

CHAPTER VI.

The fur trade—State of the currency—Highways—No manufactures—
Value of money—Descriptions of Montreal, Three Rivers, iron-work,
Quebec—Country people.

The administration under the old regime was seen on its weakest side in its blighting effect upon the economic life of the colony. Such, at least, is the verdict most generally given. The habitant lived upon a very primitive plane. His annual payments to the curé and to the seigneur were rendered chiefly in kind, and if he were industrious his farm might be made self-sufficing. Provided the harvests were good, or that he was not called out for active service in the militia at an inopportune moment, he was not likely actually to suffer. Moreover, he was not subject to any direct tax levied by the civil authorities.

But, in the case of men with capital invested in merchandise or devoted to trade, the situation appears to have been different. Individuals may have made small fortunes. There were in the colony, especially in Montreal, usurious capitalists who loaned the necessary outfit to *voyageurs* and *coureurs-de-bois*, demanding in return 33% on the advance. This evil was severely denounced and declared illicit by Monseigneur Saint-Vallier in an ordinance issued at Quebec in 1700; and confessors were enjoined to repress the practice. In the course of the ordinance Mgr. de Saint-Vallier declares:

“Nous condamnons comme illicite et usuraire le commerce des marchands qui équipent les voyageurs qui vont aux Ottawas ou ailleurs à la charge que ceux-ci leur paieront au retour en castor les marchandises qui'ils auront, sur le pied de 33 par cent., sans que les marchands veuillent risquer leurs effets qu'ils obligent les voyageurs à leur rembourser en castor quoiqu'il arrive, en sorte que s'ils ont prêté à ceux-ci mille écus en argent ou en marchandises, ils exigent qu'au retour de leur voyage les mêmes

voyageurs soient obligés de leur rendre mille écus en castor qui sont 4,000 livres ce qui fait environ trente quatre livres pour cent de profit.”

How little the government really approved of these voyageurs is stated in a brilliant paragraph by Parkman, in which he sums up much of the feeling and of the atmosphere of the whole fur trade.

“We now come to a trade far more important than all the rest together, one which absorbed the enterprise of the colony, drained the life-sap from other branches of commerce, and, even more than a vicious system of government, kept them in a state of chronic debility—the hardy, adventurous, lawless, fascinating fur trade. In the eighteenth century Canada exported a moderate quantity of timber, wheat, the herb called ginseng, and a few other commodities; but from first to last she lived chiefly on beaver skins. The government tried without ceasing to control and regulate the traffic; but it never succeeded. It aimed above all things to bring the trade home to the colonists, to prevent them from going to the Indians, and induce the Indians to come to them. To this end a great annual fair was established by order of the king at Montreal. Thither every summer a host of savages came down from the lakes in their bark canoes. A place was assigned them at a little distance from the town. They landed, drew up their canoes in a line on the bank, took out their packs of beaver-skins, set up their wigwams, slung their kettles, and encamped for the night. On the next day there was a grand council on the common, between St. Paul Street and the river. Speeches of compliment were made amid a solemn smoking of pipes. The governor-general was usually present seated in an arm-chair, while the visitors formed a ring about him, ranged in the order of their tribes. On the next day the trade began in the same place. Merchants of high and low degree brought up their goods from Quebec, and every inhabitant of Montreal of any substance, sought a share in the profit. Their booths were set along the palisades of the town, and each had an interpreter, to whom he usually promised a certain portion of his gains. The scene abounded in those contrasts—not always edifying, but always picturesque—which make the whole course of French Canadian history. Here was a throng of Indians armed with bows and arrows, war-clubs, or the cheap guns of the trade; some of them completely naked except for the feathers on their heads and

the paint on their faces; French bush-rangers tricked out with savage finery; merchants and habitants in their coarse and plain attire, and the grave priests of Saint-Sulpice robed in black. Order and sobriety were their watchwords, but the wild gathering was beyond their control. The prohibition to sell brandy could rarely be enforced; and the fair ended at times in a pandemonium of drunken frenzy."

