. They wanted Binet to go with them, Trottier argued, because they hoped that “des gens respectables fussent présent à une pareille assemblée”.⁷⁸ By rejecting the orders of some military officials and by taking the initiative to encourage the captain to participate, the *habitants* reversed the roles that predominated in the military and took a leading rather than a subordinate part in the developments.

In the context of rural Lower Canada, according to Colin Coates, militia officers, like priests, “served as intermediaries between the local inhabitants and the external world”.⁷⁹ While the *habitants* wanted the captain present to

72 Testimony of Jacque Sarazin, August 20, 1812, pp. 28318–28319.

73 Testimony of Joseph Martin, August 19, 1812, p. 28308.

74 Testimony of M. Gauthier, September 22, 1812, p. 28348.

75 It should be remembered that, at this time, a majority of subaltern militia officers were *habitants*. See Christian Dessureault and Roch Legault, “Évolution organisationnelle et sociale de la milice sédentaire canadienne : le cas du bataillon de Saint-Hyacinthe, 1808–1830”, *Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, vol. 8 (1997), pp. 87–112.

76 After Mr. Ross and M. Chaboilliez, the government agents, informed the crowd that the *Militia Act* was in force and that the assembly was illegal, Binet reportedly spoke to the crowd: “Mes enfants, on n’a point a repliquer sur les bonnes raisons de ces Messieurs, je crois qu’il est à propos de nous retirer.” Judging by the captain’s behaviour the night before, when he had allowed a crowd of men to gather around his house to disrupt Major Leprohon, however, there is reason to doubt this testimony. Testimony of Joseph Theoret, September 22, 1812, pp. 28355–28356.

77 Several witnesses stated that they saw Captain Binet in the crowd. Testimony of Joseph Landreman, September 22, 1812, p. 28339; testimony of Joseph Desautel and Ante Garnier, September 22, 1812, p. 28340.

78 Testimony of Jacques Trottier, August 22, 1812, pp. 28353–28354.

79 Colin M. Coates, *The Metamorphoses of Landscape and Community in Early Quebec* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000), p. 94.

reinforce their case in the face of external authorities, the captain was also subject to greater blame for the conduct of the *habitants*. Judge Panet used extremely harsh language to condemn Binet's neglect of duty: "Le Capitaine Binet que l'on représente comme un homme respectable, un homme jaloux de remplir son devoir pour le Service du Roy [...] [a] resté avec eux [les habitants] presque pendant toute la scène sans interposer votre autorité, sans chercher à les arrêter."⁸⁰ On July 13, 1812, the *Montreal Gazette* reported that "His Excellency the Commander in Chief" had "judged it expedient for the safety of His Majesty's service to strike him from the list of Officers of Militia, Joseph Binet", as he was "unworthy, by his bad conduct, of fulfilling such an important duty, and of which depend almost always, the good or bad conduct of Militiamen"⁸¹.

It is also important to note that the divisions between the two parties, the insurgents and the military forces that repressed them, were not primarily of a linguistic nature. True, nearly all of the rioters were francophone, and the magistrate and the regular British soldiers who accompanied him spoke English, but the crowd was protesting the enforcement of military conscription and the forceful removal of the community's young men, a position supported by the French- and English-speaking elites alike. The military party that first came into the community to arrest the resisters, for example, was led by Major Leprohon, a French-Canadian militia officer. As well, of course, the militia that marched to the region the day after the riot was composed of both English- and French-speaking soldiers. The rioters, moreover, did not automatically exclude anglophones from their group. Pierre Chamaillard, found guilty of "inciting persons to assemble riotously", tried hard to convince Robert McGregor to join the crowd to retrieve the young militia conscripts. McGregor responded that he did not have any "young ones" to free, but he agreed to join the group if it could be proven that the *Militia Act* had not been properly passed.⁸² Although McGregor did not stay with the group for long,⁸³ the fact that he was invited to join the crowd in the first place demonstrates that the conflict was not primarily focused around issues of language or ethnicity.

From the trial records, it is clear that those who participated in the riot did so because they felt that a "contract" between themselves and the government

80 "Jugement du Juge Panet", p. 28293. Coates notes a similar case of militia officers being held responsible for the conduct of the people residing in their area. When, during the time leading up to the War of 1812, rumour spread in a community about the possibility of local militiamen being sent to Germany, "Colonel Thomas Coffin blamed this problem on the lack of vigilance and action of two captains, and he recommended that their commissions be revoked" (Coates, *The Metamorphoses of Landscape*, p. 94).

