

The Fight for Quebec

England and France wage war to decide the fate of a continent. *by Desmond Morton*



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*A View of the Laing's Place
Above the Town of Quebec,
describing the Assault of the
Enemy, in September 1759.
Painting by Francis Swaine,
circa 1763.*



The Seven Years War was turning into a disaster for Britain. Defending King George II's German principality had brought defeat to the British and endless payoffs to greedy allies.



Above: Yet Britain had the world's best navy, while France's navy was as frail as the French army was strong; New France boasted only 70,000 people compared to a million and a half English colonists along the Atlantic seaboard. It was in this context that a new British prime minister, William Pitt, took office in 1756. He had a plan, along with

Right: boundless confidence. As he told the king: "I know that I can save the country, and that no one else can." Pitt made a key decision — to restore England's glory by ending New France. To do it, Pitt needed a general who delivered victories, not excuses. He thought he had such a man.

Right: Louis-Joseph, Marquis de Montcalm, date and painter unknown.

James Wolfe was ugly, red-haired, quarrelsome, and, by age thirty-two, a veteran. An officer at thirteen, he was battle-hardened at sixteen. In 1745, at age eighteen, he had slaughtered Bonnie Prince Charlie's Scottish rebels and ravaged their farms and villages. As a colonel, Wolfe defied authority and the drill book to make the members of his regiment the most efficient shooters in the army. At Louisbourg in 1758, his courage and quick wit turned a disaster into the first of Pitt's overseas victories. Promised twelve thousand soldiers, his choice of brigadiers, and the rank of major-general, Wolfe was Pitt's man to capture Quebec.

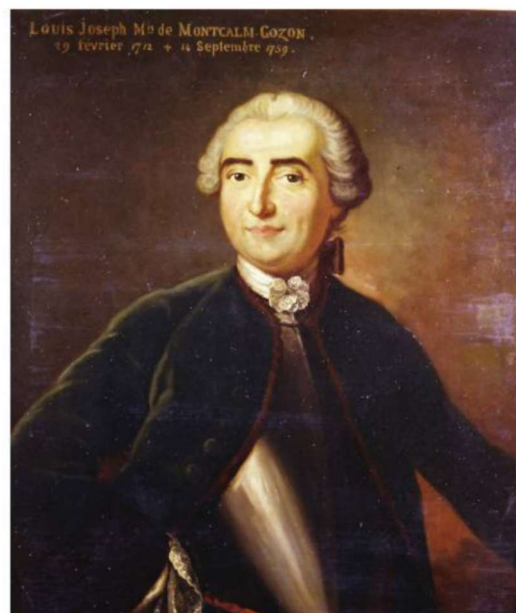
Wolfe's opponent, Louis-Joseph Montcalm-Gozon, Marquis de Montcalm, was oddly similar. An officer at

twelve, he survived five wounds and the massacre of his regiment to win promotion, honours, and a new regiment. When Louis XV needed a general to command seven thousand white-coated regulars sent to guard New France, Montcalm and his wife at first refused. At age forty-seven, with decades of soldiering behind him, Montcalm was enjoying a peaceful family life as a nobleman. Montcalm's mother, however, reminded him of his duty, and that his impoverished family needed the money.

Montcalm would be subject to New France's sixty-year-old Canadian-born governor, Pierre de Rigaud, Sieur de Vaudreuil. The two men soon hated each other. As an officer of the colonial regulars, Vaudreuil was no general, but he believed in the sneaky North American style of war — raiding parties, not pitched battles; mobility, not fortifications. Montcalm, for his part, was trained in the classic, European method of warfare — big armies clashing in the open. Montcalm had little time for Canadiens and their way of doing things. "The Canadien concept of war is going on raids that resemble hunting parties," Montcalm complained. The two men were soon busy trying to wreck each other's careers.

A third authority in New France was the king's intendant, the business manager for the colony. In an age when officials were expected to enrich themselves with fees and bribes, François Bigot exceeded all limits. When the war, plus two crop failures, sent prices soaring and spread hunger to soldiers and habitants alike, Bigot got the blame. Neither Vaudreuil nor Montcalm could or would interfere.

