

Three Preconfederation Painters of the Canadian City. Part III. Joseph Légaré

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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objects within the semi-autonomous realm of "art," to be treated within the context of critical sociology; or as historical documents offering direct evidence about pre-Confederation urban physical and social landscape.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.

Research Note/Note de recherche

Three Preconfederation Painters of the Canadian City

Part III

Joseph Légaré

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objects within the semi-autonomous realm of "art," to be treated within the context of critical sociology; or as historical documents offering direct evidence about pre-Confederation urban physical and social landscape.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.

Like James Duncan,¹ Joseph Légaré² (1795-1855) was a member of the emerging urban middle class. But where Duncan had been a migrant, Légaré was an upwardly mobile *Canadien* whose father, a cobbler, had secured modest wealth



PICTURE 1: Joseph Légaré. *Cholera Plague, Quebec, 1832*. (National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. No. 7157).



PICTURE 2: Robert Sproule. *The Market Place, Upper Town, Quebec, 1830*. (McCord Museum, McGill University, Montreal. No. M384). Légaré appears to have based *Cholera Plague, Quebec's streetscape* on this marketplace watercolour by Sproule.

through investments in Quebec City real estate. (Légaré himself also earned income from property rental).

Légaré's career had two main facets. The first was his work as a craftsman and artist. Here, he was a successful entrepreneur, earning income as a painter/varnisher — a trade in which he had apprenticed in 1812 after dropping out of his studies at the Séminaire de Québec and which, Porter writes, consisted mostly of bronzing, gilding, statue-painting, and restoration³ — and as a copyist of religious paintings for sale mainly to churches and religious institutions. As well, he was Canada's first native-born landscape artist, partly borrowing from the style of the British "picturesque" painters⁴ and partly creating a distinct approach of his own. In painting landscape, he broke sharply from the

main interest of Québécois painters and the francophone market, which were religious work and portraiture; the principal customers for his landscapes appear to have been anglophone visitors to the colony.

The second aspect of Légaré's career was his involvement in Quebec politics and public service as a committed nationalist and activist. He was a supporter of Louis-Joseph Papineau and of the Rebellion of 1837 (during which he was jailed five days for conspiring to oppose the government by violence; he was never tried), a founder of the Saint-Jean-Baptiste Society, and a director of a reformist newspaper *Le Libéral* — that is, he was among the *Canadiens* Newton Bosworth described as "designing men,"⁵ among the middle class leaders of Quebec's radical movement. Too, he held



PICTURE 3: James Cockburn. *La Procession de la Fête-Dieu à N.-Dame de Québec in 1830*. (Musée du Québec. No. 44. 110 D). The streetscape of the Upper Town market and Notre Dame in which Légaré set *Cholera Plague, Quebec* was a popular locale in British Colonial watercolour. James Cockburn (see the first article of this series) painted several scenes of city sociability here — in this picture, a religious festival, market activity, and passers-by. The perspective is slightly different than Sproule and Légaré's.

several public offices and participated in various organizations linked to events of the day — a member of Quebec's Board of Health during the cholera plague of 1832 and again in the 1840s, a city councillor in the 1830s and later chairman of a municipal reform committee, a grand juror in the criminal assizes for a number of years and justice of the peace for nearly a decade, a member of the city's Fire Relief Committee after the great Saint-Jean and Saint-Roch fires of 1845, and a member of various committees concerned with public education.

These two central preoccupations, art and local politics, intersected in Légaré's life in two ways. One was activism to promote greater knowledge and appreciation of art in Quebec — for example, through exhibition of his own extensive collection of paintings and as chairman of the arts section of the city's Literary and Historical Society. The second convergence was a series of pictures he painted which contained nationalist-historical or political content; these included his handful of city paintings. Hence, while his city work was much less prolific than James Cockburn's⁶ or Duncan's, he painted from a unique perspective, exploring aspects of urban life barely touched on in other pre-Confederation artists' work.

Légaré's city paintings were focussed around four events in Quebec local history, each a disaster: the 1832 cholera plague which claimed more than 3,000 victims; a rockslide into the Lower Town in 1841 which destroyed several houses and buried several dozen people; and the 1845 fires in the Saint-Roch and Saint-Jean neighbourhoods, in which hundreds died and thousands were left homeless.

The Cholera Plague At Quebec adds nothing to our knowledge of city physical landscape, serving no historical purpose in that sense.⁷ In fact, Légaré copied the painting's

streetscape nearly brick by brick from an 1830 marketplace watercolour by Robert Sproule, a scene of city sociability and landscape akin to some of Cockburn's and Duncan's work. Sproule's picture, in turn, appears to have been influenced by the eighteenth century Italian style of urban art, particularly a 1746 market scene by Canaletto.⁸ But if the painting, in which a ghostly moon haunts a night sky above vignettes of disease and death, is not concerned with cityscape, it does depict another aspect of urban reality — the city's emotional landscape — and has a different sort of compelling historical interest: evocation of the terror of epidemic, a fact of urban life until only recently.

