

Fig. 1. «Château Frontenac, Québec City, ca 1895».
(Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum of Canadian History, View-2786)

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Anne-Marie Broudehoux

The Château Frontenac in Québec City: The Social History of an Icon¹

“What would the city of Quebec be without the Château Frontenac?” asks a recent newspaper article.² “Without it,” another one replies, “Quebec would not be Quebec. Without Quebec, the Château would not be the Château.”³

Over the hundred years of its existence, the Château Frontenac has gained widespread recognition as the global symbol of the

city of Quebec, a visual signature, which is unblushingly likened to notorious iconic landmarks, including Paris’ Eiffel Tower, Rome’s Colosseum, Washington’s Capitol, New York’s Statue of Liberty, London’s Tower, Rio’s Christus Redemptor, and even Brussels’ Mennenkenpis (fig. 1). Yet, as many have contended, the Château Frontenac is not really a château, not even a public monument, but simply a hotel.⁴

Today, the image of the “Château”—as it is commonly referred to—has become the trademark of Québec City, used as architectural shorthand for the French-Canadian capital. Guidebooks to Canada, literature on the city, tourist paraphernalia, all widely reproduce images of the hotel (fig. 2, 3). The use of that icon is not restricted to tourism consumption, but it also serves the local population for its own purposes. The new logo for *Le Soleil*—the city’s main newspaper—, which now appears daily on its front page, is an image of the Château. The illustration for the entry “Québec” in the *Larousse Illustrated Dictionary* is a photograph of the hotel. Even gatherings taking place in other hotels in the city, which have no connection whatsoever with the Château, use its image to publicize their event. Rarely has a private commercial institution received so much free publicity.

This paper traces the social history of the Château Frontenac and outlines the complex, and often contradictory relationship, that existed between the hotel and the city it came to represent. The central role played by the Château Frontenac in shaping the image of Quebec City, as we know it today, demonstrates how culture, identity, and tradition are selectively created by the interplay of political, commercial, and individual forces over time.⁵



Fig. 2. «Quebec and the Château Frontenac.»
Poster published by the Canadian Pacific Co., ca 1910.
(Canadian Pacific Archives, Montréal.)

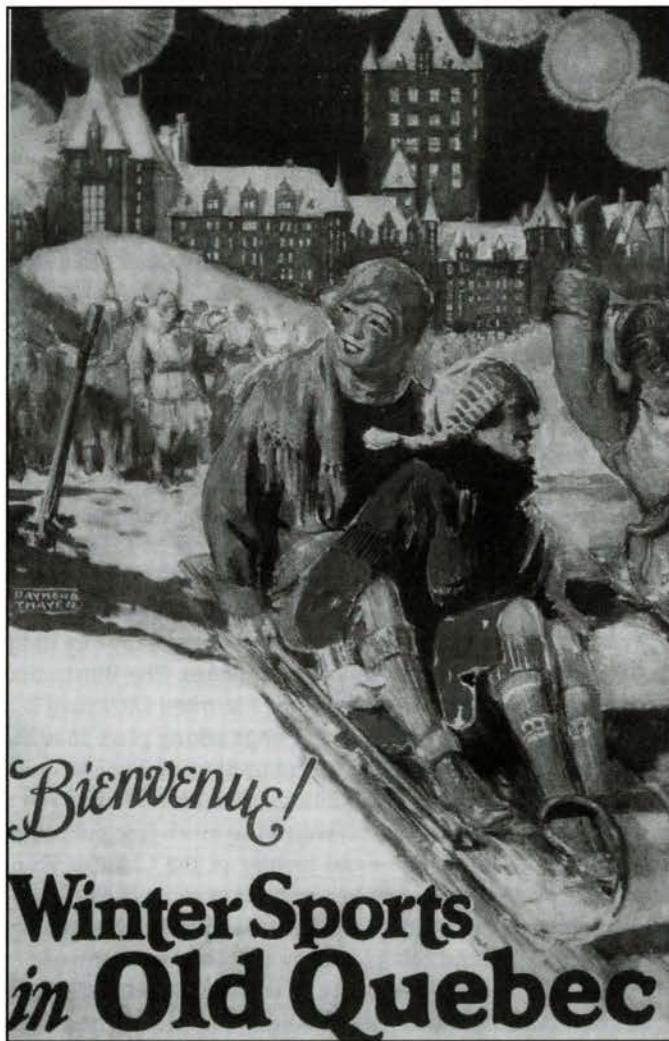
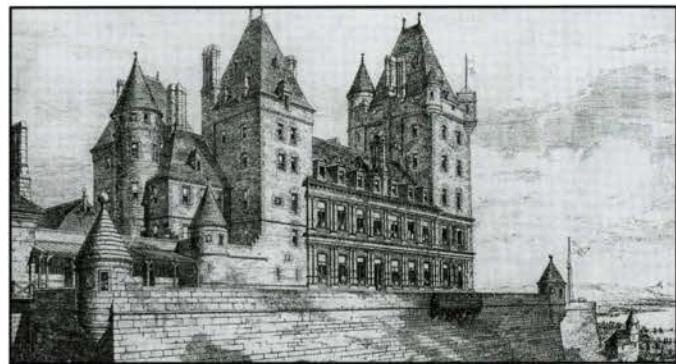


