

## Loyalties in Conflict

### A Canadian Borderland in War and Rebellion, 1812–1840

Despite their strategic location on the American border, the townships of Lower Canada have been largely ignored in studies of the War of 1812 and the Rebellions of 1837–8. Originally settled by Loyalists from New York, and followed by much larger numbers of land seekers from New England, this was a potentially volatile borderland during British–American conflicts. J.I. Little's *Loyalties in Conflict* examines how the allegiance to British authority of the American-origin population within the borders of Lower Canada was tested by the War of 1812 and the Rebellions of 1837–8.

Little argues that while loyalties were highly localized, American border raids during the war caused a defensive reaction north of the 45th parallel. The resulting sense of distinction from neighbouring Vermont, with its radical religious and political culture, did not prevent a strong regional reform movement from emerging in the Eastern Townships during the 1820s and 1830s. This movement undermines the argument of Quebec's nationalist historians that the political contest in Lower Canada was essentially a French–English one; however, the dual threat of French-Canadian and American nationalism did ensure the border townships' loyalty to the government during the rebellions. The following years would witness the development of an increasingly conservative and distinctly Canadian cultural identity in the region.

*Loyalties in Conflict* is a rigorous study of the conflicting forces that shaped a Canadian region in a pivotal period in North American history.

(The Canadian Social History Series)

J.I. LITTLE is a professor in the Department of History at Simon Fraser University.

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in War and Rebellion,  
1812–1840

J.I. Little

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## Preface

While Ontario and three of the Atlantic provinces are separated from the United States by bodies of water, the same is not true of Quebec. Yet that province's historians have only begun to grapple with the issue of *Américanité*, and the long-settled borderland alongside the forty-fifth parallel has been largely ignored. It lay beyond the colonization zone during the French regime, and, as English-speaking Protestants, the early settlers did not contribute to what Jocelyn Létourneau refers to as the province's 'great collective narrative of *la survivance*.'<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the subsequent demographic victory of the French Canadians in the region fails to conform to the defensive nature of that narrative, and it is certainly not predisposed to celebrate the accommodations characteristic of cultural contact zones. The history of the region known as the Eastern Townships would clearly be better known had there been less accommodation and more conflict, for even the two major crises of the early nineteenth century – the War of 1812 and the Rebellions of 1837–8 – saw no major battles in the region. If Canada deserves the title the 'peaceable kingdom,' however, and if the two largest 'threats' to our survival as a country have long been the external influence of the United States and the internal aspirations of the Québécois, the story of how the people of the Eastern Townships responded to those two crises should be of more than local interest.

During the French regime the land east of the Richelieu and west of the Chaudière served as the hunting territory for Abenaki warriors, whose raids into New England slowed the northward expansion of the British colonial frontier. The first settlers to arrive in this northern Appalachian region were New York Loyalists during the American War of Independence, but they were quickly outnumbered by

land-seekers from New England. Less than two decades later, the War of 1812 would represent this population's first test of allegiance to British authority. While one might have expected most of these Yankee settlers to have been sympathetic to the American cause, Vermonters themselves initially showed little enthusiasm for the war. Loyalties were localized and the people on both sides of the border resisted playing more than a defensive role. But local loyalties also meant that, just as the British invasion of Vermont in 1814 stimulated sharp resistance in that state, so American raids north of the forty-fifth parallel caused a defensive reaction in the Eastern Townships. As Peter Sahlin (echoing Benedict Anderson) has noted, 'imagining oneself a member of a community or a nation meant perceiving a significant difference between oneself and the other across the boundary.'<sup>2</sup> That difference would become more real as the war-caused break in New England preaching circuits, followed by the arrival of British missionaries, gradually resulted in the development of a more conservative religious culture north of the border, a process that I examined in *Borderland Religion*.<sup>3</sup>

This volume complements that study insofar as it focuses on the evolution of the region's political culture, culminating with the Rebellions of 1837–8, when the dual threats posed by French-Canadian and American nationalism accelerated the shift towards a pro-British political allegiance. The Eastern Townships may have been, until recent years, an exception to the rule of a French-speaking Quebec and English-speaking rest-of-Canada, but the region represents a microcosm of a country largely shaped by the interaction of American and British influences, as well as French-language and English-language ones. The forces that led to the development of a distinctive English-Canadian identity in this cultural borderland were not so different from those at work in other parts of early nineteenth-century British North America. This study, then, is not simply another example of the 'limited identities' approach to Canada's history that has been criticized by its more nationalist historians.<sup>4</sup> It does argue that local loyalties remained a powerful force in the pre-industrial Eastern Townships, but it also examines the development of a civic culture, a regional outlook, and a growing identity as British subjects and Canadians. This is not an intellectual history, however, but a socio-political one, for the emphasis is less on how a regional elite articulated that identity than on how the population as a whole manifested it through their responses to the crises posed by war and rebellion.

