

Introduction: British North America's Global Age

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THE WEDNESDAY, October 10, 1838 issue of the *Quebec Gazette* included news from the United States, the West Indies, the Maritime colonies (known as the “Lower Provinces”), Upper Canada, and Great Britain. In addition to reporting on these locales – some further afar than others – the *Gazette* also reproduced state documents such as Proclamations, Ordinances, and Correspondence alongside Petitions, Addresses, and Replies that engaged and, in some instances, enraged colonists. A list of passengers identified by name those new to the colony and noted the arrival of the governor general’s “bearer of dispatches,” W. H. F. Cavendish. Advertisements filled nearly two pages, tempting colonists to loosen their purse strings to spend money on furs, farms, or pairs of rubber shoes from India.¹ The local, colonial, imperial, and global news reported in just this single issue of the *Quebec Gazette* shares much with this themed section on British North America: both remind us that the history of British North America, and in particular Lower Canada, was part of a much larger international history.² By reading publications like the *Quebec Gazette* – or hearing them read – the residents of British North America could keep abreast of European political events, follow the latest trends in art, fashion, and literature, and stay on top of both the major developments and daily minutiae of imperial and colonial governance. In this society, public life was increasingly defined by the circulation of people, capital, commodities, and ideas. Any suspicion that the people of British North America lived in quiet isolation from the debates and conflicts remaking the world around them can be vigorously tossed aside with a cursory glance at the *Quebec Gazette*. From the wealthiest merchants and most well-connected public officials to the dockworkers and tenant

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1 *Quebec Gazette*, October 10, 1838.

2 Linda E. Connors and Mary Lu MacDonald, *National Identity in Great Britain and British North America, 1815-1851: The Role of Nineteenth-century Periodicals* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2011).

farmers, the residents of British North America were contentious, mobile, and cosmopolitan.

This themed section on British North America is rooted in a conversation that we had in Toronto in May 2011. Weeks earlier we had each discovered that we had been awarded Post Doctoral Fellowships at the L. R. Wilson Institute for Canadian History at McMaster University. The Wilson Institute, under the direction of H. V. Nelles, is tasked with “rethinking Canadian History within a globalization framework.”³ This mandate encouraged us to organize a workshop designed to “foster an informed and constructive dialogue on the state of the historical literature relating to British North America, its ties to the larger world, and to consider how such scholarship has transformed how we think about and teach the history of British North America.”⁴

We felt this exercise to be both timely and necessary. The previous decade and a half had seen the publication of several titles that urged historians to reconsider the national framework that had dominated our understanding of this period for several generations. Discussions around issues as diverse as gender politics, governance, colonial autonomy, Aboriginal resistance, migration, and the environment were reinvigorated by the adoption of global or transnational perspectives. Thinking through the ways that policies and practices being implemented in British North America resembled those being adopted in other colonial societies added nuance and depth to our understanding of the politics and culture of our period. Engaging with colleagues working on similar *problématiques* in places like New Zealand, India, the Caribbean, and South Africa pushed us towards dynamic new interpretations of figures and events once dismissed as being stale. Meanwhile, the world in which historians work was in the midst of being transformed. The digitization of certain archival materials presented historians with a myriad of possibilities and challenges unimaginable only a few decades before. Finally, political and technological developments had changed the way in which historians interact with each other and with the communities where we live, teach, write, and research.

With these transformations in mind, we convened at the Wilson Institute in May 2012. Ten historians from across Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom presented papers in a lively workshop.⁵ Much time was left for debate

3 See <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~wilson>.

4 The call for papers can be found on the website of the Canadian Historical Association: <http://www.cha-shc.ca/vm/newvisual/attachments/893/Media/CFPBritishNorthAmericasGlobalAge.pdf>.

5 The following papers were presented at the workshop: Jeffers Lennox, “The Geographers’ War: Ideas of Acadia in Britain and France, 1753-1763”; Bradley Miller, “Regions of Law: Fugitive Criminals and the Law of Nations in Northeastern North America, 1819-1842”; Brian Gettler, “Money and the Structuring of Colonial Space: First Nations and Changing Claims to Sovereignty in Nineteenth-Century Saguenay-Lac St. Jean”; Lara Silver, “Acceptance of Sacrifice for the Greater Good: John A. Macdonald’s Defence of the Treaty of Washington, 1871”; Zachary Dorner, “Mapping Drug Exchange in Eighteenth-Century North America: The Intersection of Silvester Gardiner’s Surgical, Druggist, and Atlantic Networks, 1734-1775”; Jarett Henderson, “From Colonists to Convicts: Lower Canada, Bermuda, and the Age of Liberty”; Denis McKim, “Old Bottle, New Wine: The Family Compact and the Counterrevolutionary Atlantic”; Dan Horner, “Public Health and Urban Governance: Comparing Reactions to Typhus Outbreaks in Mid-Nineteenth Century Montreal and Liverpool”; Timothy Forest, “Connaught or Hell: Irish Assisted Emigration to North America in the 1880s”; Nathan Coschi, “German Wine in Canadian Bottles: The Celebration and

and discussion, which was both provocative and constructive throughout the two days we spent together. Our gathering concluded with a keynote address from Dr. Lisa Chilton, from the University of Prince Edward Island, who thoughtfully charted the shifting terrain of British North American historiographies and demonstrated the richness that comes with tracing the connections between the global and the local.⁶

Following the workshop, we approached *Histoire sociale / Social History* to see whether the journal would be interested in publishing these papers, as long as authors submitted them for evaluation. The four articles published here (three of which were presented at this event) demonstrate the benefits of moving beyond conventional narratives and geographies. Though each study is rooted in Lower Canada, each moves beyond that terrain to include peoples, practices, and policies with connections (and histories) that extended beyond the empires of the St. Lawrence. Jarett Henderson and Dan Horner expose the trans-imperial and trans-Atlantic connections among Lower Canada, Bermuda, and the British Isles respectively, thereby expanding the international framework that Michel Ducharme argues was pivotal to the political and intellectual history of the colony to include its social and cultural histories as well.⁷ Brian Gettler and Jack Little examine how a rethinking of British colonial ventures such as the fur trade and settler-colonization can complicate our understanding of how British colonizers and indigenous peoples lived and worked in a white settler society populated predominantly by French and Catholic *Canadiens*.

Ultimately, this themed section continues a historical conversation started long ago by Chester New, the historian whose name adorns the building that is today home to the Wilson Institute. In 1937, Chester New argued in his presidential address to the Canadian Historical Association that Canadian history had not occurred “in a self-contained hermetically sealed Canadian vacuum.”⁸ In its own innovative way, each paper published here moves British North America and British North Americans out of this vacuum.

Commemoration of German Unification in Berlin, Ontario, 1871-1914.”

6 Lisa Chilton, “Contextualizing Quebec City, BNA: Reflections upon the writing of Imperial, Transnational, and Global Histories.”

7 See various contributions to “Macdonald Roundtable” in *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 94, no. 1 (March 2013), pp. 80-112.

8 Chester New, “The Rebellion of 1837 in its Large Setting,” *Société historique du Canada: Rapport de l’assemblée annuelle*, no. 18 (1937), p. 5.