Just before Wolfe helped capture the French fortress at Louisbourg in 1758, Montcalm devastated a British



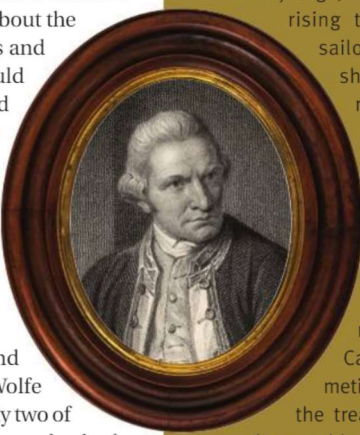


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A River of Troubles

column at Fort Carillon (or Ticonderoga, as it was known to the British) at the south end of Lake Champlain. That winter he sent an aide, Louis-Antoine, Comte de Bougainville, to France to seek reinforcements. France's response was summed up by an influential courtier: "When the house is on fire, who worries about the stable?" Embattled by European enemies and former allies, France needed all it could muster to save itself. Bougainville returned with supplies, two hundred recruits for the king's army, and an obscure official sent to investigate Bigot's corruption. France also gave Montcalm medals and command of New France's defences as rewards for his victory at Carillon. A bitter Vaudreuil hid his reduced status.

On the British side, Pitt could find Wolfe only 7,600 soldiers. And Wolfe ended up being able to choose only two of his three brigadiers — Robert Monckton, who had played a key role in the expulsion of the Acadians, and fiery Scotsman James Murray. Political influence won a spot for George Townshend, the son of a former prime minister. For his part, Wolfe found three hundred American Rangers — irregular soldiers in greasy buckskins trained in native-style warfare — and five hundred light



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The St. Lawrence River had long been a navigator's nightmare. It was known and feared for its rocks, reefs, sandbars, heavy fogs, treacherous currents, and fast-rising tides. More than 900 British sailors drowned in 1711 when ten ships shattered on dangerous reefs and shoals surrounding the notorious Île aux Oeuifs on the North Shore.

In 1759, the French believed they had little to fear from England's invading flotilla — for the French had removed the buoys that marked the river's hazards. But Captain James Cook and crew meticulously charted and re-buoied the treacherous waters in advance of the warships, working in the dark of night to avoid French cannon fire. The fleet passed through without a single loss, causing a horrified Marquis de Vaudreuil to write: "The enemy has passed sixty ships of war where we hardly dared risk a vessel of a hundred tons."

Above:
An authentic plan of the St. Lawrence from Sillery to Montmorency Falls, showing locations of British naval ships during the siege of Quebec. By John Cary, 1780.

Left:
Captain James Cook, engraved by W. Holl. Published circa 1820.



Soldier, Compagnies franches de la Marine
 These were French colonial regulars who served in New France and Louisbourg and conducted military raids against the British Colonies in the years leading up to the siege of Quebec.



First Nation warrior
 The French had good relations with First Nations such as the Algonquin, Huron, and Montagnais. About 1,700 fought on the French side at the Plains of Abraham. They were armed with muskets or rifles, as well as traditional weapons.



Drummer, Compagnies franches de la Marine
 Drummers wore the distinctive uniform of the livery of the king of France, so that they were easily identifiable during a battle. Drummers would communicate officers' orders through distinctive drumbeats.



Ensign, 15th Regiment of Foot
 In the eighteenth century, regiments of the British infantry had two "colours." The king's colour was blue with white and red crosses of St. George and St. Andrew. (This was the union flag of England and Scotland.) The regimental colour of the 15th Foot was yellow with a small depiction of the union flag in one corner.



Soldier, 58th Regiment of Foot
 This was one of many British units sent to America in 1757 to prepare for the attack on Louisbourg. This regiment took part in both the capture of Louisbourg and of Quebec.



The "Louisbourg Grenadiers"
 This was a temporary unit created in 1759 for the expedition to Quebec, consisting of grenadier companies of three other regiments that formed the British garrison of Louisbourg.

