

## Three Preconfederation Painters of the Canadian City, Part I, James Cockburn

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### Article abstract

James Cockburn, James Duncan and Joseph Légaré were the foremost painters of pre-Confederation Canadian cityscape and city life. Their work may be treated as cultural artifacts, linked to and suggesting insights about the period's social life; as aesthetic objects within the semi-autonomous realm of "art", to be treated with in the context of critical sociology; or as historical documents offering direct evidence about pre-Confederation urban physical and social landscape. The present article emphasizes the first approach, while also indicating some directions for inquiry within the second and third approaches.

# Three Preconfederation Painters of the Canadian City

## Part 1

### James Cockburn

Jon Caulfield

#### Résumé/Abstract

*James Cockburn, James Duncan et Joseph Légaré sont des peintres réputés auteurs de scènes illustrant la vie citadine et le paysage urbain de la période précédant la Confédération. Leurs oeuvres peuvent être considérées soit comme des artefacts culturels liés à la vie sociale et éclairant la compréhension de la période; soit comme des objets esthétiques relevant du domaine semi-autonome de l'Art et qui doivent être examinés dans le cadre de la sociologie critique; ou encore comme des documents historiques offrant un témoignage direct sur le paysage urbain, physique et social, d'avant la Confédération. Cet article s'intéresse davantage à la première approche, tout en indiquant certaines orientations de recherches relatives aux deux autres approches.*

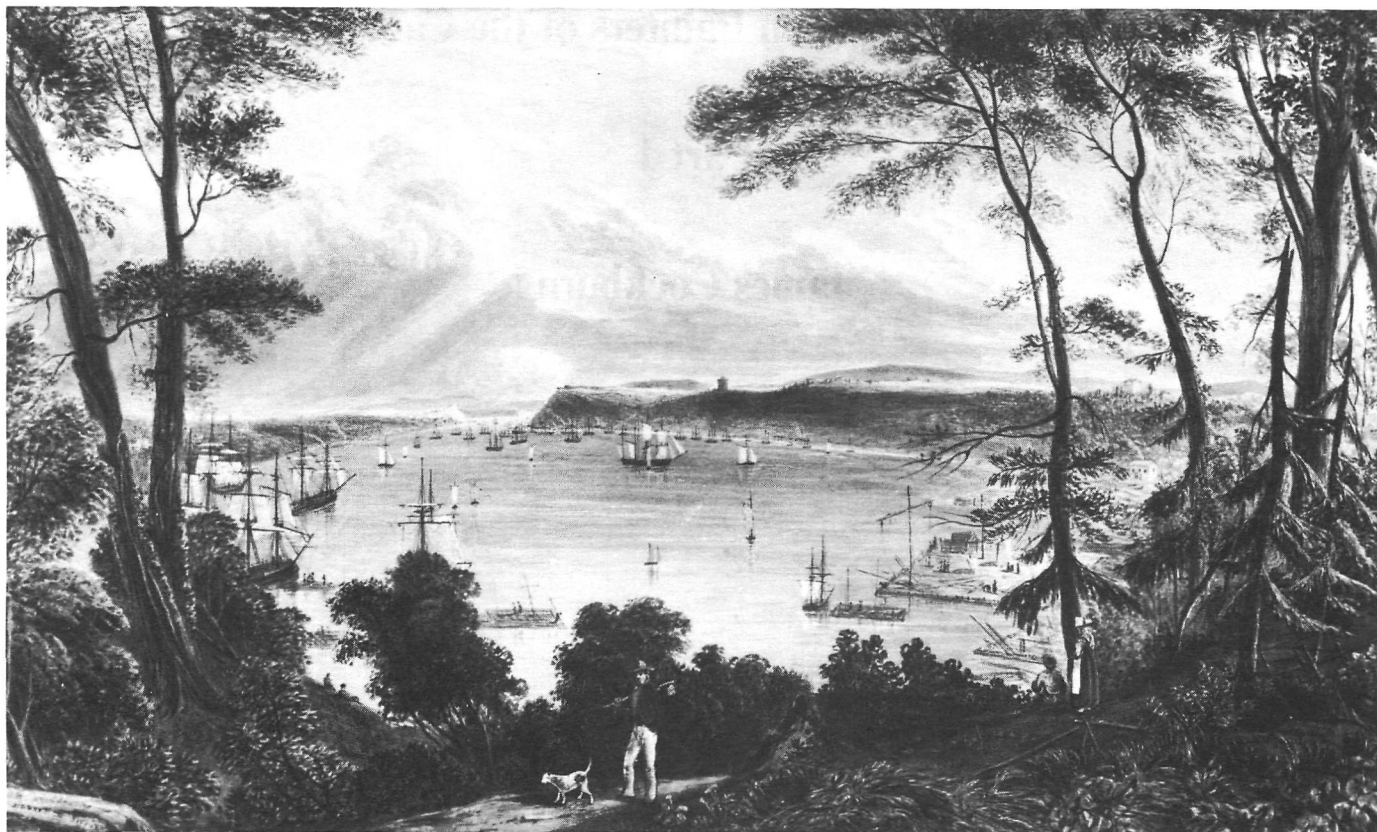
*James Cockburn, James Duncan and Joseph Légaré were the foremost painters of pre-Confederation Canadian cityscape and city life. Their work may be treated as cultural artifacts, linked to and suggesting insights about the period's social life; as aesthetic objects within the semi-autonomous realm of "art," to be treated with in the context of critical sociology; or as historical documents offering direct evidence about pre-Confederation urban physical and social landscape. The present article emphasizes the first approach, while also indicating some directions for inquiry within the second and third approaches.*

