A LIBERAL AND LITERARY GOTHIC
Arthur Buies’s Visions of Quebec

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FIG. 1. "THE NEW CHÂTEAU ST. LOUIS." ENGRAVING AFTER A SKETCH BY WILLIAM H. LYNN, LE MOINE, JAMES MACPHERSON, 1876, QUEBEC PAST AND PRESENT: A HISTORY OF QUEBEC, 1608-1876: IN TWO PARTS, QUEBEC, AUGUSTIN CÔTÉ ET CO. | BIBLIOTHÈQUE ET ARCHIVES NATIONALES DU QUÉBEC.

A PROBLEM OF RECEPTION

Drawn up in the middle of the 1870s, and only partly realized in ensuing years, the so-called Dufferin embellishments have often been described as a visionary plan to rescue Quebec City’s threatened fortifications, and thus as the first conservation project on Canadian soil.¹ More recently, however, this standard interpretation has come into question. Pointing out the discrepancies between the city’s actual historical fabric and the building program set out by then Governor General of Canada Frederick Temple Blackwood, 1st Marquess of Dufferin and Ava, and his Irish architect William H. Lynn, historian Georges Drolet has argued that the project’s true aim was to create an emblem for the new Canadian nation—an emblem that reconciled Quebec City’s conflict-ridden history with British imperial values.² In this view, the project’s connection to the past was mythical rather than material in nature.

Dufferin’s plan for Quebec envisioned a number of interventions along the city’s fortified perimeter, including the reconstruction of city gates whose demolition had either been authorized or already begun,³ the creation of new links between the walled town and its suburbs, and the transformation of obsolete military grounds into public parks. But the project as a whole, Drolet asserts, relied in fact on two primary devices.⁴ The first of these was a planned summer residence for the governor general. Set atop the ruins of Fort Saint Louis, within an iconic perspective on the city from the harbour, the building was intended to naturalize British
rule in the landscape (fig. 1). The other was a promenade crowning the town’s fortifications that projected the viewer into an idealized and static tableau of the past—one that celebrated the battle of 1759 and the death of generals Wolfe and Montcalm as symbols of a shared destiny for Canada’s British and French populations.5

That the Dufferin embellishments were indeed conceived as instruments of British imperialism is borne out by a number of period witnesses. In a speech before the local Société Saint-Jean-Baptiste, Lord Dufferin himself claimed that, whenever he walked the ramparts of Quebec, he found himself participating vicariously in the deeds of all his illustrious predecessors, both French and British:

lorsque je parcours la plate-forme garnie de canons de votre citadelle, ou que je fais le tour de vos remparts, ... je me crois instinctivement être aussi bien le successeur direct de ces braves et chevaleresques vice-rois qui ont présidé à l’origine de votre colonie, que je suis le successeur de Lord Ligon; Lord Monk ou Lord Elgin.6

A few months after Lord Dufferin made public his proposals for Quebec, local antiquarian James MacPherson Le Moine likewise portrayed the city’s fortifications as an idealized symbol of joint British and Canadian resistance against the American invasion of 1775: “all Canada had hoisted the white flag of surrender. No, not all: the area enclosed within our city had not. One flag still streamed defiantly to the breeze: the banner of St. George on the citadel of Quebec…”7

But was the celebration of Empire really the only possible reading that a late nineteenth-century spectator could make of Quebec’s fortified site? By lowering the ramparts over the city’s harbour and opening the view onto the surrounding landscape, the Dufferin embellishments participated in a much wider transformation of how the city was perceived by its inhabitants. During the first half of the nineteenth century, as historian Marc Grignon has demonstrated, the graphic conventions of topographical surveys and picturesque drawing effected a dramatic reversal in modes of perception: the fixed and hierarchical vantage point characteristic of the French regime gave way to infinitely more mobile and territorially dispersed subjective views.8

More importantly, the Dufferin embellishment also opened the spectator’s gaze onto a widened vista of imagined times. Cobbled together from disparate late-medieval and Renaissance sources, both Scottish and French, Lynn’s anachronistic and fragmentary urban décor incited the viewer to observe the city at a remove, as if he had suddenly been relocated to a distant point in time, or thrust into the body of a historical character (figs. 2-4). Thus, I would contend that the embellishments were received less as a succession of tableaux than as a fictional overlay on the town’s physical fabric: to walk along the ramparts of Quebec became an experience that was as much imaginative in nature as it was visual or spatial.