Men of Arms



Right: Corporal, Bearn regiment
 This regiment arrived in New France in 1755 and played a major role in the Battle of the Plains of Abraham. During the fateful fight, the Bearn formed the centre of Montcalm's French troops. They also took part in the Battle of Ste. Foy — the French attempt to retake Quebec.

Left: Grenadier, French Guyenne regiment
 This Grenadier wears the Canadian version of the regiment's uniform. The regiment was sent in 1755 to protect New France.



The Corps de cavalerie
 Formed in 1759, the corps was the first mounted unit in Canada. Consisting of 200 French volunteers, plus five officers, the unit carried out scouting missions and acted as couriers during the final fight for New France.

In an age before camouflage, soldiers proudly displayed their colours on the battlefields of New France.



Left: Light infantry, 48th Regiment of Foot
 This regiment was trained to fight in the forests of North America. By 1759, uniforms had been altered to adapt to the climate and conditions: hats were replaced by warm caps, and coats were shortened. The regiment fought in both Louisbourg and Quebec.



Gunner, Royal Artillery
 This regiment wore blue, which was the British royal colour. There were three Royal Artillery companies and additional detachments in Wolfe's army at Quebec in 1759.

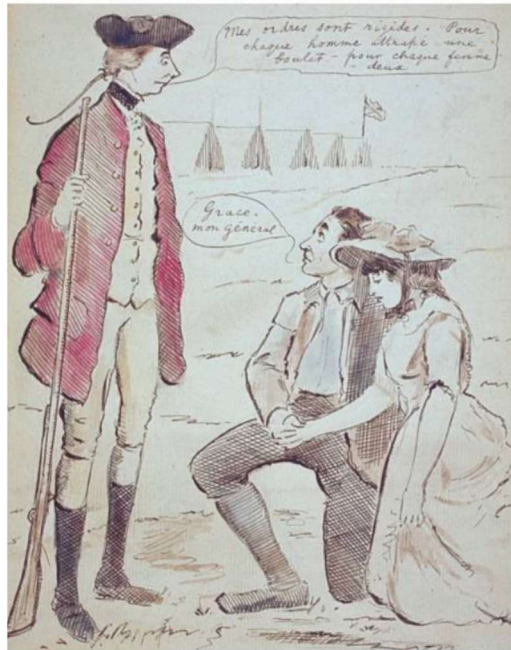
Highlander of the British 78th
 The Highlanders fought under Wolfe in the battle of the Plains of Abraham. They were among England's fiercest troops, even though 14 years earlier they had fought against the British Crown.



JEAN-PAUL ELD

infantry at Halifax. At Louisbourg, he added three hundred grenadiers. More essential was Admiral Charles Saunders' fleet of forty-nine warships, a quarter of the Royal Navy, plus 119 transports. Winds delayed the voyage.

Vaudreuil reckoned that the treacherous lower St. Lawrence would wreck the British fleet. But he reckoned without competent seamanship. James Cook, the future Pacific explorer, organized a dozen small boats to measure depths and produced the chart the French had never created. On June 26, Saunders disembarked Wolfe's army on Île d'Orléans — a large island in the St. Lawrence just east of Quebec. As Wolfe's soldiers gratefully stretched



During the military operations in Quebec, George Townshend, General Wolfe's unwanted brigadier, drew this cartoon of civilians begging for mercy from Wolfe.

their legs and built a camp, a violent summer storm turned the sky black, set the river raging, smashed anchor cables, and sent ships plunging at each other. Only consummate seamanship stood in the way of serious damage.

Montcalm had pleaded with Vaudreuil to contest the river passage by mounting guns at Cap Tourmente, about fifty kilometres east of Quebec. But Vaudreuil thought he knew better. Bigot sold some supply ships to the king, filled them with gunpowder, and, on the night of June 28, sent them to burn Saunders' wooden ships. As watchers ashore marvelled at the fireworks, Saunders' seamen leaped into their boats, grappled the fire ships, and towed them out of harm's way. A month later, a huge fire raft met the same fate. The British did not lose a single ship.