Many people contributed to the completion of this volume, but I would like to thank Patricia Kennedy of the National Archives in par-



ticular. Her generous and very knowledgeable assistance has been indispensable for nearly all my research projects during the past three and a half decades. I am also very grateful to the two anonymous assessors for their constructive recommendations, to John Scott for sharing his remarkable knowledge of the local family histories, and to James Leahy for the expert copy-editing. The unfailingly supportive Len Husband proved, once again, to be all one could ask for in an editor, and I also wish to thank Greg Kealey for taking this project on board. The always professional staff of the University of Toronto Press made the production process a smooth and expeditious one.

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## Loyalties in Conflict

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# Introduction

The picturesque region south of the St Lawrence River and north of the American border, known as the Eastern Townships or les Cantons de l'Est (more recently, l'Estrie), has had a long history as a contact zone between Canada's French-speaking and English-speaking communities. Even before that history began this territory was a rather permeable buffer zone between the warring French and British empires. Then, after being opened to settlement, it became a borderland between competing British and American influences. In short, the Eastern Townships was like much of the rest of English-speaking Canada insofar as it represented a middle ground in which a hybrid collective identity emerged from the interaction between conflicting political and cultural forces.

During the French regime, western Abenaki hunters had this wilderness region mostly to themselves. The northward expansion of the British colonial frontier had caused them to abandon all their traditional villages except for the one on the western edge of their territory at Missisquoi Bay on northern Lake Champlain. Most of the western Abenakis retreated to the Jesuit missions at the mouths of the St Francis and Bécancour rivers that drained the northern Appalachian range into the St Lawrence. Beginning in 1690 the warriors from these two villages served as the shock troops of the French war effort by raiding the frontier New England settlements that were occupying what had once been their homeland.<sup>1</sup> After the French defeat in the Seven Years' War, the British continued the ban on settler encroachment on the Abenaki hunting grounds but refused to recognize that the Natives had any legal entitlement to this territory.

The Abenakis' position was further weakened by the War of Independence, when they were torn between alliance to Britain or to the rebelling colonies. When the Treaty of Paris extended the boundary between New York and Quebec eastward to define Vermont's northern border, the Missisquoi Abenakis found that not only had their traditional hunting and fishing territory been divided but their village lay south of the forty-fifth parallel, leaving them to the mercy of hostile American settlers.<sup>2</sup> Lacking official recognition of their land rights, the Missisquoi Abenakis soon scattered in small bands or migrated to the St Francis village of Odanak. The expansion of the settlement frontier would gradually force the St Francis and Chaudière Abenakis to shift their hunting grounds north of the St Lawrence.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to most North American borderland regions, then, the history of the indigenous population in what would become the Eastern Townships largely ended soon after the imposition of the international boundary.

The governor of Quebec, General Frederick Haldimand, did attempt to delay settlement of the Missisquoi Bay area by insisting that the Loyalists who had arrived there during the war move once again to the St Lawrence valley west of Montreal. Haldimand claimed that he wanted to prevent border conflicts, but he was probably more concerned about smuggling and the development of close ties along the border that would weaken the colony's defences – hence, his stated preference for French-Canadian settlers. But a sizable minority of the Loyalists refused to leave the fertile area even after Haldimand cut off their provisions and threatened to burn their houses. In 1785, only two years after the war had ended, a petition of 380 names was submitted for land titles in the area.

Meanwhile, prominent Loyalists were able to remain on the Vermont side of the border as long as its government was flirting with allegiance to Britain, but that independent republic's entry into the American Union in 1791 intensified pressure to open the region north of the boundary to colonization. As Alan Taylor has noted, recruiting Americans was a dangerous gamble, but colonial authorities were convinced that the American states were filled with suppressed Loyalists, anxious to escape republicanism by returning to the empire.<sup>4</sup> British officials may also have viewed American settlement as a means of diluting French-Canadian influence in the elective Legislative Assembly, which was granted by the constitution that separated Upper and Lower Canada in 1791.