Ultimately, the sense of visual fragmentation and temporal dislocation that the Dufferin embellishments induced in the nineteenth-century spectator made it
Impossible for any single historical narrative to prevail. Lynn’s Scottish-Baronial gates and turrets identified Quebec City as a site of antiquity, and the promenade along its ramparts as the primary mode of “seeing” and “reliving” its history. However, the nature of this subjective experience, as well as its import for the present, were to remain the object of conflicting interpretations throughout the closing decades of the nineteenth century.

**WHY BUIES?**

To illustrate my point, I propose to examine the role that the view over the “ancient city” of Quebec played in the essays of journalist and essayist Arthur Buies (1840-1901) (fig. 5). Over a period of thirty years (from 1864 to 1893), Buies repeatedly used Quebec City’s fortifications as a fictional site, placing himself as narrator of a dismal present against the backdrop of Dufferin (now Dufferin) Terrace (fig. 6). Where Lord Dufferin sought to appropriate the city for the Empire, Buies envisioned instead its remaking as a collective act of liberation—a symbolic dismantling of the nation’s intellectual and political binds. I will focus in particular on three aspects of Buies’s writings: why he employs the device of the fictional promenade; how he situates the city in historical time; and how his narratives of the city relate to a larger project for the nation.

Arthur Buies is of interest in this context because he represented, throughout the last decades of the nineteenth century, a figure of intellectual and political dissent. According to historian Francis Parmentier, Buies acted as the ideological conscience of Canada’s Liberal Party during the last decades of the nineteenth century, and as the principal spokesman in Quebec of a philosophical rather than political conception of liberalism. Buies’s peculiar brand of liberalism was characterized by his boundless faith in the capacity of the individual to shape his destiny according to rational criteria, by his refusal to submit to any authority other than his own conscience, and by his equation of material and moral progress. His understanding of history was teleological, envisioning its ultimate horizon as a sort of ideal city, to be built by humanity for humanity.

Moreover, Buies’s opinions—on the relation between Church and state, on the political destiny of French Canada, and on the nature of liberalism—placed him in opposition to the major forces of his age: the Catholic Church, the elites grouped around the Conservative Party, and the moderate wing of the Liberal Party under Wilfrid Laurier. Thus, Buies understood his role as journalist as an isolated and prophetic voice, preaching the revolutionary values of the rebellion of 1837-1838 in the wilderness of Catholic Quebec.
This unusual identity as an intellectual rebel and provocateur was deliberately fashioned. Born to William Buies, a Scots banker and trader, and Léocadie d’Estimauville, a young French Canadian whose family held the Seigneurie of Rimouski, Buies renounced early on his native Catholicism and native Britishness. Instead, he decided to become something of an “impossibility” in nineteenth-century Quebec: a non-confessional, freethinking French Canadian, and an imaginary citizen of republican France.

Buies’s intellectual filiation to France remained quite exceptional throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. From 1855 onward, the visit of the warship La Capricieuse (the first French military vessel to sail the Saint Lawrence river since 1760) initiated a form of mutual rediscovery between France and its former colony. However, from the vantage point of French Canada, this relationship was often tinged with mistrust—not only because of France’s abandonment of its American possession, but also for the political instability and anticlericalism of its latter-day government. Most French-Canadian intellectuals expressed their sense of distance toward France either by claiming a double allegiance—to France for the gift of life, but also to Britain for the gift of liberty—or by identifying with the Catholic and monarchical France of the Ancien Régime rather than the chaotic offspring of the French Revolution. Buies, as we shall see, did precisely the opposite in his writings on Quebec.

**LETRES SUR LE CANADA**

Withdrawn by his father from the Quebec Seminary and sent to study at Trinity College, Dublin, Buies fled instead to Paris in 1857 and enrolled three years later in the Expedition of the Thousand—a military campaign led by General Giuseppe Garibaldi across the south of Italy, which aimed to wrest Rome away from the pope. Upon returning to Canada in 1862, he then joined the radical Institut canadien in Montreal, participating in its political campaigns as a lecturer and pamphleteer. Thus, Buies’s first essay on Quebec—*Lettres sur le Canada*—begun in 1864 and later expanded in 1869—must be read against a backdrop of heightened tensions between the Catholic Church and the Liberal Party in Quebec.
Between 1858 and 1862, both groups adopted increasingly polarized positions—the clergy asserting its supremacy over the authority of the state, and a radicalized Liberal Party arguing for their complete separation in all civil matters. The conflict crystallized around the Montreal branch of the Institut canadien, with the Archbishop of Montreal demanding to censor its library, accusing its press vehicle *Le Pays* of anti-Catholicism, and finally excluding its members from the sacraments of the Church. For the Institut and its members, the result was marginalization: one could not, it seemed at the time, be both Catholic and liberal.