Canada's three foremost painters of cityscape and city life in the hundred years after the Conquest were individuals of diverse social roots and cultural moorings: a gentleman-officer stationed in the colony with the army of occupation; a middle-class Irish immigrant who entered the mainstream of the colony's anglophone culture; a *nouveau riche* Quebec nationalist. Not surprisingly, images of the city in their work vary. Among these differences are instructive illustrations of aspects of status and ethnicity in pre-Confederation urban Canada.

James Cockburn<sup>1</sup> (1779-1847) was born in New York, the son of a Royal Artillery officer serving in the lower col-

onies during the American War of Independence. Cockburn entered Woolwich Royal Military Academy in 1793; was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Royal Artillery in 1795; and served in Britain, South Africa, the East Indies and Canada before his second posting in Canada in 1826, at the rank of lieutenant-colonel, as commander of the colony's Royal Artillery. He remained in Canada, headquartered in Quebec City, until at least 1832.

We have several initial clues about Cockburn's worldview and work as a painter. One is knowledge of Quebec's garrison during his time there, an insular world, linguistically, socially and spatially segregated from the Canadian community in which it was stationed. For the colonial elite, secure in simple certitudes of the Empire's destiny and their vital role as its outposts' custodians, the period was peaceful and fairly prosperous, allowing ample time for polite leisure.



PICTURE 1:

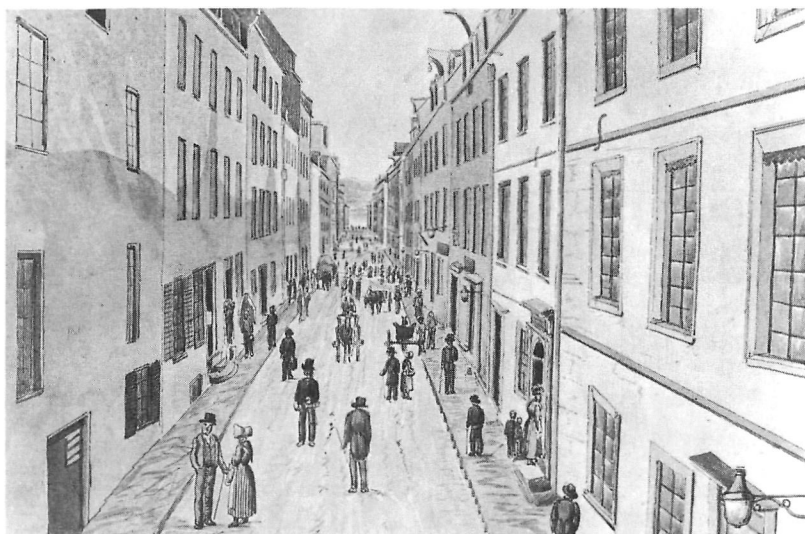
James Cockburn. *Pont à Pizeau, Québec, 1831*. (National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. No. 17663.) Ships at anchor at Quebec in Cockburn's "picturesque" style.

Among fashionable pastimes was amateur watercolour: depiction of aspects of the local setting perceived to be romantic, picturesque or topical — not entirely unlike modern tourist photography. Cockburn was among these painters.

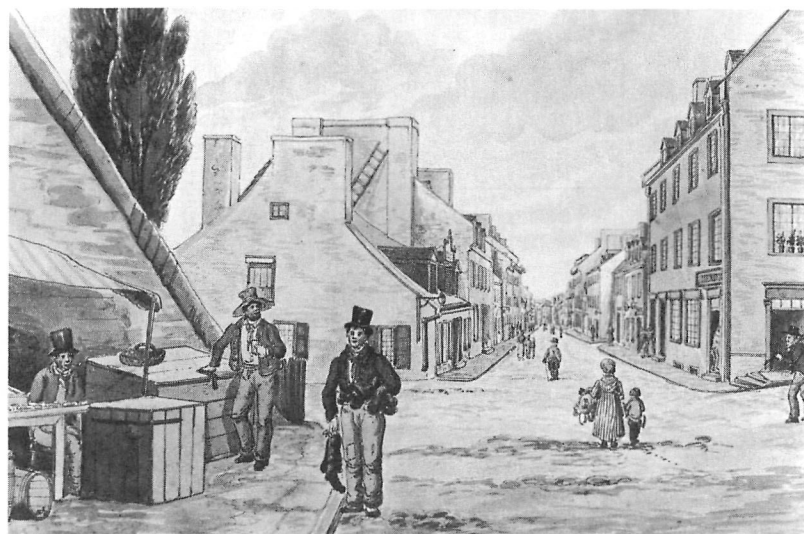
Our second clue about Cockburn is knowledge of roots of his art. He worked in the tradition of British topographic landscape, dating from at least the early Sixteenth Century, a style popular among the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie, though often rebuffed by the artistic elite as a vulgar genre. In this context, he had two main influences. One was Paul Sandby, among the most skilled of the British landscape topographers and a founding member of the Royal Academy (Sandby appears to have transcended the artistic community's disparaging view of topographic art) who instructed military drawing at Woolwich in the latter decades of the 1700s; Cockburn was among his students. The second influence was William Gilpin, who, in the same decades, sought to codify the esthetic basis of landscape topography in a theory of the "picturesque,"<sup>2</sup> and whose ideas attracted Cockburn. Like Gilpin, Cockburn authored several illustrated tour-guides which directed readers to picturesque views from specifically described vantage points; and Cockburn subtitled his own Quebec tour-guide *A Picturesque Guide to the Stranger*.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, these two influences were not entirely compatible. While the style of topography Cockburn learned as an artillery cadet emphasized accuracy and care for factual detail, Gilpin encouraged landscape artists to concern themselves with only the mood and spirit of actual scenes, eschewing "painful exactness."<sup>4</sup> These different approaches are variously evident in Cockburn's work. Gilpin's ideas are more visible in his scenes of nature — views of rivers, waterfalls and wilderness which, like the painting of colonial Canada's foremost topographic artists, Thomas Davies<sup>5</sup> and George Heriot,<sup>6</sup> are often vigorous examples of picturesque style. But while renderings of picturesque nature were the main interest of most colonial watercolourists, Cockburn was more often preoccupied with urban landscape.