The trade, as a whole, suffered from many causes. In the time of the Cent Associés the hostility of the Iroquois had made it almost impossible. To the Iroquois was later added the competition of the English and Dutch traders of Albany, who offered more for the skins than the French. It frequently required no little show of force, mingled with persuasion, on the part of the French governors to keep the traffic from passing into English hands. But the restrictions imposed by the government itself took the traffic out of the natural current of demand and supply, and restricted it within artificial lines to an arbitrarily regulated market. No trader, for example, could dispose of his furs by sending them to the New England colonies. To travel to Albany, even, without a permit involved capital punishment. To the Canadian trader the scope of the market was definitely limited, for, in the end, he could dispose of his beavers to one source only, and was forced to accept in return a compensation fixed by law. In some form or other, the yoke of monopoly rested on colonial trade from the very foundation of the colony. The termination of the Cent Associés in 1663 was followed by the creation, the next year, of the gigantic *Compagnie des Indes Occidentales*. This organization received the monopoly for forty years of all the trade within the limits of the Atlantic Ocean, including Africa and South America. Fortunately, although it held wide governmental powers over Canada, it resigned the greater part of them to the Crown. Yet it exploited the resources of the colony, and, by virtue of its monopoly, controlled all the import and export trade. In 1674 it became insolvent and surrendered its charter to the Crown.

A less formidable, though equally vicious, system was next installed. The Crown exacted an impost on skins exported from the colony, and farmed out this source of revenue. It was sold to one collector for 350,000 livres, on the understanding that he had the sole right of transporting the

skins to France; but, at the same time, he was required to accept all the skins which the traders brought to him. A continued glut in the market ruined several collectors, and reacted on the traders, who found their bills of exchange depreciated. To remedy this state of affairs a local Canadian company was organized in 1701, under the title of the Company of Canada. Every trader was obliged to join the association before being allowed to engage in the traffic. The failure of this led to another local company being formed in 1707, but the conditions of the market in France, where the demand for beavers had slackened, and the situation was abnormal, owing to the progress of the War of the Spanish Succession, left the trade as demoralized as ever. But the monopoly was continued in 1717 to the celebrated *Compagnie d'Occident*, promoted by the notorious John Law, of Mississippi Bubble fame. The era of wild speculation which followed after the Treaty of Utrecht, and which lasted into the third decade of the century, saw yet another monopoly. In 1719 Canada passed under the control of the *Compagnie des Indes*, which retained its hold till after 1760, being mentioned in the articles of capitulation.

It added to the financial distress of the colony that the currency was never in a satisfactory state. Exchange being always against Canada, the metallic currency sent out from France invariably found its way back. Various devices were resorted to for a medium of exchange. Wheat at one time passed at the rate of three bushels for four francs. Beaver skins served as a convenient medium, though their value was carefully regulated by the intendant. One schedule gave the following equivalents: One skin for two pounds of powder; six skins for a blanket; six skins also for a barrel of Indian corn. To supply the lack of metal, recourse was had to paper. By the year 1717 paper had depreciated twenty-five per cent., introducing confusion, particularly in the payment of the cens. It continued to decline as the French regime drew to a close. At the time of the conquest, in 1760, the province was flooded with inconvertible paper. This use of paper currency was noted by Kalm in a paragraph as follows:—

“They have in Canada scarce any other but paper-currency. I hardly ever saw any coin, except French sous, consisting of brass, with a very small mixture of silver; they were quite thin by constant circulation, and

were valued at a sou and a half. The bills were not printed but written. Their origin is as follows. The French king having found it very dangerous to send money for the pay of the troops, and other purposes, over to Canada, on account of privateers, shipwrecks, and other accidents, he ordered that instead of it the intendant, or king's steward, at Quebec, or the commissary at Montreal, is to write bills for the value of the sums which are due to the troops, and which he distributes to each soldier. On these bills is inscribed, that they bear the value of such a sum, till next October; and they are signed by the intendant, or the commissary; and in the interval they bear the value of money.

