Paving the Way for Globalization: Early Travellers’ Impressions of Canada 1583–1793

When reflecting on the 21st century, we often refer to a Brave New World, as the age of globalization. The 16-17th centuries were also referred to as “A Brave New World”. Shakespeare, perhaps its best spokesman, said:

O wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,
That has such people in ’t! 2

The single term that best characterizes England during the 16th and 17th centuries is Expansion: expansion in the historical, the geographical, the scientific, the political, the social, and the artistic senses. People pushed their capacities to the extreme; to use a modern psychological term, they were characterized by growth. It is due to this expansion that from the single country of England the English-speaking world evolved.

Our age in the early 21st century makes people also grow in the psychological sense, however, geographically the world has turned into a “global village”: we shop in stock places, tend to eat stock food, to enjoy the same movies, we have worn stock clothes for quite a few decades and last but not least we all tend to speak English. We watch with googoo eyes the same TV and computer screens and have been led to think along uniform ideas. Due to the expansion of earlier times, our world has grown small and practically reachable by this or that means for all of us. As a result, however, community conscious individuals of society are becoming atomised. If this expansion continues, our growth will turn into a kind of shrinking, as individuals become increasingly isolated from one another.

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What led us, human beings so far? A continual expansion in geography, sciences, arts, learning, practically the drive to grow. Brave discoverers, explorers, travellers, globe trotters paved the way, all inquisitive people, who had the courage and physical endurance to learn more about our world most of which was totally unknown to them, and who upon arrival in the unknown territory became colonisers in several senses.

This paper was compiled with the aim to refer to a handful people of various European origin who are all related to Canada’s literary history heritage: Stephen Parmenius of Buda, Hungary; the Jesuits of France, Frances Brooke of England, and Sir Alexander Mackenzie of Scotland. These travellers had one common aim: to put the land and what they found on the land in the service of white man. By both comparing and demarking differences between Europe and the new land Canada, the travellers acted as tourists first by observing everything carefully, with the rationale of the white man: the intelligent, learned man is looking around with a purpose and becomes a colonizer in the process. Their judgement is portentous, but well-founded, as well as their works are the first literary descriptions of the various areas of modern Canada. Parmenius described Newfoundland, the Jesuits reported on the regions of Eastern Canada and the area of the Great Lakes, Frances Brooke lived and gained experience around Quebec City and Montreal, and Mackenzie reached the West Coast that is called British Columbia today.

Parmenius was the member of Sir Humphrey Gilbert’s team of several shipful of crew whose task was set by Queen Elizabeth I to establish English colonies in the New World. In other words to export and extend British rule and power: economic, political, and social. Stephen Parmenius (?1541-1583), a Hungarian poet and the chronicler of Sir Humphrey Gilbert, had three days in the early August of 1583 to look around the part of Newfoundland that is called today the harbour of St. John, the Province’s capital.

There are inexhaustible supplies of fish […] The whole terrain is hilly and forested: the trees are for the most part pine. Some of these are growing old and others are just coming to maturity, but the majority have fallen with age, thus obstructing a good view of the land and the passage of travellers, so that no advance can be made anywhere. All the grass is tall, but scarcely any different from ours […] I found some blades and ears that resembled rye and they seem capable of being adapted easily to cultivation and sowing in the service of man. There are blackberries in the woods, or rather very sweet strawberries growing
on bushes. Bears sometimes appear round the shelters and are killed: but they are white… and smaller than ours. I am not clear whether there are any inhabitants in this area, nor have I met anyone who was in a position to say… Nor do we know any better whether there is any metal in the mountains; […] their appearance may indicate underlying minerals […] At this time of the year the weather is so hot that if the fish which are put to dry in the sun were not regularly turned over they could not be prevented from scorching. But the huge masses of ice out to sea have taught us how cold it is in winter. Some of our company have reported that in the month of May they were stuck for sixteen whole days on end in so much ice that some of the icebergs were sixty fathoms thick […] The atmosphere on land is moderately clear, but there is continuous fog over the sea towards the east. And on the sea itself around the Bank (which is what they call the place about forty miles off shore where the bottom can be reached and they start catching fish) there is scarcely a day without rain (The New, 171-73).