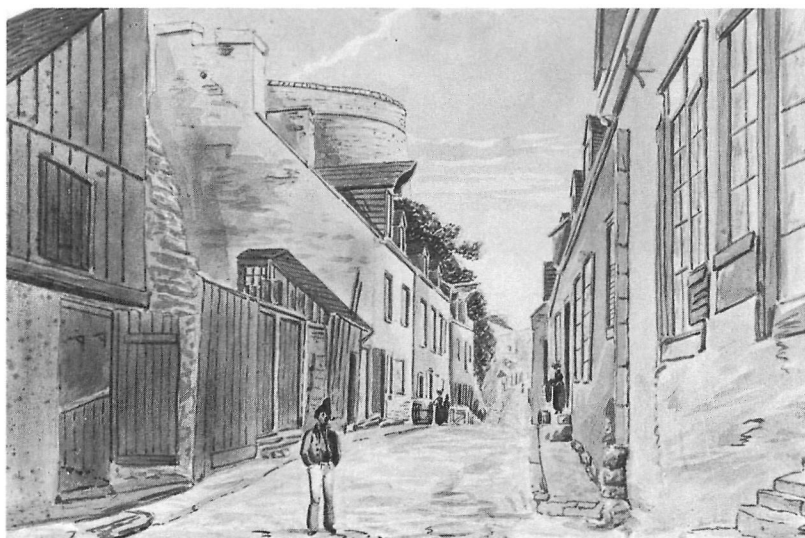
It is not clear why Cockburn broke from the pattern of the artists around him to become an important painter of the city. Perhaps, like his contemporary in Quebec, Robert Sproule, he was influenced by the popular recent Italian school of city painting,<sup>7</sup> though evidence of this influence is less clear in Cockburn's work than in Sproule's. Alternatively, the answer may be of interest to those concerned with the emergence of "modern" consciousness. But the singular fact is that it was not the colony's dramatic wilderness but commonplaces of its urban social life and built environment



**PICTURE 2:**  
James Cockburn. *St. Peter Street*. (Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto. Neg. No. 69CAN112. Cat. No. 951x205.14.) A commercial street in Quebec's Lower Town.



**PICTURE 3:**  
James Cockburn. *St. John Street, Quebec, 1829*. (Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto. Neg. No. 69CAN110. Cat. No. 951x205.12.) A commercial street, with peddlers and passers-by, in the Upper Town.



**PICTURE 4:**  
James Cockburn. *Rue Matelot*. (Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa. No. C-40038.) A residential street in a "slum" quarter of the Lower Town, beneath the citadel.