That constitution declared that the seigneurial system was not to be extended, but, in an attempt to ensure that a landed aristocracy would

dilute the republican American influence, each newly surveyed township of approximately sixteen square kilometres was to be granted to a leader and his associates. While the standard grant was supposed to be only 80 hectares, the prevailing assumption was that each associate would receive the supposedly exceptional amount of 480 hectares, then sign over 400 hectares to the leader as compensation for the time and money invested in obtaining the land title and developing the economic infrastructure. But this system, which had originated in New England, was more capitalist than feudal because the leader was financed by outside investors and protracted delays in securing land titles caused their number to multiply, making the venture increasingly speculative in nature.<sup>5</sup>

These delays were caused by British officials in the colony who remained concerned about American expansion, especially as fears of French invasion gave rise to a garrison mentality in Quebec City.<sup>6</sup> In his recent study of the borderland between New York and Upper Canada, Taylor defines the land-granting process as one in which the state 'derived revenue and power by surveying property lines and selling sovereign title to enclosed parcels,' and 'the recipients returned allegiance to the government that issued their land titles.'<sup>7</sup> But the process was not quite so clear-cut in the Eastern Townships. Because Quebec officials were eager to discourage American settlement and acquire much of the land for themselves, they insisted that an oath of loyalty be administered to every settler before he became eligible for a grant, then delayed the appointment of the oaths commissioners for two years. Settlers who had little choice but to begin improving their land claims in the meantime because they had sold their properties in the United States subsequently found that those claims were transferred to Quebec officials and their merchant allies.

The most persistent American township leaders finally did acquire land titles in 1802, by which time most of them had amassed debts that prevented them from developing or even holding onto much of their land grants. The Loyalist township leaders may not have become a landed aristocracy, but the government did, as we shall see, bolster their social leadership role with appointments as militia officers and justices of the peace. In the meantime, the arable tax-free land in the border townships had attracted 8,300 New England settlers by 1803, a number that would reach approximately 18,500 in 1812. Not only could very few claim to be Loyalists, but many were squatters with no expressed loyalty to the state.<sup>8</sup> As in Upper Canada, where the population was 70,000 in 1815, the immigration from south of the border was driven not by an antipathy to republicanism

but by the fact that the War of Independence had left the new country with a large debt. The result was the large-scale alienation of public lands in the United States to speculators as well as a heavy tax burden, while in the remaining colonies Britain assumed the cost of government and taxes were only nominal.<sup>9</sup>

As for the British and Irish immigrants who disembarked at Quebec following the Napoleonic Wars, the vast majority made their way to Upper Canada or the United States, and most of the relatively small number who did settle in the Eastern Townships remained in the more economically marginal outlying areas. The French Canadians who would eventually dominate the region numerically only began to arrive in the later 1830s.<sup>10</sup> For all intents and purposes, then, the southern heartland of the Eastern Townships was the northern frontier of New England settlement.

While Canadian historians have tended to stress metropolitan links and influences on the settlement frontier,<sup>11</sup> the governing officials and influential merchants who became absentee proprietors in the Eastern Townships did little more than hinder the region's development, and they were resented accordingly. Economic links with the principal external markets of Montreal and Quebec were tenuous because there were no obstacle-free river arteries to the St Lawrence, and the absentee proprietors only posed an obstacle to road construction. The political connections to the colonial capital were also weak for many years because the Eastern Townships did not have its own electoral constituencies until 1829. Other state ties were equally limited for there were no local courts prior to 1823. While justices of the peace were authorized to fulfil low-level legislative and administrative functions such as the regulation of markets, they remained few and far between, and there was only one police constable for the entire district, appointed in 1824.<sup>12</sup> The militia was the one institution that represented a formalized link between most of the local population and external authority, but it was of little significance outside wartime, and we shall see that the men of the Eastern Townships tended to march to their own drummer during the War of 1812.