Wolfe learned about Quebec's defences from British officers held captive earlier in the war. Money spent to fortify Quebec's landward side had been wasted. West of Quebec, eighty-metre cliffs formed a barrier, and they resumed on the north shore, where the Montmorency Falls leaped a sixty-metre height of land. As previous attackers had recognized, invaders had to land on the



shallow Beauport shore, fight across the St. Charles River, and attack Quebec's feeble land defences. And, Wolfe believed, the sooner the better, even if the victory came at great cost. As Wolfe had written in a letter a few years earlier: "In particular circumstances and times, the loss of a thousand men is rather an advantage to a nation than otherwise, seeing that gallant attempts raise its reputation and make it respectable."

When he actually inspected Quebec, Wolfe's heart sank. Montcalm had anticipated him. Through May and June, thousands of militiamen had built batteries and earthworks to pulverize invaders approaching the shore. Masses of tents and earthworks showed where the French were waiting. Wolfe's plan would have been suicidal for his soldiers, his career, and probably himself.

Desperate to do something, Wolfe sent Monckton to capture Pointe-Lévy, opposite Quebec, and build a battery. Montcalm would have defended it but Vaudreuil's favourite engineer assured him that no known gun could

The French filled supply ships with gunpower, set them on fire, and sent them into the middle of the British fleet. As watchers ashore marvelled at the fireworks, British seamen leaped into their boats, grappled the fire ships and towed them out of harm's way.



throw a shell across the river into Quebec. On the morning of July 12, when the first British shell fell in the river, gunners heard the jeers. But the next shell crashed into the Upper Town. The bombardment continued for the next two months, with the British firing more than 40,000 cannonballs and 10,000 firebombs on the town. Few buildings were left standing. Even Notre-Dame-des-Victoires, a little church built to celebrate previous failed sieges, was razed. Terrified citizens fled the city, seeking safety in the countryside.

Wolfe had promised civilians that he would protect their lives, property, and religion if they kept the peace. "Britain stretches out her powerful yet merciful hand. Let the wisdom of the people of Canada show itself," he declared in a proclamation issued June 28. But the Canadiens did not keep the peace. They had their quarrels with the French, but they were not neutral in a battle for their homeland. Militiamen, habitants, and natives killed British soldiers when they could. A ranger on the Île d'Orléans was found dead with a stake through his heart. Gunners at Pointe-Lévy learned that a tomahawk thrown by expert hands was a silent killer. Wolfe soon posted a new proclamation, warning of ruthless