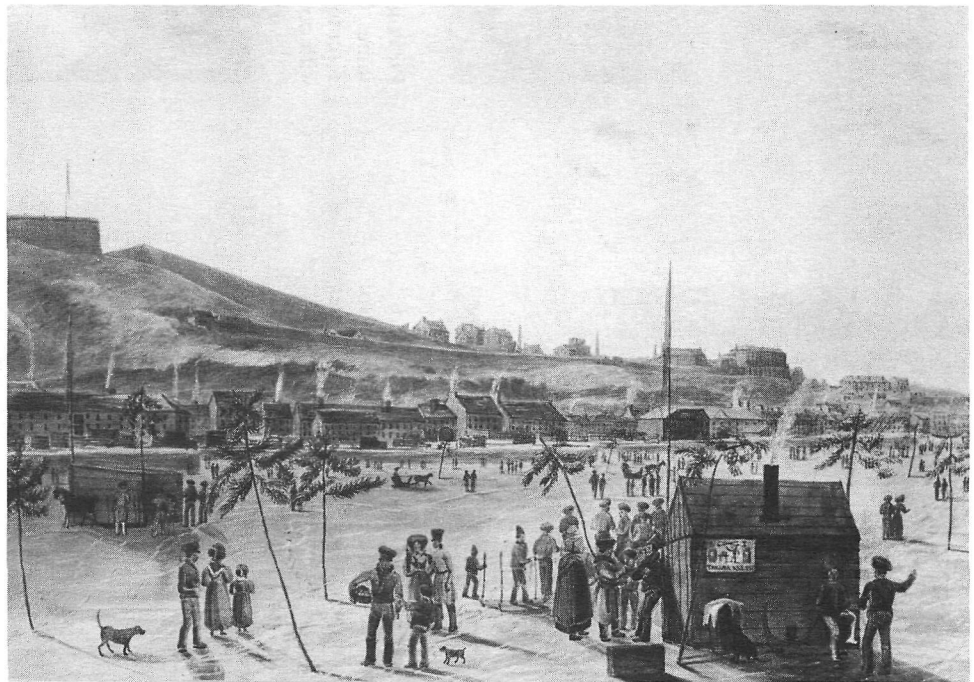
**PICTURE 5:**  
James Cockburn. *Chief Justice Sewell's House and the St. Louis Gate*. (Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto. Neg. No. 68CAN76. Cat. No. 942.48.85.) A residential street in the prosperous Upper Town.





**PICTURE 6:**

James Cockburn. *Street in the Suburb of St. Roch*. (Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto. Neg. No. 69CAN107. Cat. No. 951x205.9.) Cockburn painted the main street of the working class suburb St. Roch in about 1830; in 1845, Joseph Légaré depicted the fire which destroyed the neighbourhood (cf. the third article of this series).



**PICTURE 7:**

James Cockburn. *Quebec From the Ice Bridge of 1830*. (Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto. Neg. No. 69CAN182. Cat. No. 952.69.2.) Among Cockburn's favourite themes were pictures of city sociability — markets, religious occasions, and scenes of winter activities.

which most fascinated Cockburn — nearly alone among major colonial watercolourists — as a painter. And his approach to this work was, in the main, not stylized but realistic. While his city painting does include picturesque elements, it is more strongly characterized by the accuracy and attention to detail in which he was trained at Woolwich. Hence, one aspect of his urban art is that it is a vital historical document. With Richard Short and a handful of other early topographers who cared for factual verisimilitude — and in contrast to artists whose city work was dominated by

picturesque or other idealist principles — Cockburn has helped provide a reliable pictorial record of the colonial Canadian city.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Cockburn's scores of Quebec watercolours are the most comprehensive study of a Canadian city by any painter of any era.

Our third clue about Cockburn is the text of his tour-guide of the colony. Gilpin's influence is evident; a central emphasis of the guide are "rambles" in the Quebec vicinity whose routes allow the sightseer "romantic and charming



**PICTURE 8:**

James Cockburn. *La place Royale et Notre-Dame des Victories, à Québec (L'Eglise de la Basse-Ville et Place du Marché)*. (Musée du Séminaire de Québec, Québec. No. PF 984.30 R 609.)

views . . . , to all admirers of nature affording a rich treat."<sup>9</sup> But Cockburn's imagination encompassed more than only picturesque nature — again, there may be a glimpse of a more "modern" sensibility. The essay celebrates the "yield(ing)" of the Canadian wilderness to "the genial influence of human industry" ("... cities and villages will proclaim the dominion of man in this desert . . ."),<sup>10</sup> and the traveller is advised to tour two modern sawmills to view their up-to-date technology.<sup>11</sup> Too, Cockburn finds the view of the St. Lawrence enhanced rather than distracted by ships at anchor and busy activity in the port.<sup>12</sup> More consistent with picturesque taste, however, he has not much to say about Quebec City itself in the guide and offers no insights about his interest in the town's streets and inhabitants.