The authenticity of this first literary description of an area of modern Canada is easily recognizable against e.g. Michelin Green Guide of Canada even four hundred years after Parmenius’s letter on Newfoundland.

In Europe the competition for the new continent of North America continued between France and Britain. Thanks to the efforts of the Jesuits, seemingly the French had the upper hand. Established in 1534 by Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556) – the Spanish soldier and ecclesiastic, active in missionary and other work for which he was canonised in 1622 (Ignatius, 23279) – the Jesuits mapped the globe. Their skilful, experienced experts, carefully trained to travel and to adapt themselves to whatever circumstances they would encounter, were sent to observe and to put to paper their observations and convert any human being they would meet to the uniform religion of their version of Christianity. The Jesuits “hold a special place in the history of exploration and description of non-European lands and peoples” (Harris, 212). After mapping India, Vietnam, China, the Himalayas in Asia, Peru, Mexico in South and Central America respectively, Ethiopia and the region of the Upper Nile in Africa, Austria, Hungary, Silesia in Eastern Europe and last but not least the region of the Mississippi in America, the Jesuits turned their attention also to Canada.

Why did the Jesuits travel and explore the then known world? Because the Society of Jesus, i.e. the Jesuits, wanted to learn about the world, increase
their knowledge of sciences and share this knowledge with all members of their Society (Harris, 212). The Society of Jesus wanted its members, the priests, to be committed to an obedience bound to mobility, obedience without direct supervision. Trust and reliability went hand in hand with the usage of one’s own best judgment to accomplish corporate goals. To keep in permanent contact, an elaborate network of correspondence was operating between the centre in Rome and the regional urban centres in Europe as well as the travelling missionaries outside Europe. The incoming reports were published at regular intervals and the written works constituted nearly eight hundred titles in geography and natural history (Harris, 4, 213).

The Jesuits operated colleges and schools and distributed the knowledge they gained about the world among their disciples. By the middle of the 17th century eastern Canada as a trading and colonial territory of France also became a regional centre of knowledge for the Jesuits. Thus New France became part of a “remarkably stable administrative structure” (Harris, 4; 219) of the Jesuit order: the Jesuit missionaries explored Eastern Canada and the area of the Great Lakes, learnt the languages of the indigenous people – whom they labelled as ‘savages’ according to the custom of the day – converted them to Christianity, listened to the confessions of the French settlers, built the first houses for the Jesuit Society, later founded schools, colleges, seminaries, sent a Father to Rome to represent the missionaries’ interest, traded fur (beaver and bear skin) with the Indians for European commodities, suggested that European craftsmen go to Canada and join the Fathers in the newly founded Jesuit institutions to make these entirely self-reliant and be in control of the colonies’ peace. Besides the regular household chores of cooking, cleaning etc., the Fathers were doing gardening (growing vegetables, corn, fruits etc.) making shoes, brewing beer; the Fathers were also setting up schools for Indian children with the hope of settling down the “savages” in order to be in full control of the whole population of the French colony. If the Jesuits could prove white man’s superiority to the “savages”, the latter turned out to be docile to the priests. The knowledge of writing and reading turned out to be the mysterious quality the indigenous people held in special awe. Here are a few lines to illustrate how carefully Jesuit priests reported on their activity for Algonquin children:

This is the plan we followed all the winter: Father Dequen went every morning to the hospital, in the Algonquin quarter, to say Mass: men, women, and children all were there. The Chapel and the ward of the
sick were often filled. Before Mass, the Father pronounced aloud in their language the prayers, which each one also repeated aloud. After noon, I assumed charge of teaching the catechism to the Algonquin children. They assembled in the ward of the sick, with as much diligence and fervor as those of our France. If their stability were equally firm, they would yield to them in nothing. The reward for catechism was a knife, or a piece of bread, at other times a chaplet, – sometimes a cap, or an axe, for the tallest and most intelligent; it is an excellent opportunity for relieving the misery of these poor peoples. The parents were charmed with the fervor of their children, who went through the cabins to show their prizes. The Hospital Nuns often intoned, at prayers and at catechism, some hymns in Algonquin speech. The Savages take much pleasure in singing, and succeed in it very well, too (The Jesuit, 128).