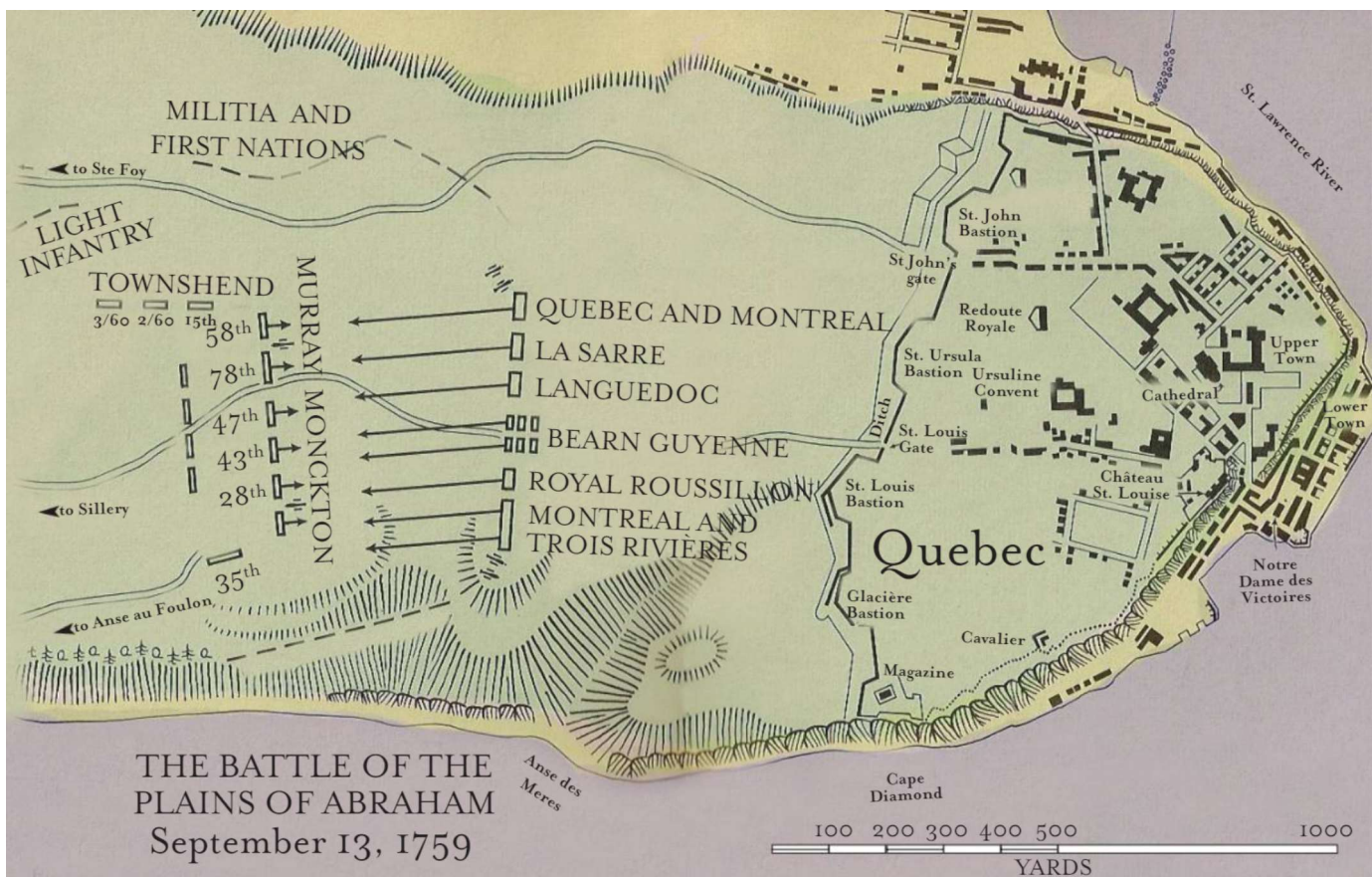
consequences. All through the summer, rangers and light infantry rowed up and down the river, burning villages and farms. Only churches were ordered spared. Montcalm's militiamen were left to wonder at the fate of their families. "M. Wolfe est cruel," wrote Bigot.

Civilians captured in raids were landed at the Anse au Foulon, a tiny cove west of Quebec. Wolfe watched as old men, women, and children scrambled up a steep path to a French guard post. But when Vaudreuil boasted that the prisoners were liberated because the British were starving, Wolfe angrily cancelled further releases.

None of this captured Quebec. Two thousand of Wolfe's elite soldiers were now sick or dying from summer heat, rain, and foul sanitation. The British suffered about a thousand dead, wounded, or missing soldiers on July 31, when France's native allies slaughtered a force hunting for a ford across the Montmorency River east of Quebec, and during a landing on the Beauport shore a few days later. Wolfe's efforts to improve sanitation provoked his unwanted brigadier, George Townshend, to draw a cartoon of the long-nosed, ungentlemanly general poking his spyglass

The Defeat of the French Firaft Attack on the British Fleet anchored before Quebec, 28 July 1759.
Painting by Dominic Serres, circa 1900.

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They waited until the French were about forty paces away. Then, with apparent calm, the British raised their weapons and fired. Using Wolfe's drill, as one line reloaded, another line stepped forward from the smoke.

into soldier's toilets. By then, Wolfe was sick too, with symptoms of scurvy added to his chronically upset stomach. When he took to his bed in August, soldiers believed he was dying. Some of his officers hoped it was true, for while Wolfe was well-regarded by the rank and file, those closer to the top chafed at his leadership. When August turned into September, cold nights and reports of ice in the gulf led Admiral Charles Saunders to warn Wolfe that his fleet must leave by the end of the month or be trapped in St. Lawrence ice.