Cockburn's class position also becomes clear. The tourist is strongly encouraged to visit several stately homes and country retreats of the colonial gentry, with whose style of life the author is plainly familiar.<sup>13</sup> (Most 1830s tourists were of the aristocracy or bourgeoisie themselves.) In contrast, there is scant reference to the colonized population. The urban working class is acknowledged in passing: "The shores beneath (the property of a local gentleman) re-echo the rude but cheerful sound of the vast population employed in the timber trade."<sup>14</sup> The province's rural *habitants* are discussed only briefly — "a happy race . . . of primitive manners and dress" whose "wants of life (are) amply supplied" ("... though [Canada] cannot boast of the elegance and refinements of Europe, she can say in this happy land wretchedness and want are not known. . .").<sup>15</sup>

Cockburn's subjects in his urban painting are as diverse as the city. Crowded markets, religious processions, people

and sleighs gathered outside a popular pub, aristocrats promenading on garrison battlements, peddlers and passers-by in narrow cobbled lanes, workers on the river's docks in summer, ice-cutters on the river in winter — few Quebec crannies escaped his eye. He was strongly concerned with the city's physical landscape — aging buildings, shops and streetscapes, quaysides and churches — and his scenes are invested with careful topographic and architectural detail. But he was concerned with social landscape too, the varieties of city-dwellers and textures of urban social life.<sup>16</sup> There is little intimacy in his depictions of the city's people; they are more cases of social types than studies of particular personalities. But their anonymity — and the ordinariness of their surroundings — strengthens the notion that it was the city itself, not its idiosyncracies, which most absorbed the artist. Cockburn probably worked more frequently in the prosperous Upper Town; but he painted often in the Lower Town too, and occasionally in the working class suburbs, crossing social barriers which constrained most other visiting water-colourists.

In his city painting, Cockburn's confidence in the social and moral harmony of the colony is evident. The single mood which most dominates his work is peacability: his Quebec is a well-ordered society. No doubt this is how the colonial aristocracy and administrators, and their masters in Britain, wished to see Quebec's life. A dominant ideological theme of the Empire was beneficence — political order and material progress fashioned from despotism and backwardness — and so it was not remarkable that Cockburn went into the avenues and alleys of the city and found evidence of tranquility and well-being. For all that, his gentle celebra-

tions of busy urban social life and picturesque city places are not very different from aspects of contemporary bourgeois urban myths.

The city paintings of James Cockburn, then, together with those of James Duncan and Joseph Légaré, whose city work will be discussed in subsequent articles, are in part of interest as documents; from Cockburn and Duncan we have some sense of how colonial Canadian cities looked, and from Duncan and Légaré we have some sense of how these cities felt. In part, they are of interest as examples of varieties of Nineteenth Century Canadian painting in the urban field: topographic landscape, picturesque landscape, topical genre, historical depiction. And in part they are of interest because they reflect diverse social perspectives toward the colonial Canadian city — among others, the perspective of anglophone culture (Cockburn and Duncan) contrasted with francophone culture (Légaré); the perspective of painters who approached the city personally, apart from the context of the popular market, (Cockburn and Légaré) contrasted with one whose approach to the city was mainly commercial (Duncan); the perspective of middle class Canadian society (Duncan and Légaré) contrasted with that of a visiting colonizer (Cockburn).

In all of these ways these artists' work is of special interest to students of Canadian cities and city life.