Formal institutions that would promote internal cohesiveness were also somewhat lacking because the New England missionary societies neglected the region, especially after the War of 1812, and it took a number of years for the British-based Wesleyan Methodist and Anglican churches to gain a firm foothold. The largest religious category in the census of 1831, at 37 per cent, was the one that declared no denominational affiliation whatsoever.<sup>13</sup> But churches rapidly gained in influence thereafter, as attested by the rise of a number of



temperance societies, and local notables exercised some influence through Masonic lodges, though these went into decline in the 1830s. The town meeting system that had fostered a strong sense of civic consciousness in New England was forbidden in Lower Canada, but local residents did take matters into their own hands by building schools and, when the need arose, organizing vigilante societies. For example, Hatley's society 'for the suppression of Felonies, Vices and Misdemeanors' assessed the property of subscribing members and paid 'pursuers' to apprehend offenders.<sup>14</sup> The threat posed by the conflicts examined in this study also called for a united local response. It is safe to assume, however, that the Eastern Townships was rather slow to evolve from the egalitarian, self-sufficient, and family-centred society described by Frederick Jackson Turner's western frontier thesis.<sup>15</sup>

But even though American historians of religion view northern New England's frontier conditions as an important factor in the radical revivalist and political protest tradition that developed there during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries,<sup>16</sup> that tradition failed to take deep root in the neighbouring Canadian townships. Despite the experience of an even stronger social atomization process, there were three important distinguishing features on the northern side of the boundary. Firstly, settlers in a British colony could obviously not rely upon the revolutionary tradition of sacrifice made during the American Revolution to justify their political demands. (Sacrifice for the Loyalist cause, which relatively few had supported in any case, clearly had more conservative connotations.) Secondly, as already noted, the town meeting system that provided the organizational framework for those demands in New England was prohibited in Lower Canada; and, thirdly, this meant that Canadian settlers were not subject to the taxes that led to major protests south of the border.<sup>17</sup> Added to those differences was the impact made by British-funded missionaries even before state-controlled schools would begin to have a major influence in the 1840s.<sup>18</sup> Finally, the two armed conflicts examined in the following pages would, themselves, play a role in transforming the cultural identity of an American-origin people living adjacent to the New England border into a distinctively 'Canadian' one insofar as it represented a synthesis of American and British values.

The main advantage of the borderlands approach is that it shifts the focus from the central state to the local communities as active agents in history, but borderland historians are generally most interested in the common features of the contiguous societies, as well as in how

state-imposed boundaries were defied or ignored by the people they divided. Lauren McKinsey and Victor Konrad of the Northeastern Borderlands Project go so far as to state that borderlanders have 'more in common with each other than with members of their respective dominant cultures.'<sup>19</sup> In contrast to old-world countries, however, the boundary between Lower Canada and Vermont was established before all but the earliest settlers arrived, and they were attracted in part by the freedom offered from taxes and religious conformity. Furthermore, because the border did not divide an already established population, once the indigenous inhabitants had been pushed aside, the cross-border political networks that characterize First Nations borderlands as well as those in other continents did not exist here.<sup>20</sup> Although the people of the border townships and northern Vermont and New Hampshire shared similar origins and geographical propinquity, a more interesting question than what they had in common is: when and how did this borderland become a bordered land?<sup>21</sup>

In taking this approach, Adelman and Aron focus largely on the power exercised by the state, but simply pointing to state imposition of the border by 'fences, gates, and other signs and systems of control' would not take us very far in understanding the Eastern Townships because the Canadian-American border did little to impede regular communications or contact.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the state's influence was somewhat limited in what Michiel Baud and Willem Van Schendel would refer to as an unruly borderland because there was for many years a lively traffic in counterfeit American bank bills manufactured in the Eastern Townships and exchanged for stolen American livestock.<sup>23</sup> And, as we shall see, the fact that the sale of American livestock to Britain or its colonies was prohibited by Jefferson's embargo only increased the northward flow, as did the outbreak of war in 1812.

The armed conflicts studied in this volume obviously brought the state into play, but it lacked the coercive power to enforce loyalty during the war, and it had little need to do so during the Rebellions. It was only the American side of the forty-fifth parallel that threatened to become a rebellious borderland during the War of 1812, and the enthusiasm of the American border communities to 'liberate' the Canadas in 1838 through the Hunters' Lodge movement was not reciprocated in the Eastern Townships. As Peter Sahlin points out in his study of the Spanish and French Catalonians, borders are not simply products of central states but of local social relations as well.<sup>24</sup> Benjamin Johnson also notes that borderlanders were never unaware

of the border, often using it for their own purposes.<sup>25</sup> To take one local example, the inhabitants of the border townships may have opposed the state's imposition of the boundary by forcefully resisting the local customs officers' attempts to collect duties on regular cross-border exchanges, but they did tolerate the presence of those same officers because they also resented the competition posed by imports of American livestock.<sup>26</sup>