It appeared that Wolfe's mission of conquering New France was about to fail!

Wolfe was despondent. He blamed Saunders, his soldiers, and his brigadiers. Above all, he condemned himself. His last dispatch to William Pitt, written four days before Wolfe fell on the field of battle, illustrated his bleak state of mind: "My constitution is entirely shattered without the consolation of having done any significant service to the state and without any prospect of it." In his

journal, Wolfe wrote of "my plan of quitting the service, which I am determined to do, the first opportunity."

On the French side, Montcalm's militia, worried about the fate of their families in the countryside, began to desert, even though the penalty for doing so was death by hanging. Montcalm and the main French army remained at the Beauport shore, just east of Quebec, where the main battle was still expected. But when Admiral Saunders sneaked part of his fleet upriver, past Quebec, Montcalm sent Bougainville and a strong force to Cap Rouge, about eleven kilometres west of Quebec, to protect his rear and the route from Montreal. Another thousand left under his second-in-command, Brig.-Gen. François-Gaston, Duc de Lévis, to stop the British advance on Montreal. Meanwhile, Brig.-Gen. James Murray and his two thousand troops raided French supplies as far south as Deschambault, about sixty kilometres upstream from Quebec.

On August 31, Wolfe got up from his sickbed to meet with his brigadiers and present his plans for a fresh assault on the Beauport shore. They rejected his idea. He returned to bed. They kept talking. Why not reunite the troops and set them ashore at Les Ecureuils, about forty kilometres upstream from Quebec? Wolfe agreed but changed the landing place to Pointe-aux-Trembles, which was a little closer to Quebec than Les Ecureuils, but still about a thirty-kilometre march away.

On September 2, the British abandoned their camp at Montmorency. Vaudreuil rejoiced; Montcalm worried. He remained concentrated on Beauport, but what if the British landed upriver? Bougainville got more troops.

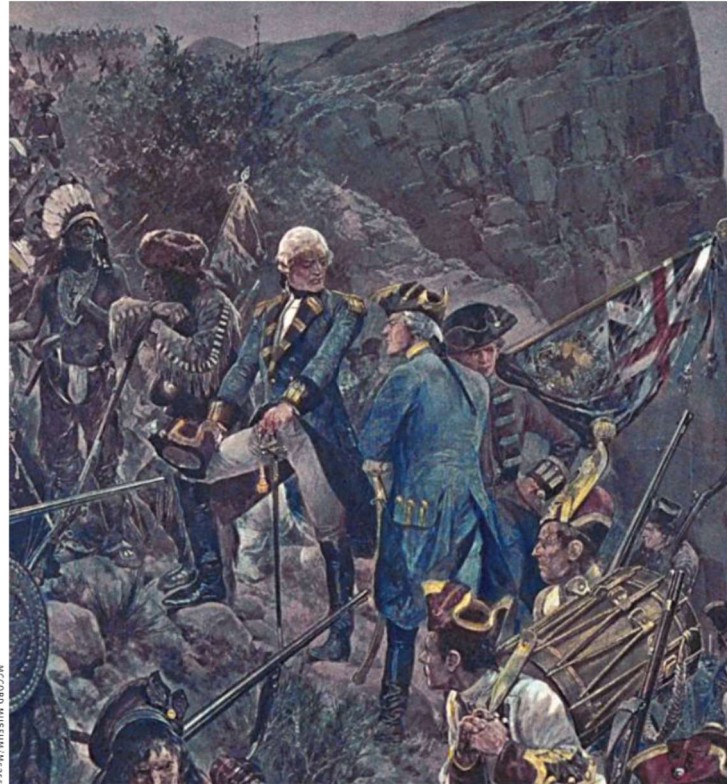
Wolfe collected his striking force, which was reduced to thirty-five hundred from the eighty-five hundred who had landed in June, and headed for Pointe-aux-Trembles. Then the weather broke. Rain bucketed down, the mud road from Pointe-aux-Trembles dissolved, and Wolfe cancelled the move. Sodden soldiers returned to their tents.