81 Reported by F. Vassal de Monviel, Adjutant-General of Militia, *Montreal Gazette*, July 13, 1812.

82 Testimony of Rob McGregor, August 21, 1812, pp. 28322–28323.

83 When he suggested that the crowd should send five or six people to gather information instead of immediately assembling, one of the *habitants* responded, indicating that he was not a member of the community that was going to fight: "Allez vous en vous n'êtes pas des nôtres." Testimony of Rob McGregor, August 21, 1812, p. 28324.

had been broken. In Lower Canada, according to Coates, a hierarchical understanding of society “persisted into the early nineteenth century”.⁸⁴ Rather than openly challenge the hierarchical structure, he argues, *habitants* often protested to demand that their social superiors fulfil their obligations to the community.⁸⁵ Virtually all of the witnesses and defendants who took part in the collective action at Lachine stated that they believed the *Militia Act* had not been legitimately passed, and they were all upset that they had not been allowed to voice their grievances to the governor. Fifteen days before the uprising, the *habitants* had gone to Captain Thibodeau asking him to petition the government, but Thibodeau had refused because he was afraid of damaging his reputation as an upstanding citizen.⁸⁶ By declining to give voice to their concerns, Thibodeau was neglecting his responsibilities to the *habitants* and thus increasing their frustration and the dissent in the region. When tensions reached a boiling point a few weeks later, the *habitants* decided to take matters into their own hands. Upon hearing the news that one of the young members of the community had been arrested, they quickly formed their own conclusions: the young Léveillé was not guilty of any crime and should be freed.⁸⁷

As both the political and clerical elites attempted to persuade the *habitants* to remain loyal to the “French-Canadian nation”, the *habitants* placed their primary loyalty to the defence of their families and their local communities. To defend French-Canadian values, the clergy and the bourgeoisie had argued, it was necessary to fight for the British, but this reasoning had little appeal to those who lived in highly localized rural communities. As Gerald Friesen has argued, systems of communication and transportation were at the very centre of the historical experience, and, before the mid-nineteenth century, “textual-settler” communities were deeply rooted in place and still relied heavily on oral forms of communication. Popular protests in this period were therefore very much based on this “communication context”, and French-Canadian *habitants*, like other rural people, “were limited in their power to effect change both by the rules laid down by the established order and by their inability to contact, debate with, and mobilize” large segments of the population. Lacking the communication structures to forge “long-term, organized, cooperative attempts to restructure the economy or to redistribute public power”, popular protests focused on matters of more immediate con-

84 Coates, *The Metamorphoses of Landscape*, p. 95.

85 *Ibid.*, p. 89.

86 Testimony of Captain Thibodeau, August 20, 1812, p. 28316. See also the testimony of François Rapin, September 22, 1812, p. 28343. According to Pointe Claire resident Amable Legault, three weeks before the incident at least 200 *habitants* went to Thibodeau wanting to “dresser une requête au gouverneur pour savoir si le Bill était sanctionné” (testimony of Amable Legault, September 22, 1812, p. 28344).

87 Judge Panet clearly recognized the affront to the proper hierarchy that had taken place; in his judgement, he lashed out at the accused: “était-ce a vous a juger si ce Leveillé avait été arrêté bien ou malapropos?” (“Jugement du Juge Panet”, p. 28289).

cern, like the price of bread, the imposition of labour, or, in the example of the Lachine riot, the infringement upon community rights.⁸⁸

When military officials were sent to arrest young conscripts, therefore, older members of the community felt that the authorities had overstepped their bounds. Outraged, they considered it part of their duty to protect the youth, and they were prepared to resort to armed resistance if necessary. The *habitants*' response to the outside intrusion relied on the collective memory of the community and on the *habitants*' own conceptions of gender roles. In contrast to the war propaganda that encouraged *habitants* to follow in the great military tradition of French Canadians, for example, they responded angrily to a government agent by yelling that "nos pères ne faisaient pas l'exercice et nous ne voulons pas d'exercice".⁸⁹ The rioters, all men, also clearly felt that it was their responsibility as males to protect their families and their community against outsiders. Ironically, as the clergy and other members of the Lower Canadian elite employed highly gendered rhetoric to convince French-Canadian men to fight for the larger interests of nation and Empire, the men felt that it was their duty to protect their families and communities. In this instance, the two sites of possible loyalty came into open conflict.