“In the month of October, at a certain stated time, every one brings the bills in his possession to the intendant at Quebec or the commissary at Montreal, who exchanges them for bills of exchange upon France, which are paid there in lawful money, at the king's exchequer, as soon as they are presented. If the money is not yet wanted, the bill may be kept till the next October, when it may be exchanged by one of those gentlemen for a bill upon France. The paper money can only be delivered in October, and exchanged for bills upon France. They are of different values, and some do not exceed a livre, and perhaps some are still less.

“Towards autumn when the merchant ships come in from France the merchants endeavour to get as many bills as they can, and change them for bills upon the French treasury. These bills are partly printed, spaces being left for the name, sum, etc. But the first bill, or paper currency, is all wrote, and is therefore subject to be counterfeited, which has sometimes been done, but the great punishments, which have been inflicted upon the authors of these forged bills, and which are generally capital, have deterred people from attempting it again; so that examples of this kind are very scarce at present. As there is a great want of small coins here, the buyers, or sellers, were frequently obliged to suffer a small loss, and could pay no intermediate prices between one livre and two.”

Considering the state of transportation in Europe throughout the eighteenth century, it cannot be said that Canada was at all backward in this respect. In summer the waterways furnished a natural and almost unrivalled system of communication. Between Montreal and Quebec a line

of "yachts" plied regularly; in fact, one of the agreements entered into by the original *Compagnie de Ville-Marie* when it received its charter in 1640, was the maintenance of river connection between Montreal and Quebec. In 1722 a ferry service was started between Quebec and Point Levi. Eventually a system of mechanical propulsion by means of horse-power came into use, the "horse-boats," as they were called, being still employed some years after the use of steam on the St. Lawrence.

Under the intendant was an official known as the *Grand Voyer*, charged with duties corresponding to a modern commissioner of highways. Under his supervision the public roads of the province were first laid out. A few of them, especially those intended for communication between Montreal and the forts on the Richelieu, were built by military engineers. The country roads appear to have been very narrow, for the habitants drove their teams tandem. A network of roads connected Montreal and Quebec with their immediate suburbs; but the long connecting road between the two cities dates only from 1733. The first wheeled vehicle to go between Montreal and Quebec, was driven over this road in 1734. Before the road was constructed, however, a regular system of postal service between the two cities had been established. This source of revenue, like so many others, was placed in the hands of a monopoly, first bestowed in 1721.

Of anything like local industry, there were few traces to be found. Kalm noticed the lack of manufactures, and the complete dependence of the Canadians upon French productions. "There are as yet," he writes, "no manufactures established in Canada; probably because France will not lose the advantage of selling off its own goods here. However, both the inhabitants of Canada and the Indians, are very ill off for want of them, in times of war." Some attempts had been made at ship-building, for the forests supplied excellent lumber. In 1723 there were built two men-of-war and six merchant vessels. The intendant, Talon, endeavoured to foster a trade between Canada and the French West Indies, sending thither a cargo of Canadian products in 1667, in a vessel built in the colony. In 1686 three ships sailed from Quebec for the West Indies laden with Canadian flour. It is interesting to note that in 1689 Louis the Fourteenth sanctioned the

the importation of negroes into Canada to be used as slaves, but the climate rendered them unfit for work.

Some idea of wages current under the old regime may be gathered from a note in Kalm. "They commonly give," he observes, "one hundred and fifty livres a year to a faithful and diligent footman, and to a maid-servant of the same character one hundred livres. A journeyman to an artist gets three or four livres à day, and a common labouring man gets thirty or forty sous a day. The scarcity of labouring people occasions the wages to be so high; for almost everybody finds it easy to set up as a farmer in this uncultivated country, where he can live well, and at a small expense, that he does not care to serve and work for others."

For the general appearance of the colony, particularly of Montreal and Quebec during the old regime, much information is to be gained from the reports of travellers. For the seventeenth century Lahontan and La Potherie furnish descriptions, the latter more accurate, perhaps, but not so interesting as the former. The letters of Monseigneur de Saint-Vallier, already referred to, are invaluable for the light they throw on certain phases of Canadian society, and also upon the condition of many of the public buildings of the two rival cities. The latest general description comes from the pen of the Swedish scientist, Kalm, who visited Canada in the year 1749, the year that the news of the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle reached Quebec. In Montreal he was graciously received by the acting governor, Baron Longueuil, and he gives this very quaint picture of the people he saw.