Wolfe was now desperate. His memory of civilians climbing from the little cove at Anse au Foulon, just a little upriver from the French citadel, came to mind. Though it seemed too crazy to share with his resentful brigadiers, suddenly Wolfe had a plan. He would land his army right on the doorstep of Quebec, at Anse au Foulon, where they would climb the steep path to the top of the heights and assemble on the Plains of Abraham to finally force Montcalm's forces into open battle.

On September 11, the navy quietly carried Wolfe's striking force upriver. At dusk on the 12th, soldiers transferred to boats and two small schooners. Saunders' seamen rowed them silently back toward Quebec. At Sillery, a little upstream from Quebec, a French sentry challenged the flotilla; a quick-witted Scottish officer answered in French. When another sentry shouted, the officer told him to shut up: "You'll give us away to the English." An unexpected current shoved the first boats past their destination of Anse au Foulon, but they turned toward shore. Quick-witted in a crisis, Wolfe jumped ashore and sent the light infantry along the beach to the foot of the path. The French guard post at the top was silent. Its commander, a friend of Bigot, had let many of his men go home to harvest their crops. The struggle with the French sentries lasted only a few seconds. One escaping sentry raced across the fields to sound the alarm. Vaudreuil, who was headquartered just east of the citadel, near the St. Charles River, was the first to learn of the British arrival. He refused to believe it. So did Montcalm, who received the news at Beauport, which was about three kilometres downstream from Vaudreuil's camp. He raced to meet the governor, then climbed a height of land to see for himself as British redcoats poured onto the Plains of Abraham.

All summer Montcalm had resisted Wolfe with cool brilliance. Did he now panic to see Wolfe's thin red line, visible through the September mist? He called for reinforcements upstream from Cap Rouge, but messengers to Bougainville did not return.

James Johnstone, Montcalm's Scottish aide, went to summon the army from Beauport, the landing just east of Quebec where the main attack had been expected. But the veteran colonels there were watching Saunders' battleships manoeuvre toward the Beauport shore, with boatloads of redcoats rowing through the fleet. They were staying put. They were wrong, of course. The British had staged a feint.



Montcalm finally managed to gather an army of about thirty-five hundred, of whom just over sixteen hundred were enlisted men. The rest were militia. Montcalm's ultimate mistake was mixing Canadian militiamen with the white-coated king's troops he commanded. In battle, regular troops stood steadfast to get the best effect out of their muskets; militiamen hit the ground, shot their target, and crawled to safety. Montcalm assumed the regulars would train their reluctant new comrades. But there was no time.

Canadiens and their native allies spread to the flanks and opened fire on the British. French artillery tore bloody lanes through the British ranks. Wolfe ordered his soldiers to lie down. Officers stood, targets for militia and native sharpshooters. A bullet hit Wolfe's wrist; another his stomach. He ignored the pain and continued to direct his troops from the front of the line. The real battle had yet to begin.

As Montcalm's soldiers cheered and wondered why he looked so sad, the French general inspected his troops. Four French battalions formed a conventional line of battle extending from the Royal Roussillon regiment near the British cen-

Wolfe Scaling the Heights of Abraham, 1759.
Print by
R. Caton
Woodville,
circa 1906-1908.



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After the capture of Quebec

There wasn't much left of Quebec City and the nearby countryside when the British took it over in 1759–60. A sergeant major of the 40th Regiment of General Hopson's Grenadiers (part of Wolfe's Army of the Louisbourg Grenadiers) states, in *A Journal of the Expedition up the River St. Lawrence*: "During the whole Siege from first to last, 535 Houses were burnt down, among which is the whole eastern Part of the lower Town (save 6 or 8 Houses) which makes a very dismal Appearance. We also destroyed upwards of Fourteen Hundred fine Farm-Houses in the Country."

He notes how the French garrison was sent home, "on board transports," and only "such of the Inhabitants as would come in and take the Oaths of Allegiance, were permitted to enjoy their Estates."