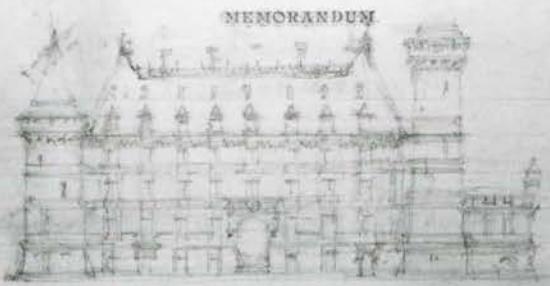
Fig. 3. «Winter Sports in Old Quebec.»
Poster published by the Canadian Pacific Co., ca 1950.
(Canadian Pacific Archives, Montréal.)

Fig. 4. «New Château St. Louis, Quebec City.» Proposed by W.H. Lynn, architect.
Part of Lord Dufferin's *Quebec City Improvements*.
(*The Building News*, 28 October 1878)

Fig. 5. First rendering of proposed Fortress Hotel, Eugène-Étienne Taché, architect, 1890.
(Archives nationales du Québec à Québec, Fonds Eugène-Étienne Taché)



The Department of Crown Lands, P. Q.



History: The Origins of the Château

The Château has, since the beginning, been the product of a romantic vision closely linked to imperialist expansion and tourism development. In the 1870s, the British governor general of Canada took upon himself to stop the modernization of the old seventeenth-century capital and to restore its picturesque character through beautification efforts typical of the Victorian era. To give the city a nobler image, Lord Dufferin undertook the erection of monumental public buildings inspired by European Medieval Revivals.⁶ That antiquated urban image coincided with the conception of French Canada by the British as an "old and backward society in a new and progressive world."⁷ Dufferin also assumed the restoration of the old city walls, which had been partly demolished, as well as the rebuilding of the city gates in a Medieval fashion. Part of Dufferin's scheme, which never materialized, was to rebuild the Château Saint-Louis,

