

Report of the Annual Meeting

Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada

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Volume 38, Number 1, 1959

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300413ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/300413ar>

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Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (print)

1712-9095 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Gipson, L. H. (1959). Colonies Ripe for Revolt: The Older British North American Colonies in 1763. *Report of the Annual Meeting / Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada*, 38(1), 44–47. <https://doi.org/10.7202/300413ar>

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COLONIES RIPE FOR REVOLT:
THE OLDER BRITISH NORTH AMERICAN COLONIES
IN 1763*

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In this paper I shall attempt to clarify two things. One is that no one can calculate in advance with clarity the ultimate effects of a great war upon a nation and its political dependencies, if it possesses any. The other is the dilemma that can arise when a mother country suddenly finds herself in possession of mature offspring no longer willing to be kept in leading strings. I am sure that when the world war (which I call the *Great War for the Empire* in my writings) began in 1754, no British statesman in that year would have dreamed that within a little over a decade after its termination in 1763, Great Britain would have to face the fact that her American colonials no longer treated her government as that of a protecting parent but rather as that of a wicked and tyrannical enemy.

* * *

[Professor Gipson introduced his paper with the above statement. What follows is a *précis* prepared under his direction. Editor's note.]

The paper was concerned with analysing the visible and psychological changes which took place within the Empire and especially in North America as an aftermath of nine years of war between 1754 and 1763. On the geographical side the changes encompassed the tripling in size of the territories previously recognized to be embraced within the Empire and the expansion of its potentials to a degree that would justify its being called *the great Empire* of that day. However, this expansion brought with it problems of colonial administration that were to prove to be insuperable. Among these was the need of providing the royal and proprietary colonies with the type of government better suited to the degree of maturity they had achieved, dealing justly with the Indians who had deserted their French allies in favour of the British, creating a system of defence for North America commensurable with its importance and the potential dangers facing it, and finally, finding the financial resources to this end and for the honouring of the Great War

* This paper will form the introductory chapter to Volume X of Professor Gipson's series, *The British Empire before the American Revolution*, projected to appear in 1961 under the Borzoi imprint, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. (New York), which has published Vols. IV - IX and Vol. 1, Revised (1936-58).

debt. In fact, a solution of some of these problems was irreconcilable with an effective solution of some of the others just enumerated.

Certain additional effects of the Great War for the Empire included the conversion of a group of immature, rather isolated British North American colonies into a much more closely-knit group of fairly mature commonwealths. They were now held together by common ties of military defence created during the late war and by improved means of intercommunication — through the expansion of roads, the postal services, the press, and intercolonial business and cultural relations. Between 1753 and 1775, for example, in these colonies there were some 43 newspapers in existence for brief or fairly long periods and in all some 4,467 distinct publications were issued with an American colonial imprint. Such publications, in addition to providing news from abroad, were chiefly concerned with local issues up to 1763. From then on they became the chief mediums for voicing criticism of the British government. This reached such a degree of intensity by 1774 and so powerfully influenced the attitude of colonials that the question may fairly be raised as to whether there would have been an American Revolution during this period without this free press.

A new sense of self-sufficiency of the colonies manifested by 1763 was based upon a feeling of political, economic, and social maturity as well as upon the rapid growth in population and the manner in which new immigrants were assimilated to what may be called the American pattern of life — a pattern that, in many ways, was sharply diverging from the English pattern. It was also based upon what was to British North Americans a new sense of security by that year with the elimination from Canada, the area east of the Mississippi, and Florida of the former French and Spanish threats to life and property. In its place there were now visions of an unlimited western expansion in North America of the English-speaking people.

While the southern colonies continued a plantation-type economy, industrialization was beginning to take hold in the more northern colonies. Economic expansion was keeping pace with the wealth accruing from such activities as land speculation, the marketing of the great staples of southern agriculture, the fisheries, the Indian trade, and the production of ships, naval stores, iron and steel, as well as from other profitable activities such as the great provision trade of the middle colonies. In short, in the words of Professor Gipson: "British North America by 1763 was no longer in a state of infancy. In fact, it had now become a young giant as the result of the extraordinarily favourable conditions under which it had been permitted to flourish."

Typical of the cultural flowering of the period was the collection and utilization of books in public and private libraries. Benjamin

Franklin's experiments in electricity were representative of a growing interest in science on the part of many Americans. The existence by 1763 of six colleges attested the interest in higher education of the North American colonials and their capacity to support it. A considerable number of students moreover went abroad to study in English and Scottish universities. In the field of religion the influence of Calvinism was spreading chiefly through Presbyterian and Baptist channels, especially in the back-country. The importance of this lies in the fact that its theological tenets posed a threat to continued British imperial control of Americans despite the growing tendency of Congregationalists in New England to drift away from its predestinarianism. Other Christian faiths had varying impacts and influences, often of a regional nature. Various groups of non-English immigrants likewise left deep imprints of their peculiar culture in the areas in which they settled.

However, it was the presence of the African Negro and the institution of slavery that had the most profound influence in altering the basically English culture patterns of the older North American colonies. While indentured whites formed an important part of the labour force, especially in the middle colonies, the Negro slave constituted a unique colonial class because of his low legal and social status. Indeed, the holding of slaves played a prominent part in the development of what one may call a British North American élite, which by 1763, and in spite of liberal franchise requirements in a number of colonies, rather effectively controlled all the colonial governments, from the post of governor or that of assemblyman to that of town selectman or vestryman.

That an impasse in the orderly and peaceful processes of government was destined to arise soon after 1763 may be attributed largely to a fundamental constitutional defect. This was the inability of the mother country to adjust imperial administrative policy and with it legislation — originally conceived for a group of separated, weak dependencies — to fit the needs of the mature group of closely-related colonies that had evolved in British North America by 1763. Political inequality of the almost two million inhabitants of the American colonies, especially in the light of their lack of representation in the House of Commons, could no longer be ignored. Nevertheless, the constitutional framework of the British Empire, as it stood in 1763, did not admit of any easy alteration to solve the problem of political inequality. Although proposals were made from time to time for colonial representation in Parliament, any effective representation could only have come about through drastic changes in the British constitution, including the destruction of Parliament as it then existed, and the substitution of something strikingly different. Were one to assume that the British Government had been prepared to take such a drastic step in 1763 or thereafter, it is probable that this would not have satisfied the colonials, any more than they would have welcomed a North American political union in 1763, as the fate of the

Albany Plan of Union of 1754 in their own assemblies had indicated. Professor Gipson's conclusion is that the only way to have preserved the old British Empire at all would have been to have given the colonials a free choice of remaining a part of it on their own terms or of peacefully separating from it. And he closed by asking: "What statesman was prepared in 1763 to offer a solution that only in our own days has been tried and has proved to be a source of strength rather than weakness to the parent country?"