In the first pages of *Lettres sur le Canada*, Buies conveyed his feelings of estrangement and rage against his own country by adopting the persona of “Langevin,” a social economist who has traveled from France to study the mores and intimate thoughts of French Canadians. Tellingly, Langevin’s encounters with the local population play out either in private homes or on Durham Terrace—the city’s single pocket of public space and thus its only contact with the outside world.

For Buies’s fictional traveler, the historical impulse of the nineteenth century is defined by the political emancipation of nationalities and the intellectual emancipation of individuals. Against this background, Quebec appears to him to be a historical oddity: set in a virginal Eden, and gifted with civic liberties, it nonetheless remains a despotic society, ruled by a shadowy inquisition—that of the Catholic Church. Insofar, the city stands outside of historical progress: it is a fragment of France’s Ancien Régime, or even of the Middle Ages, transplanted to North America. Because of their common inheritance, Langevin muses, the French and French Canadians ought by rights to be close, but over the past century, he finds instead that the two peoples have moved in opposite directions. Quebec has become an Old World in the new, in contrast to a Europe made young by revolution:

> Il y a des pays où l’ordre règne par la tyrannie des baïonnettes ; il y en a d’autres où la paix s’étale comme un vaste linceul sur les intelligences. Ici, point de révolte de la conscience ... point de tentative d’émancipation ... hélas ! il n’y a plus de jeunesse au Canada.  

For Buies, the crucial event in this narrative (the moment of original sin, as it were) was the aftermath of the rebellions of 1837 and 1838: by this he meant not only the forced Union with Upper Canada, but more especially what he saw as the treason of the clergy. In exchange for the guarantee of religious rights, Buies argued, the Church had entered into a political alliance with the British occupier, henceforth promoting to French Canadians a perverted definition of nationality, centred on the conservation of traditions rather than the acquisition of civic and political liberties:

> Les prêtres ne demandaient qu’une chose, la religion catholique, et ils abandonnaient tout le reste. Dès lors il se joignirent à nos conquérants et poursuivirent de concert avec eux la même œuvre ... au nom de cette sujétion honteuse qu’ils recommandaient comme un devoir ; ils anathémisaient les patriotes de ’37, pendant que nos tyrans les immolaient sur les échafauds.  

In that moment Canada was lost: it was condemned to remain a colony because it was dominated by the clergy.

Two years after Confederation, in an unfinished appendix to the *Lettres*, Buies concluded on a note of despair that the only hope for Canada now lay in the past, in the radical and unimplemented Liberal program of 1856. Calling all at once for the separation of Church and state, the undoing of the Union between Upper and Lower Canada, full independence from Great Britain, the establishment of a Republican government and annexation to the United States, this had been the last manifesto of the Liberal Party to bear the imprint of Louis-Joseph Papineau.

**L’ANCIEN ET LE FUTUR QUÉBEC**

After the commercial failure of his radical weekly *La Lanterne canadienne*, which appeared in 1868 and 1869, Buies went into self-imposed exile in Quebec City, working from 1871 to 1877 as a chroniqueur or columnist for a number of liberal-minded newspapers, most of which were based in Montreal. It is in that context that Buies discussed the planned improvements to the city.

In appearance, Buies’s writings during his sojourn in Quebec City are less controversial than his earlier works, and more concerned with local issues and current events. But in reality, in the process of chronicling the city, Buies repeatedly expressed a sense of being in exile both in his own land and in his own age. This impression was no doubt sharpened by the evolution of the Quebec Liberal Party during the 1870s. Under the impulse of Hector Fabre and Wilfrid Laurier (fig. 7), the party’s moderate wing moved at the time from wholesale rejection of Confederation toward a position of compromise—claiming intellectual roots in a British tradition of reform rather than a French one of radical upheaval, and affirming its loyalty to the Crown and its deference on moral matters to the Catholic Church.  

In Buies’s eyes, such compromises were a betrayal of the republican, nationalist and freethinking ideals of the Rouges. Radical reform, he believed, was still as necessary.
as ever, and the idea of a nation in captivity, held back by ignorance, became embodied for him in the physical image of Quebec City’s ramparts and toll-gates (fig. 8). Encircled by stone, unable to move freely, the city was a symbol of all French Canada: “les portes abattues, restaient encore les remparts, et après les remparts, les glacis, et plus loin, à quelques pas seulement, les barrières. Partout des obstacles, des étreintes, des resserrements.”