The Jesuits proved indispensable in the society of New France. By the 18th century, the Governor, the Intendant and last but not least the Bishop shared financial and spiritual power in the French owned country of the New World.

In 1759 the British Army under General James Wolfe (1727-1759) on the Plains of Abraham near the city of Quebec came to grips with the French Army of Marquis de Montcalm (1712-1759), the commander in chief in New France. In the battle both commanders were killed and the victory of the British came to light. General Wolfe’s name became linked forever in history with the predominance of the English-speaking peoples in North America, because the capture of Quebec decided the war between the French and the British for good (Navis et al., 56). In the ensuing “treaty of peace in 1763 England took all of Canada from France, and Florida from Spain, which had entered the war against the British Empire. North America from the Atlantic to the Mississippi, with New Orleans excepted, became British” (Navis et al., 56). On the other hand, for certain colonies on the North American continent the 1760’s were times of fervent preparation for separation from Great Britain, and during this time the border-lines between the different British Colonies were far from set. Frances Brooke’s (1723-89) The History of Emily Montague was published in London in 1769. It is the first novel born out of the North American Continent: it relates in the form of 228 letters not only the story of the three amorous couples to be ultimately married in England, but it is at the same time a collection of essays on contemporary North America when neither the United States nor Canada existed as separate countries.
Frances Brooke had first-hand information about the life in the British colonies since she stayed there with her husband, Dr. John Brooke, the Chaplain of the garrison near Quebec and deputy to the Auditor General. The Brookes spent five years in the area, from 1763 to 1768, with presumably a short break in 1764 on a visit to England. Mrs. Frances Brooke knew personally the high-ranking officers in General Wolfe’s army and also several administrators who organised British rule (Klinck, vi).

As a colonizer Frances Brooke recorded everything that she saw. So she experienced herself that the umbilical cord between Europe and America were the ships over the Atlantic Ocean. The joy the first spring ship means for colonial people is shown in the next passage:

A ship from England! You can have no idea of the universal transport at the sight: the whole town was on the beach, eagerly gazing at the charming stranger, who danced gaily on the waves, as if conscious of the pleasure she inspired. If our joy so great, who preserve a correspondence with Europe through our other colonies during the winter, what must that of the French have been, who were absolutely shut up six months from the rest of the world? I can scarce conceive a higher delight than they must have felt at being thus restored to a communication with mankind (Brooke, 200).

The British victory over the French in 1759 did not result in immediate hostility between the victors and the defeated. Indeed many individual friendships were first formed between officers and also a great deal of intermarriage began to take place (Lower, 106-107). In the long run

[…] it was not, however, merely a matter of individuals meeting, but of two societies totally different from each other and neither uniform within itself. Both had their ranks and classes. French society was uniform in religion and in outlook, but from the top of its gentry to the bottom of its peasantry, the distance was great. English society was hardly uniform in a single particular, for not only was there the traditional gulf between the aristocrat and his inferiors, but there was also a wide, vocal and powerful layer inserted between the gentleman and the lower orders. This middle class was powerful and constantly challenged the ruling class. […] In this small society of ranks and classes, the clergy stood at the top of the scale. They were the guardians of the religious, moral, and cultural springs of the race (Lower, 13, 95, 102).
All the correspondents in Brooke’s novel come from the gentleman layer of society. Several of them had had financial difficulties. Ed Rivers, the suitor and later husband to Emily Montague, arrived in the colonies for financial reasons: “I cannot live in England on my present income, though it enables me to live en prince in Canada.” – he says (Lower, 12, 77). Colonel Ed Rivers is happy to return to England in the end. The very fact that the main characters and correspondents eventually settle down in England makes their observations of Canada fairly objective, impersonal and detached as if those of tourists as a remark of Ed Rivers shows: “America is in infancy, Europe in old age” (Lower, 12, 32). He views the Huron Indians with a philosophical eye and from a European cultural background. Indians always captured the European imagination on the American continent and have always been widely written about. What is remarkable about the passages on the Indians in Brooke’s book is the objectivity regarding the social structure of the Huron Indians, and the irony that the European civilization had taught the natives of America nothing but excessive drinking. The letters by Captain W. Fermor, another correspondent, are expository essays conveying the views of a conservative English nobleman about colonial life and the prospects of British civilization. He confirms many observations of Ed Rivers on the indolence of the French, the Indians, the “general spirit of amusement” especially in winter, and some aspects of religion.