For the *habitants*, the threat to the community did not come from an impending American invasion, but from military officials who arrived to arrest conscripts who had failed to report for duty. The possibility of an American invasion was far from the minds of the *habitants* — in all the testimony provided at the trials of the rioters, the United States was not mentioned a single time. But the men of the community were furious that the youth were being forced to fight: "si les jeunes gens voulaient aller, qu'ils yraient mais qu'ils ne souffriraient pas qu'on les y forçat."⁹⁰ One of the major complaints made to officials in Montreal was that the *habitants* found it "extraordinaire que des personnes armées fussent envoyées pour prendre leurs gens avec ordre de tirer sur eux".⁹¹ According to the testimony of Louis Chaboilliez, Guillaume Mallet, one of the leaders of the assembly,⁹² was a moderate who resorted to violence because of the breach of family and community rights: "il paraissait seulement fort en colère contre le Maj. Leprohon qui était venu chez lui armé avec son propre frère pour poursuivre les prisonniers."⁹³ When asked why they had assembled at Lachine, Bernard Courville and Mallet responded together that they wanted "de ravoit leur miliciens qui

88 Gerald Friesen, *Citizens and Nation: An Essay on History, Communication, and Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), pp. 95–96.

89 See testimony of Louis Chaboilliez, September 22, 1812, pp. 28334–28335.

90 Testimony of Major Jean Philippe Leprohon, August 19, 1812, p. 28302.

91 Testimony of Captain Thibodeau, August 20, 1812, p. 28317.

92 According to McCord, "Mallet paraissait très animé et changeait souvent de place qu'il paraissait que la foule l'écoutait avec attention" (testimony of Thomas McCord, September 22, 1812, p. 28339).

93 Testimony of Louis Chaboilliez, September 22, 1812, pp. 28335–28336.

étaient à la Prairie – que Mr. Leprohon était venu jusque dans leurs greniers avec des tizons de feu et qu’il était accompagné des gens armés”.⁹⁴ With tensions already running high, the arrival of the armed officials attempting to arrest the younger members of the community triggered the collective act of resistance. The men simply felt that they could take no more insults.

Why, then, did the crowd shout its support for the King? The riot was not the result of revolutionary fervour, nor was it necessarily a revolt against the government or the King. When British regulars marched to Lachine and fired into the crowd, the insurgents almost immediately dispersed and ran for cover; when the Montreal militia marched into the disturbed region the following day and arrested 24 men, no one resisted and no crowd formed in their defence. The riot was not an anti-government rally, but a defensive reaction by a community whose members felt themselves under threat. When a serious military force arrived, the crowd was neither ready nor willing to engage in a sustained conflict. The rioters were not protesting either for or against the “nation” because, for them, the “national community” did not yet exist, and they shouted their support of the King because they did not feel themselves to be challenging the hierarchical order. The *habitants*’ loyalty to the King contrasted with their anger towards local officials who were abusing their power and trampling on long-established community rights.⁹⁵ Drawing on a long tradition of resistance to militia duty, and an even longer tradition of popular protest, they had the goal of re-establishing a sense of mutual rights and obligations between themselves and their political and military leaders.

This does not mean, however, that the *habitants*’ grievances were not real or that the danger of the riot spreading was not serious. The event at Lachine can only be understood when placed in the context in which it occurred. While the rioters looked inward towards their local communities, the confrontation formed part of a much larger, yet uncoordinated, resistance to militia duty. The riot was the largest and most dramatic instance of a problem that was much more widespread: a significant number of rural French-Canadian farmers saw no need and had no desire to leave their communities behind to fight in a war that they considered did not concern them. In the summer of 1812 the government showed that it would not hesitate to use force if *habitants* refused to respond dutifully to military conscription, and the government’s determination to reinforce its authority with violence ensured that there were no more collective uprisings against militia conscription. In November 1812 Prevost wrote that the “Canadian Peasantry” had “materially

94 *Ibid.*, pp. 28333–28334.

95 According to Allan Greer, “A basically royalist political vocabulary does not imply a docile acceptance of authority. People who have been taught to regard the distant king as a father-figure who has the best interests of his subjects at heart, often tend to conclude, when things go badly, that exploitive officials, merchants, or aristocrats are the monarch’s enemies as well as their own.” See Allan Greer, *The Patriots and the People: The Rebellion of 1837 in Rural Lower Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. 193.

changed their character and disposition” and that “their former prejudices and distrust have been removed”.⁹⁶ While *habitants* did not universally comply with the raising of the militia after 1812, the largest and most violent demonstrations against militia duty had passed. Only by taking seriously these acts of collective resistance that occurred in the spring and summer of 1812, however, do we come closer to understanding the meaning of the war from the eyes of those who lived through it.

96 Cited in Taft Manning, *The Revolt of French Canada*, pp. 396–397.