L'Incendie Du Quartier Saint-Roch is nearly as striking. Scores of people are helpless bystanders as flames consume their homes; the night darkness is lit by firey smoke thick with cinders. Légaré also painted the fire's desolate, smouldering ruins. Two months later, the Saint-Jean fire destroyed a second Quebec neighbourhood — in a matter of weeks much of the housing of the city's francophone working class was wiped out — and Légaré painted that fire and its aftermath, too. Devastating fire was another fact of pre-modern urban life, and Légaré was not the first artist to have depicted its occurrence in a Canadian city. The itinerant American artist, Thomas Wentworth, for example, painted an 1839 fire which destroyed part of downtown St. John — a picture similar in some respects to a couple of Légaré's fire scenes — and Duncan painted a burning Montreal mansion. Wentworth's *Great Conflagration* and Duncan's *Hayes House*, however, were single idiosyncratic canvases, not parts of a series of city "disaster" pictures like that Légaré painted.

Légaré often invested his historical painting with political meaning — for example, a polemically allegorical depiction of a monument to General Wolfe⁹ and a view of a scene from the Quebec's 1851 elections, which also has allegorical con-

PICTURE 4: Joseph Légaré. *Landslide At Cape Diamond (Eboulis du Cap Diamant)*. 1841. (Musée du Séminaire de Québec, Québec. No. PC 983.30 R 243. Photographer: Pierre Soulard).



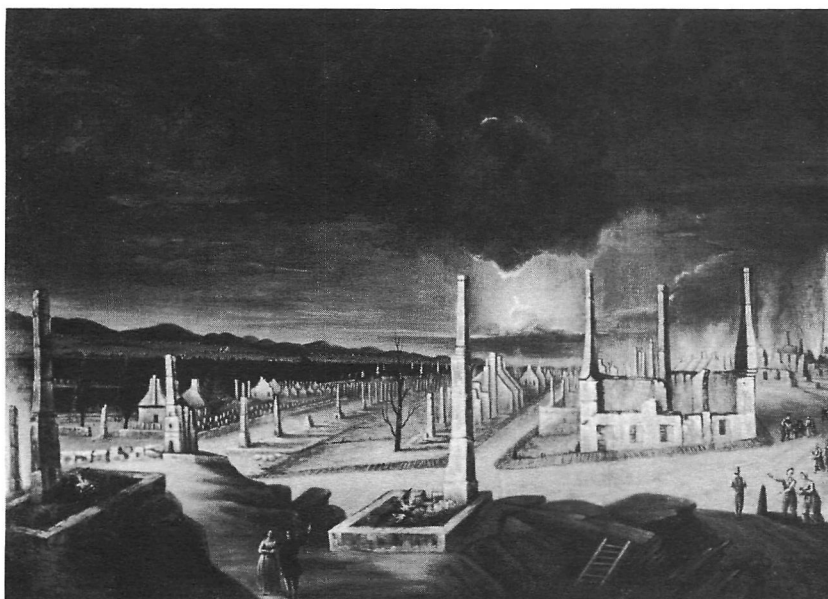
PICTURE 5: Joseph Légaré. *L'incendie du quartier Saint-Jean vu vers l'ouest*. (Art Gallery of Toronto.)

tent.¹⁰ There also appears to be political meaning in some of his city painting.

In respect to the cholera plague, for instance, we know that the *Canadiens* blamed the British for what occurred. While Britain was anxious to discourage the emigration of middle class Irish and Scots,¹¹ they had no such reluctance about the Isles' poor and unemployed, who were exported to the colony in execrable conditions in the cargo-bays of returning lumber-ships. The 1832 plague, which literally decimated Quebec City, arrived with the immigrants in just such a boat-hold. The bourgeoisie and colonial aristocracy were underrepresented in this death-rate. Some decamped to their country estates — like the villas described in Cockburn's *Picturesque Guide* — for the plague's duration; others, among whom Cockburn appears to have been one, returned with their families to Britain. We know that Légaré often

worked as a copyist and, from time to time, borrowed from other artists' work in his own paintings. Lord, however, suggests that the choice of Sproule's watercolour as the setting for *The Cholera Plague* may not have been incidental but politically deliberate, "transform[ing] the picture from Sproule's picturesque daytime genre scene . . . into the nighttime horror [Légaré] depicts."¹² Intentionally or not, Légaré stands the conventions of the picturesque on their head in the picture; and rather than the order and civility of the British watercolourists' city-scenes, here Quebec is a nightmare.

Likewise, *Landslide At Cape Diamond* depicts the cliffs of the citadel, celebrated in the work of the picturesque artists, as a scene of destruction and death. The disaster was blamed in the francophone press at the time on careless engineering by the British military of the fort above;¹³ and



PICTURE 6: Joseph Légaré. *Les ruines après l'incendie du quartier Saint Jean vu vers l'est*. (Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. George A. Morrow Memorial Endowment).