Captain Fermor gives a fairly good account of the seigneurial system established in New France – based on the European model, the feudal system – valid along the St. Lawrence River:

[…] their whole system of policy seems to have been military, not commercial […] The lands are held in military tenure; every peasant is a soldier, every seigneur an officer, and both serve without pay whenever called upon; this service is, except a very small quitrent by way of acknowledgement, all they pay for their lands: the seigneur holds of the crown, the peasant of the seigneur, who is at once his lord and commander (Lower, 12, 117).

The seigneurial system remained virtually untouched by the British conquest of 1759 until the 20th century’s industrial progress, which partly swept it away, partly transformed it into an up-to-date agricultural system.

The town of Quebec is described through British eyes: “[...] it is like a third or fourth rate country town in England; much hospitality, little society;
cards, scandal, dancing and good cheer, all excellent things to pass away a winter evening, and peculiarly adapted to… the severity of this climate” (Lower, 12, 86). Garrison-life is described in detail with plenty of passages on winter amusements: balls, social gatherings, visits paid by friends at all hours of the day, and by recurring comparisons between the French and British social customs, and national characteristics. First a man’s point of view: “[…] coquetry is dangerous to English-women, because they have sensibility, it is more suited to the French, who are naturally something of a salamander kind” (Lower, 12, 106). And a woman’s point of view on man’s behaviour: “As to real gallantry, the French style depraves the minds of men least, ours is most favourable to the peace of families” (Lower, 12, 295). A comparison between the French and British ways of colonization is offered:

I am surprized [at] the French, who generally make their religion subservient to the purposes of policy, do not discourage convents, and lessen the number of festivals, in the colonies, where both are so peculiarly pernicious. It is to this circumstance one may in great measure attribute the superior increase of the British American settlements compared to those of France: a religion which encourages idleness, and makes a virtue of celibacy, is particularly unfavourable to colonization (Lower, 12, 167).

– is the British standpoint. And the British idea on religion is developing into an elaborate project on religious tolerance in the colonies:

[…] it seems consonant to reason, that the religion on every country should have a relation to, and coherence with, the civil constitution: the Romish religion is best adapted to a despotic government, the presbyterian to a republican, and that of the church of England to a limited monarchy like ours. As therefore the civil government of America is on the same plan with that of the mother country, it were to be wished the religious establishment was also the same, especially in those colonies where the people are generally of the national church; though with the fullest liberty of conscience to dissenters of all denominations (Lower, 12, 168).

As a final touch on colonization language, as the cornerstone, is foreseen by Captain Fermor: “it were, indeed, to be wished that we had here schools, at the expense of the public to teach English to the rising generation: nothing
is a stronger tie of brotherhood and affection, a greater account of union, than speaking one common language” (Lower, 12, 197). Common language for all is already in the late 18th century a vitally important consideration that will be a cornerstone for the globalization to come two centuries later.

The British had come to the colonies to maintain British rule and/or to make a temporary living. Once there they are interested in the world around them, want to learn as much about it as possible and inform their fellow Englanders about everything. The colonizers’ fate is closely linked with England, and since their financial matters improve after serving in the colonies for several years, some of the British colonizers happily return to the mother country. Were their position unchanged economically they would also readily accommodate themselves to a colonial life for good. This flexibility so characteristic of British people had been a not negligible factor that paved the way to the British Empire that led to globalization later. The British felt no hostility for the French, yet the distinction, if not superiority, was vividly expressed. The same sentiments were revealed towards the Indians. British institutions, British education, and British ways of living and thinking are preponderant in all the letters. The norm had been set: the 19th century and part of the 20th century saw to the fact that Canada had become an extension of Great Britain. British expansion paved the way towards larger scale uniformity, the ultimate globalization.