"The town of Montreal is built on the eastern side of the island, and close to one of the most considerable branches of the river St. Lawrence; and thus it receives a very pleasant and advantageous situation. The town had a quadrangular form, or rather it is a rectangular parallelogram, the long and eastern side of which extends along the great branch of the river. On the other side it is surrounded with excellent corn-fields, charming meadows and delightful woods. It is pretty well fortified, and surrounded with a high and thick wall. On the east side it has the river St. Lawrence and on all the other sides a deep ditch filled with water, which secures the inhabitants against all dangers from the sudden incursions of the enemy's troops. However, it cannot stand a regular siege, because it requires a great

garrison, on account of its extent; and because it consists chiefly of wooden houses. . . . Some of the houses in the town are built of stone, but most of them are of timber, though very neatly built. Each of the better sort of houses has a door towards the street, with a seat on each side of it, for amusement and recreation in the morning and evening. The long streets are broad and straight, and divided at right angles by the short ones; some are paved, but most of them very uneven. The gates of the town are numerous; on the east side of the town towards the river are five; on the other side are likewise several.

“Every Friday is a market-day, when the country people come to the town with provisions, and those who want them must supply themselves on that day, because it is the only market-day in the whole week. On that day likewise a number of Indians come to town to sell their goods and to buy others.”

Of the people of Montreal some quaint observations will be found in this paragraph.

“The difference between the manners and customs of the French in Montreal and Canada, and those of the English in the American colonies, is as great as that between the manners of those two nations in Europe. The women in general are handsome here; they are well bred, and virtuous with an innocent and becoming freedom. They dress out very fine on Sundays; and though on the other days they do not take much pains with other parts of their dress, yet they are very fond of adorning their heads, the hair of which is always curled and powdered, and ornamented with glittering bodkins and aigrettes. Every day but Sunday they wear a little neat jacket and a short petticoat which hardly reaches half the leg, and in this particular they seem to imitate the Indian women. The heels of their shoes are high, and very narrow, and it is surprising how they walk on them.

“In their knowledge of economy they greatly surpass the English women in the plantations, who indeed have taken the liberty of throwing all the burthen of housekeeping upon their husbands, and sit in their chairs all day long with folded arms. The women in Canada, on the contrary, do not spare themselves, especially among the common people, where they are always in the fields, meadows, stables, etc., and do not dislike any work.

whatsoever. However, they seem rather remiss in regard to the cleaning of the utensils and apartments; for sometimes the floors, both in the town and country, were hardly cleaned once in six months, which is a disagreeable sight to one who comes from amongst the Dutch and English, where the constant scouring and scrubbing of the floors is reckoned as important as the exercise of religion itself. To prevent the thick dust, which is thus left on the floor, from being noxious to the health, the women wet it several times a day, which renders it more consistent; repeating the aspersion as often as the dust is dry and rises again. Upon the whole, however, they are not averse to the taking a part in all the business of housekeeping; and I have with pleasure seen the daughters of the better sort of people, and of the governor himself, not too finely dressed, and going into the kitchens and cellars, to look that everything be done as it ought.

“The men are extremely civil, and take their hats off to every person indifferently whom they meet in the streets.”

Of the houses in the country, we find the following description: “The houses in the country are built promiscuously of stone or wood. To those of stone they do not employ brick, as there is not yet any considerable quantity of bricks made here. They therefore take what stones they can find in the neighbourhood, especially the black lime-slates. These are quite compact when broke, but shiver when exposed to the air; however, this is of little consequence, as the stones stick fast in the wall, and do not fall asunder. For want of it, they sometimes make their buildings of limestone, or sand-stone, and sometimes of grey rock-stone. The walls of such houses are commonly two foot thick, and seldom thinner. The greater part of the houses in the country are built of wood, and sometimes plastered over on the outside. The chinks in the walls are filled with clay, instead of moss. The houses are seldom above one story high. In every room is either a chimney or a stove, or both together. The stoves have the form of an oblong square; some are entirely of iron, about two feet and a half long, one foot and a half high, and near a foot and a half broad. These iron stoves are all cast at the iron-works at Trois Rivières.”