PICTURE 7: Joseph Légaré. *L'incendie de quartier Saint-Roch vue de Côte-à-Coton vers l'est*. (Musée du Séminaire de Québec, Québec. No. PC 984.6 R 239. Photographer: Pierre Souillard).

in the picture a small group of British soldiers stands idly by, doing nothing to help with rescue work. Soldiers occur, too, in one of Légaré's views of the Saint-Jean fire: an armed formation apparently present to maintain public order.

Légaré's city pictures are not polemic. The artist's motivation is more complex, most especially concerned with the circumstances of the lives of Quebec's people, about whom his political career suggests he strongly cared. His concern was not only for the francophone community; the neighbourhood demolished by the Cape Diamond landslide was mainly Irish working class. Perhaps a rough parallel for his Quebec pictures is Lawren Harris's work in Halifax several decades later; Harris's *Black Court* and *Elevator Court* were not — contrary to hostile responses at the time — socialist rhetoric but portraits of a community's impoverished life — conditions which strongly touched a bourgeois artist's ideal-

ism and imagination.¹⁴ In both cases, too, the artists had compositional and painterly preoccupations as well as human concerns (Harper, for example, is struck by the "surrealistically modern" mood of *Les Ruines après l'incendie du Faubourg Saint-Roch*¹⁵). There is, however, clear social meaning in both groups of pictures.

Légaré's city paintings clashed with artistic tastes of his period and — though he did attempt to sell them — attracted no commercial interest. Nor did major Quebec painters in his wake continue to treat historical and landscape themes. After his death, the pictures were bundled along with the remainder of his unsold work to the Séminaire de Québec, where they remained virtually ignored until only recently. In the end, he had been able to paint them only because of his commercial success in other areas; and had it not been for this commercial success, they might not have survived at all.

The city paintings of Joseph Légaré, then, together with those of James Cockburn and James Duncan, whose city work has been discussed in earlier 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 Duncan, see the second article in this series in the *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine* XVI (October 1987).
2. For more information on Légaré's life and career, see, especially John Porter's definitive critical monograph (John R. Porter, *The Works of Joseph Légaré: 1795-1855* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1978). Also see, R. Derome and H. Clark, *A Brief Introduction to the Work of Joseph Légaré (1795-1855)* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1978); J.R. Harper, *Painting in Canada: A History*, second edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 70-73; Barry Lord, *The History of Painting in Canada: Toward A People's Art* (Toronto: NC Press, 1974), 48-55; Dennis Reid, *A Concise History of Canadian Painting* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973), 46-49. For reproductions of Légaré's work, see especially Porter, *The Works of Légaré*.
3. Porter, *The Works of Légaré*.
4. For more information on picturesque colonial art, see the first article of this series in the *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine* XVI (June 1987).
5. Newton Bosworth, *Hochelaga Depicta: The Early History and Present State of the City and Island of Montreal* (Montreal: William Grieg, 1839), 250: "Ignorant and uninstructed as the great mass of French people unquestionably are, they are easily misled by designing men." Also see the second article in the series in the *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine* XVI (October 1987).
6. For more information on Cockburn, see the second article in this series in *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine* XVI (October 1987).
7. For more information on 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).
8. See Barry Lord, "The Eighteenth Century Urban View in Canada," *Canadian Art* XXII, 97 (1965): 26-29.
9. Porter's and Lord's interpretations of *Landscape With Wolfe Monument* differ sharply (Porter, *The Works of Joseph Légaré*; and Lord, *The History of Painting in Canada*). In the former's view (pp. 64-65) the painting is a nationalist statement; in the latter's view (pp. 54) the picture "pander[s] to British ruling-class patrons' tastes." The writer concurs with Porter.
10. Porter and Lord again disagree (Porter, *The Works of Joseph Légaré*; and Lord, *The History of Painting in Canada*). For Lord, (p. 53) *Election Scene at Chateau Richer* is "a spirited and witty (genre) comment on the election" while for Porter (pp. 96-99) it has a more complex and historically rooted meaning. The writer again concurs with Porter.
11. See Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 137 ff. British policy toward middle class Scots-Irish immigration is discussed in the second article of this series.
12. Lord, *The History of Painting in Canada*, 50. Cockburn also painted — from other perspectives — several views of the same Quebec streetscape.
13. Derome and Clark, *A Brief Introduction*, 9; Porter, *The Works of Joseph Légaré*, 67.
14. For more information, on Harris's Nova Scotia work, see especially F.B. Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1926); National Gallery of Canada, *Lawren Harris: Retrospective Exhibition, 1963* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1963); Peter Mellen, *The Group of Seven* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970); and Jeremy Adamson, *Lawren S. Harris: Urban Scenes and Wilderness Landscapes, 1906-1930* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1978).
15. Harper, *Painting in Canada*, 73.