Thus, the promenade along Quebec’s ramparts came to function for Buies as a polemical device: it allowed him to view his country and its people at a critical distance, either from the vantage point of its heroic past or from that of a future still to come.

In the principal essay he devoted to the Dufferin embellishments, L’ancien et le futur Québec (1876), Buies repeatedly shifted temporal settings, contrasting the city’s present state with other imagined times. Quebec, he began, was America’s only ancient city: to embrace the panorama from Durham Terrace was to embrace time itself, apprehending the process by which Canada was born. In Buies’s view, the city’s history had consisted so far of a long struggle for the possession of a continent, between “two civilizing nations” or “two heroic peoples” who could not coexist in peace. This history, however, remained incomplete. The New World had its own destiny, he argued, and was rightly the inheritance of young peoples:

Non, non, Dieu n’avait pas fait le nouveau monde, cette terre de l’af franchissement, terre traditionnelle du refuge contre tous les genres de persécution et d’oppression, pour le laisser envahir par les passions, par les rivalités et les folies cruelles qui désolaient l’ancien continent.

What then might Quebec City become? As Buies envisioned it, Lord Dufferin’s project for the city was not so much a practicable plan as a utopian representation of its possible future: a city that would one day be filled with new and magnificent monuments, released from the confines of its walls, irrigated by new roads, and opened onto a grandiose and largely untouched landscape. In this sense, it was really a continuation of a dream laid out by Pierre-François-Xavier de Charlevoix (New France’s first historian), who had imagined in Quebec a metropolis that would rival with and eventually outshine Paris:

L’Charlevoix s’écriait dans son enthousiasme : « De même que Paris a pendant longtemps été inférieur à ce que c’est aujourd’hui Québec, de même il viendra un temps où celle-ci sera l’éga le de Paris ... » Ce temps n’est pas encore venu, mais le rêve de Charlevoix n’est pas non plus évanoui; cent cinquante ans plus tard, de nos jours, un homme d’une nature d’élite, d’une imagination d’artiste, sensible au beau ... a conçu de nos jours un rêve peut-être aussi grand ... cet homme, Messieurs ... c’est my lord Dufferin, le gouverneur général.

It is nonetheless doubtful whether Lord Dufferin’s project truly coincided with Buies’s own hopes for Canada’s future. Instead, Buies remained ambivalent, simultaneously calling for the proposed embellishments to be implemented, and dismissing them as a historical figment. At issue for him was not the embellishments’ architectural style, but rather the institution that they represented (in particular the governor general’s chateau). Despite his personal qualities, Lord Dufferin...
embodied the continuation of an aristocratic regime and thus of French Canada’s political immaturity—first as a colony of Britain, second as a minority within Confederation:

*Est-ce à nous seuls, les Québécquois, qui sommes appelés à payer pour le maintien du système colonial ... ? Quoi! nous aurions seuls, nous qui ne sommes 70.000 dans une confédération qui compte quatre millions d’âmes, le magnifique privilège d’offrir; à nos frais et dépens, une éternelle hospitalité au gouverneur nommé par la Grande Bretagne ... *?²⁰

For Buies, then, the problem with Lord Dufferin’s project was that it altered the face of the city but left its social and political conditions intact.

**QUÉBEC EN 1900**

During the last decades of his life, Buies increasingly distanced himself from partisan politics, working instead for the colonization campaign led by Father Antoine Labelle and producing accounts of his travels across Quebec’s remote, newly-opened regions. This episode in Buies’s life has been interpreted in the past as a late conversion to Catholicism and agrarian values, but it constitutes in fact a quite natural extension of his belief in the necessity of French Canada’s emancipation through education, economic development, and territorial expansion.³¹

In this context, some twenty years after his essay on the Dufferin embellishments, Buies returned to the same site in a short work of anticipation entitled *Québec en 1900* (1893). Once again, he used the view from the terrace as a polemical device, contrasting the city to come with its sordid present and showing, fifty years after Union, how little had yet changed. In comparison to his earlier essays, however, Buies now confronted his readers with a series of unexpected metaphorical shifts. Firstly, if Quebec remained “medieval,” it was no longer because of clericalism, but because it had been bypassed by the century’s material progress: the city was underequipped and shunned by industry, and its capital lay dormant in unproductive investments.³²