After garrisons had been set up in Eastern Canada and so Britain’s position was carefully secured, more travellers arrived to push West- and Northward in the new land. The English explorers fulfilled a double role: they belonged to England’s colonial history on the one hand, and on the other hand “belonged to the emerging consciousness of the new English Canadian culture” (The Oxford, 242). The English Canadian fur-traders carefully kept diaries and journals, as well as writing letters, scientific reports, autobiographies and treatises which were vivid illustrations of Europe’s 18th century rational philosophical thinking and at the same time constituted an early body of “quest” literature:

there is a definite displacement of the mythic values of the quest into a scientific and mercantile ethos that insists on the primary value of the strictly factual account. There is a firm rejection of everything ‘poetic’; all subjective, metaphorical, and visionary perspectives are treated with embarrassment or brisk scepticism; and familiar literary devices such as structural patterning, irony, and verbal play are almost entirely
absent… The chronicle form, and the factual language and open ended vision of these early writers contributed to what Northrop Frye calls the “documentary tradition in English Canadian literature” (*The Oxford*, 25, 243).

The explorer in most cases is usually a man of one book and that one book is perceived by the contemporaries as a sort of heroic testimony to physical endurance, sense of adventure and discovery, and the insight into the character of the author. These first travelogues, not reminiscences but diaries, “are written in the first person singular, derive their interest from the novelty of their material” (Hopwood, 26).

Matthew Cocking, Samuel Hearney, Dr. Walter Henry, Simon Fraser, and Andrew Graham are perhaps the most noted explorers who all preceded Sir Alexander Mackenzie (1764-1820). The Scottish traveller and entrepreneur, knighted for his heroic missions in Canada surpassed all previous travellers by being the first white man to cross the whole of North America as he got beyond the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Coast. To commemorate his deed Mackenzie himself painted on a rock near Bella Coola: “Alexander Mackenzie, from Canada by land the 22 of July 1793” (Hopwood, 27, 30).

Sir Alexander Mackenzie was the first coast to coast traveller in Canada. His two expeditions’ daily chronicles in 1789 and 1793 respectively served as an invaluable history of the fur trade; as an “empirical basis for the first cohesive image of Canada that exists today” (Hopwood, 27, 246); and as one of the favourite readings of Napoleon – while dreaming of conquering Louisiana – who never parted with the three-volume book and kept it by his side even on the island of St. Helena (Hopwood, 27, 29).

To illustrate the pragmatic dictated factual style of Mackenzie here is a short entry dated Tuesday June 23, 1789:

Towards Morning our Indians joined us they paddled all night, they killed 2 Swans & a goose, we continued our Route this Morning at half past three, steering W.b N. 1 ½ miles. The wind North. Came to the foot of a Traverse across a deep Bay [today Yellowknife Bay] W. 5 miles. There is a considerable large River falls in at the Bottom of it about 12 miles distant. We found the N.W. S[ide] of this Bay formed by a No. Of small Islands which were quite full of Ice, but the wind drive it off the land a little that we had a clear passage on the inside of
it, we steer S.W. 9 miles, under sail then N.W. nearly, thro’ Islands we often Carried Sail, the wind having veered a little to the Eastward, this course 16 miles. Here we landed at half past 2 P.M (Exploring, 36).

This passage convincingly shows that Alexander Mackenzie has a mercantile perception as he measures and counts and above all tells the truth about a region that the explorer had been to see and record single-handed, out of ambition and Scottish drive. Mackenzie certainly contributed with his “organized accounts of the whole of British North America seen as a geographical and economic entity” as “an empirical basis for the first cohesive image of the Canada that exists today” (Exploring, 25, 246).

When one looks back several centuries one is in awe of the early travellers from Europe who were mapping vast regions in the wilderness of Canada all distant from their respective homelands. These early voyagers’ mobility paved the way for future settlers. The explorers in their writings measured the plants, the fauna, the human beings and their established societies against those in Europe, and so they exported first European objects, values, customs to Canada and what they found there voluntarily and/or unvoluntarily built into their lives once back in their respective mother countries in Europe. Exporting and importing things, ideas paved the way towards uniformity all over the globe that is labelled globalization today (Toth, 69).

Works Cited