The iron-works in question, the only ones in Canada, Kalm includes in the description he gives of Three Rivers.

“Trois Rivières is a little market town, which had the appearance of a large village; it is however reckoned among the three great towns of Canada. . . . The town formerly flourished more than any other in Canada, for the Indians brought their goods to it from all sides; but since that time they go to Montreal and Quebec, and to the English, on account of their wars with the Iroquois or Five Nations, and for several other reasons, so that this town is at present very much reduced by it. Its present inhabitants live chiefly by agriculture, though the neighbouring iron-works may serve in some measure to support them.

“The iron-work, which is the only one in this country, lies three miles to the west of Trois Rivières. Here are two great forges, besides two lesser ones to each great one, and under the same roof with them. The smelting ovens stand close to the forges and are the same as ours. The ore is got two French miles and half from the iron-works, and is carried thither on sledges. It is a kind of moor ore, which lies in veins, within six inches or a foot from the surface of the ground. . . . The iron which is here made was to me described as soft, pliable, and tough, and is said to have the quality of not being attacked by rust so easily as other iron; and in this point there appears a great difference between the Spanish iron and this in ship-building. This iron-work was first founded in 1737 by private persons, who afterwards ceded it to the king; they cast cannon and mortars here, of different sizes, iron stoves which are in use all over Canada, kettles, etc., not to mention the iron bars which are made here.”

The management of the works seems so typical of the industrial conditions prevailing under the old regime that it is worth quoting here in full. Kalm observes: “Here are many officers and overseers, who have very good houses built on purpose for them. It is agreed on all hands that the revenues of the iron-work do not pay the expenses which the king must every year be at in maintaining it. They lay the fault on the bad state of the population, and say that the few inhabitants in the country have enough to do with agriculture and that it therefore costs great trouble and large sums to get a sufficient number of workmen. But however plausible this may appear, yet it is surprising that the king should be a loser in carrying on this work; for the ore is easily broken, is very near the iron-work, and very fusible.

The iron is good and can be very conveniently dispersed over the country. This is, moreover, the only iron-work in the country, from which everybody must supply himself with iron tools, and what other iron he wants. But the officers and servants belong to the iron-work appear to be in very affluent circumstances. A river runs down from the iron-work, into the river St. Lawrence, by which all the iron can be sent in boats throughout the country at a low rate."

In approaching Quebec the same writer noticed the great amount of land which had been cleared and settled in comparison with the forest country around Montreal and Three Rivers. This accords well with the relative distribution of the population among the three districts which has been discussed in a previous part of this sketch.

"Quebec," writes Kalm, "lies on the western shore of the river St. Lawrence, close to the water's edge, on a neck of land bounded by that river on the east side, and by the river St. Charles on the north side; the mountain on which the town is built rises still higher on the south side, and behind it begin great pastures; and the same mountain likewise extends a good way westward: The city is distinguished into the lower and the upper town. The lower lies on the river, eastward of the upper. The neck of land mentioned before, was formed by the dirt and filth which had from time to time been accumulated there, and by a rock which lay that way, not by any gradual diminution of the water. The upper city lies above the other, on a high hill, and takes up five or six times the space of the lower, though it is not quite so populous. The mountain on which the upper city is situated, reaches above the houses of the lower city. Notwithstanding the latter are three or four stories high, and the view, from the palace, of the lower city, is enough to cause a swimming of the head. There is only one easy way of getting to the upper city, and there part of the mountain has been blown up. This road is very steep, notwithstanding it is made winding and serpentine. However, they go up and down it in carriages and with waggons. All the other roads up the mountain are so steep, that it is very difficult to climb to the top of them. Most of the merchants live in the lower city, where the houses are built very close together. The streets in it are narrow, very rugged, and almost always wet. The upper city is inhabited by people

of quality, by several persons belonging to the different offices, by tradesmen and others. In this part are the chief buildings of the town."