Secondly, Buies claimed that, if one raised one’s eyes from the city below to the wilderness beyond, there was indeed—at last—something new to be seen from the terrace. The recent completion of a railroad from Quebec City to Lac Saint-Jean and the port of Chicoutimi had created a new kind of boulevard, 200 miles long, linking the city to its vast hinterland for the first time in its history (fig. 9). In Buies’s view, the building of the Lac Saint-Jean railroad was as much a moral as a commercial undertaking. Not only had it transformed the physical landscape (through the opening of new mills, new farmland, and new towns), it had also changed how French Canadians understood their land. Previously unknown territory was now familiar and the seemingly uninhabitable now settled.³³ In this sense, the city’s expansion into the back country was equivalent to a new discovery or a return to origins: by opening itself to the continent, Quebec might yet regain its lost youth.

The expanded field of vision in Buies’s last essay on Quebec City also reflected a shift in his political outlook. Ultimately, he argued here, the city’s destiny lay neither with France nor with Britain, but with the providential American landscape. Thanks to the vast river that flowed past it and the new railroads running north to Labrador and west to the Great Lakes and the Canadian Prairies, Quebec City, Buies felt sure, was destined to become one of the continent’s greatest warehouses and shipping ports (fig. 10).³⁴ Moreover, in the context of what he called the sharpening “conflict of races” between English and French Canada (referring no doubt to recent restrictions on minority rights in Manitoba and New Brunswick), such common undertakings, grounded in enlightened self-interest, now offered the only
avenue for cooperation and mutual tolerance between the two nations. 25

In her recent study of the remaking of Victorian London during the 1860s, cultural historian Lynda Nead argues that the consciousness of modern life that emerged at mid-century was neither complete nor coherent. In the concrete experience of the urban spectator, modernization unfolded in a fragmentary form. As excavations and demolitions multiplied in many of its streets, the nineteenth-century city seemed to be haunted by the material relics of its past. 26

Buies’s visions of Quebec City evince a similar tension between ruin and utopia. Looking back in the early 1890s on what Lord Dufferin had left behind, he found the governor’s improvements both inadequate and incomplete. Even the new gates were too narrow, he claimed, and must soon be swept away in a frenzied quest for air, open space, and freedom of movement. What Buies envisioned instead for Quebec City in the coming century was a kind of architectural grotesque—the town’s breached ramparts to be left standing as an archipelago of broken antiquities, spanned and supplanted by an elevated web of iron bridges, railways, and tramways. 27 What this final vision from the terrace embodied was not a sense of continuity with history, but rather its difficult overcoming, and the building of a new society on the ruins of the old.

Notes


3. The wholesale dismantling of Quebec’s gates was allowed by the British government in 1871 and confirmed by Canada’s Department of the Militia the following year. Municipal authorities awarded contracts for the demolition of St. Louis and Prescott gates in the summer of 1871, and for that of Hope and Palace gates in early 1873. By the time Lord Dufferin intervened, only the fate of St. John’s gate (already rebuilt in 1866-1867) was still undecided.


5. Id.: 23.


7. Le Moine, James MacPherson, 1876, Quebec Past and Present: A History of Quebec 1608-1876 in Two Parts, Quebec, Augustin Côté et Co., p. 194.


10. Id.: 85-86.

11. Arthur Buies soon altered the spelling of his Scottish family name, apparently in an effort to make it seem French.


15. Lamonde, Yvan, 1990, Gens de parole : Conférences publiques, essais et débats à l’Institut canadien de Montréal, 1845-1871, Montreal, Boréal, p. 63-64, 73-74; Parmentier, “Formes, contenu et évolution...,” op. cit.: 79-80.


18. Id.: 28-29.


20. Id.: 59, 64.


22. Id.: 98-102.


27. Buies, Arthur, 1876, L’ancien et le futur Québec. Projet de son excellence Lord Dufferin. Conférence faite à la Salle Victoria le 19 janvier 1876, Quebec, C. Darveau, p. 3-4.

28. Id.: 5.

29. Id.: 8-9.


31. On Buies’s conception of French Canada’s “manifest destiny” on the American continent, see Lamonde, Histoire sociale des idées au Québec, op. cit.: 394-396; and Parmentier, “Formes, contenu et évolution...,” op. cit.: 95.


33. Id.: 11-12.

34. Id.: 13-17.

35. Id.: 5.


37. Buies, Québec en 1900..., op. cit.: 51-52.