As with all the young settlements of British North America during the early nineteenth century, loyalty was largely restricted to a community that – as Jane Errington has noted for Upper Canada – ‘was confined to those in his or her family and to the few settlers he or she met occasionally at the mill, at work parties, or at social occasions.’<sup>27</sup> During the War of 1812 most settlers of the Eastern Townships rejected allegiance to their country of birth, while also remaining deaf to the colonial authorities' orders to send recruits who would fight outside the region. But by activating the militia and forcing the settlers to take sides, the war did foster a nascent sense of regional identity, one that was loosely associated with the fact that they were residents of a British colony even though regional grievances gave birth to a lively political protest movement in the 1820s.<sup>28</sup> That movement was cut short in the mid-1830s by the prospect of French-Canadian rebellion. The outbreak of armed conflict saw the formation of volunteer units in the Eastern Townships eager to join the British forces, though their only active role would be to repel invaders from the United States. Reform sentiment certainly did not die with the Rebellions, but the American revolutionary tradition had failed to take root in the region.

Baud and Van Schendel caution that historians who ground their research on one side of an artificial line in social space run the risk of confirming the nationalist claims that borders represent.<sup>29</sup> As if to illustrate that observation, Elizabeth Jameson and Jeremy Mouat argue that by dividing ‘U.S. cultural and economic savagery from Canadian civilization’ the forty-ninth parallel (which, they fail to point out, only begins in Manitoba) continues to play a role in Canadian history similar to that of Turner's frontier in American history.<sup>30</sup> This study does not ignore developments to the immediate south of the border, but they are not a major theme because there is little to suggest that the cultural values and identity of the American borderland population were significantly influenced by its proximity to a British colony.

These observations notwithstanding, I am not adopting a nationalist stance in arguing that a more conservative cultural identity devel-

oped north of the forty-fifth parallel. Indeed, my thesis is that localism, not nationalism, was the dominant force in the early nineteenth century, albeit a localism that was gradually complemented (perhaps even weakened, but not replaced) by broader regional, provincial, and imperial identities. In that sense, this study conforms to Nancy Christie's recent appeal that pre-Confederation history be read as an extension of British cultural, institutional, and social frameworks, though I would add that historians should not neglect ongoing American influences nor the persistence of local traditions and loyalties well into the industrial era.<sup>31</sup> Almost by definition, then, my findings will be unique to the Eastern Townships in many respects, but local loyalties were a defining feature of what Randy Widdis, echoing Northrop Frye and Cole Harris, refers to as an 'archipelago of solitudes.'<sup>32</sup> And the fact remains that the experience of British political domination, American military threat, and French-Canadian unrest – all themes explored in this study – helped to define how the 'imagined' community known as English Canada came into existence.<sup>33</sup>

# The War of 1812

The causes and general progress of the War of 1812 are too well known to require more than a brief outline here. Native unrest in the Ohio country was blamed on British interference, and the Americans also resented the British naval blockade of continental Europe. Jefferson's retaliatory Embargo Act of 1807 and its successors failed to change British policy, and the impressment of British-born sailors from American ships was considered a severe provocation, leading to the declaration of war in June 1812. As for the war's progress, British seizure of the American posts at Michilimackinac and Detroit restricted the early fighting to Upper Canada, where it remained focused until the autumn of 1813, when a half-hearted American attempt was made to take Montreal. The two-pronged American attack was turned back at Châteauguay and Chrysler's Farm, and, with the defeat of Napoleon the following year, the British took the war to Lake Champlain. Their defeat at Plattsburg Bay in September 1814 helped set the stage for the Treaty of Ghent, which effectively restored the antebellum status quo the following December.

Even though the thinly settled country north of Vermont and New Hampshire served as a smuggling frontier across which New England livestock were moved to feed the British army,<sup>1</sup> and Lake Champlain became a two-way invasion route during the later stages of the war, the Eastern Townships escaped with relatively little armed conflict. The war's many historians, preoccupied largely with military events, have therefore found no reason to give the region more than a passing mention.<sup>2</sup> But the history of war concerns more than military conflict; it is also social and cultural history, exploring the role played by, and the impact felt by, the civilian population. S.F. Wise has claimed