Then follow descriptions of all the public buildings of the city from which list the governor's palace and the house of the intendant are selected.

"The palace is situated on the west or steepest side of the mountain, just above the lower city. It is not properly a palace, but a large building of stone, two stories high, extending north and south. On the west side of it is a court-yard, surrounded partly with a wall, and partly with houses. On the east side, or towards the river, is a gallery as long as the whole building, and about two fathoms broad, paved with smooth flags, and included on the outside with rails, from which the city and the river exhibit a charming prospect. This gallery serves as a very agreeable walk after dinner, and those who come to speak to the governor wait here till he is at leisure. The palace is the lodging of the governor of Canada, and a number of soldiers mount guard before it, both at the gates and in the court yard; and when the governor or the bishop comes in or goes out, they must all appear in arms and beat the drum.

"The Cathedral church is on the right hand, coming from the lower to the upper city, somewhat beyond the bishop's house. The people were at present (1749) employed in ornamenting it. On its west side is a round steeple, with two divisions, in the lower of which are some bells. The pulpit, and some other parts within the church, are gilt. The seats are very fine."

"The house of the intendant, a public building, whose size makes it fit for a palace. It is covered with tin, and stands in a second lower town, situated southward upon the river St. Charles. It has a large and fine garden on its north side. In this house all the deliberations concerning the province are held; and the gentlemen who have the management of the police and the civil power meet here, and the intendant generally presides. In affairs of great consequence the governor is likewise there."

The following reference to the shipping and trade of Quebec is of particular interest:—

"Quebec is the only sea-port and trading town in all Canada, and from

thence all the produce of the country is exported. The port is below the town to the river, which is there about a quarter of a French mile broad, twenty-five fathoms deep, and its ground is very good for anchoring. The ships are secured from all storms in this port; however, the north-east wind is the worst, because it can act more powerfully. When I arrived here, I reckoned thirteen great and small vessels, and they expected more to come in. But it is to be remarked, that no other ships than the French ones can come into the port, though they may come from any place in France, and likewise from the French possessions in the West Indies. All the foreign goods which are found in Montreal and other parts of Canada must be taken from hence. The French merchants from Montreal on their side, after making a six months' stay among several Indian nations, in order to purchase skins of beasts and furs, return about the end of August, and go down to Quebec in September or October in order to sell their goods there. The privilege of selling the imported goods, it is said, has vastly enriched the merchants of Quebec; but this is contradicted by others, who allow that there are a few in affluent circumstances, but that the generality possess no more than is absolutely necessary for their bare subsistence and that several are very much in debt which they say is owing to their luxury and vanity."

We conclude this topic by a short paragraph on the general civility of the inhabitants of Quebec of which Kalm makes special mention.

"The civility of the inhabitants here is more refined than that of the Dutch and English, in the settlements belonging to Great Britain; but the latter, on the other hand, do not idle their time away in dressing as the French do here. The ladies, especially, dress and powder their hair every day, and put their locks in papers every night; which idle custom was not introduced in the English settlements. The gentlemen wear generally their own hair, but some have wigs. People of rank are used to wear laced clothes and all the crown-officers wear swords. All the gentlemen, even those of rank, the governor excepted, when they go into town on a day that looks like rain, carry their cloaks on their left arm."

Mr. Kirby, in the story of the Chien d'Or, has given a circumstantial picture of Quebec as it may be imagined to have appeared in the closing

days of the French regime. Dr. Doughty and Dr. Dionne, in a recent work: *Quebec under Two Flags*, have quite taken away the historical foundations of Mr. Kirby's plot; and it is to be regretted, in view of the general interest in the characters of this romantic period that so popular a book should have been offered as accurate history. The book, however, is of particular interest to Canadians as being one of the first attempts to make use in fiction of a social background which lends itself so easily to the purpose of a novelist.