The conditions of surrender that allowed the settlers to return to France came into effect in 1763, after the Seven Years War ended and the Treaty of Paris was signed.

Many in Quebec left for France, including soldiers, officials, and some landowners. They departed Canada in the ships that had previously brought over British troops and supplies. But others stayed. These included clergy, a few seigneurial families, peasants, and *coureurs de bois*.

Although the inhabitants of New France did not display loyalty to the French crown, their language, culture, and tastes remained decidedly French. And their faith was resolutely preserved in the Roman Catholic tradition.

Why were the French inhabitants allowed to stay and keep their language, religion, and culture, when the British expelled thousands of French-speaking Acadians from their homeland just four years previously?

One factor was that the size of the French-speaking population, estimated at about 70,000 in 1763, greatly precluded any mass expulsion. Another factor was that the first two British governors — James Murray and Guy Carleton — were a Scot and an Irishman, respectively. Both spoke fluent French and sympathized with the French Roman Catholics.

In addition, when the harsh winter of 1759–1760 brought disease, as well as shortages of food and fuel, French settlers and British soldiers decided co-operation, not conflict, was the key to survival.

Historian Desmond Morton speculates why the British did not try to convert and anglicize the French Canadians: "Judging from other conquests of the period, it never occurred to them. The Thirty Years War tended to put wars of religion out of fashion."

Morton adds: "French, to the British of the eighteenth century, was as civilized a language as English.... Until 1763, who knew whether New France would be returned to France, and who could afford more trouble than necessary when the American colonists were so determined to be difficult?"

— Beverley Tallon

tre to Montreal and Quebec militia battalions on the right flank. At 10 a.m. sharp, Montcalm commanded the drums to beat an advance. The British stood up. Aware that their muskets could not hit a barn door at over a hundred metres, they were silent. Two guns, dragged up by seamen, opened fire on the advancing French. Militia in the French regular battalions instinctively dropped to their knees or bellies to shoot, breaking the solidity of the line of advance. Sergeants kicked, cursed, and tried in vain to restore alignment. The British silence grew ominous. They waited until the French were about forty paces away. Then, with apparent calm, the British raised their weapons and fired. Using Wolfe's drill, as one line reloaded, another line stepped forward from the smoke. Then they fired again. From a hillock, Wolfe spotted panic-stricken French soldiers fleeing. He gave an order. British drums beat for an advance as the French line disintegrated. Only the Royal Roussillon kept in formation, crowding around its colonel. And the Canadien militia kept shooting.

At the moment of victory, a militia bullet tore into Wolfe's chest. Two officers lowered him to the ground. "It is all over with me," he told them. "They run," shouted a soldier. "Who run?" asked Wolfe. "The enemy," an officer answered. Wolfe gave orders for a pursuit and turned on his side: "Now God be praised, I will die in peace."

At almost the same moment, a cannon ball tore through his beaten army. Montcalm felt a cannon ball tear through his side. Carried in agony into Quebec's Upper Town, he had no advice for a badly shaken Vaudreuil. Upon learning his wound was mortal, Montcalm said: "I am happy I shall not live to see the surrender of Quebec." Next morning, he was dead. The French had lost six hundred men but thirteen thousand remained. They must attack, demanded Johnstone, Montcalm's Scottish aide. Exhausted and demoralized, Vaudreuil and the surviving colonels refused; Vaudreuil angrily ordered Johnstone out of his sight. Abandoning guns, baggage, and even their food supplies, the French army fled south on September 14. Their native allies took the food and went home. They, too, had done enough. With Monckton badly wounded, command fell to Brigadier Townshend. On September 17, he accepted Quebec's surrender. But New France was not quite finished. Lévis took his forces to Montreal for the winter, where they regrouped. They returned the following spring to attack a sickened and hungry British garrison in the second battle of Quebec, otherwise known as the Battle of Ste. Foy. It was that battle that would finally settle the question of who would claim Canada. 🐾

Canadian historian Desmond Morton has authored over thirty-five books on Canada. An Officer of the Order of Canada, Morton is a professor emeritus at McGill University.

Et Cetera

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