#### NOTES

1. For more information on Cockburn's life and career, see Michael Bell and W. Martha Cooke, *The Last Lion: Rambles in Quebec With James Pattison Cockburn* (Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1978), 9-15; Christina Cameron and Jean Trudel, *The Drawings of James Cockburn: A Visit Through Quebec's Past* (Toronto: Gage, 1976), 10-18; W. Martha Cooke, *W.H. Coverdale Collection: Paintings, Watercolours and Drawings* (Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada, 1983), 43-59; F. St. George Spendlove, "The Canadian Watercolours of James Pattison Cockburn," *The Connoisseur* CXXXIII/537 (1954): 203-07, reprinted in F. St. George Spendlove, *The Face of Early Canada: Pictures of Canada Which Have Helped to Make History* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1958), 46-53. See also J.R. Harper, *Painting in Canada: A History*, 2nd edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 52-54; Dennis Reid, *A Concise History of Canadian Painting* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973), 29-30. For reproductions of Cockburn's work see Mary Allodi, *Canadian Watercolours and Drawings in the Royal Ontario Museum* (Toronto:

- Royal Ontario Museum, 1974), plates 270-463; Bell and Cooke, *The Last Lion*; Cameron and Trudel, *Drawings of James Cockburn*; Cooke, *W.H. Coverdale Collection*, plates 83-148. See also Michael Bell, *Painters in a New Land* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973); Spendlove, "Canadian Watercolours."
2. For more information on Gilpin, see Gerald Finley, *George Heriot: Postmaster-Painter of the Canadas* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 9.
3. James Cockburn, *Quebec and Its Environs: Being a Picturesque Guide to the Stranger* (Quebec: Thomas Cary and Company, 1831). Reprinted in Bell and Cooke, *The Last Lion*, 17-32.
4. See Finley, *George Heriot*, 9.
5. For more information on Davis, see R.H. Hubbard, *Thomas Davis in Early Canada* (Toronto: Oberon Press, 1972). See also Cooke, *W.H. Coverdale Collection*, 61-62; Barry Lord, *The History of Painting in Canada: Toward a People's Art* (Toronto: NC Press, 1973), 62-65; Reid, *A Concise History*, 26-27; Harper, *Painting in Canada*, 49-50; Spendlove, *Face of Early Canada*, 14-17; and Donald B. Webster, *Georgian Canada: Conflict and Culture, 1745-1820* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1984), 208-09.
6. For more information on Heriot, see Finley, *George Heriot*. See also Cooke, *W.H. Coverdale Collection*, 112-16; Harper, *Painting in Canada*, 51-52; Lord, *History of Painting in Canada*, 65-67; Reid, *A Concise History*, 27-29; Spendlove, *Face of Early Canada*, 26-30; and Webster, *Georgian Canada*, 211.
7. See Barry Lord, "The Eighteenth Century Urban View in Canada," *Canadian Art* XXII/97 (1965): 26-29.
8. For more information on Canadian documentary art, see Sylvia Antoniou, et al., *The Painted Past: Selected Paintings from the Picture Division of the Public Archives of Canada* (Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada, 1984); and J. Burant, "Visual Records and Urban Development," *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine* XII (February 1984). For more information on Short, see Antoniou, *The Painted Past*, 16-19.
9. Cockburn in Bell and Cooke, *The Last Lion*, 3-4.
10. *Ibid.*, 4-5.
11. *Ibid.*, 16, 25.
12. *Ibid.*, 10-11.
13. *Ibid.*, 10-14.
14. *Ibid.*, 12.
15. *Ibid.*, 27-29.
16. Cameron and Trudel, *Drawings of James Cockburn*, agree inconsistently. Compare for example pp. 12-13. "The people in Cockburn's works are in a certain sense accessories. They appear in order to give scale to the perspectives . . . [and] are not of primary interest for Cockburn . . ." with, on the other hand, p. 18: "As a European, Cockburn was clearly fascinated by the exotic customs of life in Quebec. Especially in the winter scenes, he recorded the minutiae of work and play in this snow-bound climate . . . . The pomp and ceremony of the Roman Catholic processions also stimulated his curiosity." Reid, *A Concise History*, 29, characterizes Cockburn's work in Quebec City as "lively with human anecdote," and Spendlove, "Canadian Watercolours," 205-06, discusses Cockburn's care in depicting "the varied types [of people] found in the city at that time."