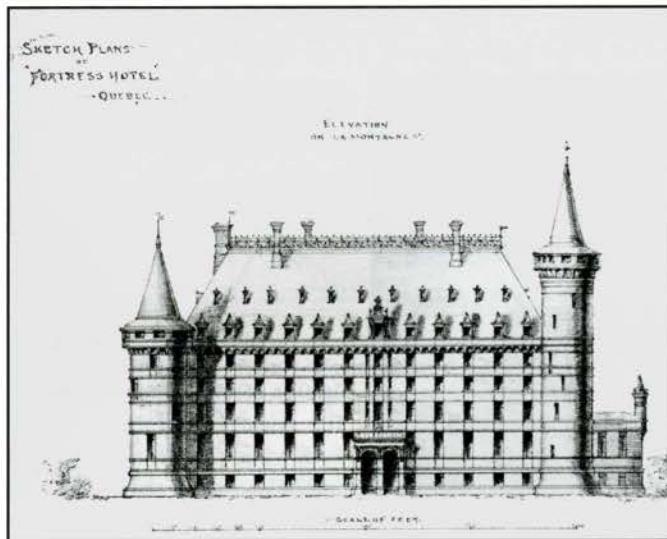
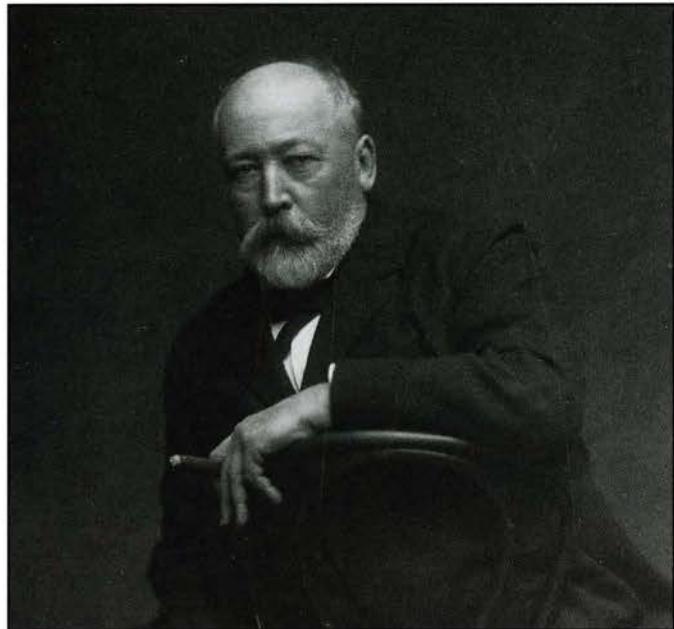


Fig. 6. «Sketch Plans of Fortress Hotel. Elevation on La Montagne Street.» Eugène-Étienne Taché, architect, 1890. (Archives nationales du Québec à Québec, Fonds Eugène-Étienne Taché)

Fig. 7. «Sir William Van Horne, Montreal, QC, 1916.» (Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum of Canadian History, II-212767)



residence of the French governors of the colony, which had stood atop the cliff from 1620 to 1834 (fig. 4).

After Dufferin's departure in 1878, the City Council and the local Board of Trade revived the idea of the castle on the cliff by promoting the construction of a luxury hotel to attract affluent travelers to the capital and develop tourism.⁸ A group of local businessmen incorporated as the Fortress Hotel Company soon showed interest for the project and started raising development capital for the construction of such hotel. By the 1890s, they had published diverse sketches of the future hotel inspired by Medieval Loire Valley Châteaux, but had failed to raise sufficient funds to carry out the project (fig. 5, 6). A group of Anglo-Saxon businessmen from Toronto and Montréal—whose close relationship with the Canadian Pacific Railway Company was said to be coincidental—took over the project and soon announced the imminent construction of a new hotel to be called Château Frontenac. Ground was broken in May 1892, and the hotel was expected to be completed in time to accommodate European travelers en route to the 1893 World Fair in Chicago.⁹

At the head of the hotel's shareholders was Cornelius William Van Horne, general manager of the Canadian Pacific Railway Company (fig. 7). At the time, the CPR had just completed the Transcanadian railway line and expanded its trade to transcontinental steamships. Two years after completion of the hotel, the private railway company acquired most of the stock of the hotel. Van Horne saw it as his mission to promote the expansion of the British Empire by making the CPR part of an all-British route to the Orient. He also had ambitious views about the future of Canada and dreamt of taking the country "out of the backwaters and onto the highway"¹⁰ through the development of tourism. Van Horne developed the concept of the Canadian railway hotel system that, by locating hotel facilities in strategically selected urban settlements along the line, was to ensure a nourishing flow of passengers and goods to the railway artery across the country, while providing accommodation services with certain standard to discriminating travelers.

The choice of Québec City for the construction of a major hotel was judicious. As a major North American seaport at the heart of the Eastern Canada railway network, Quebec City had the locational advantage of the land-sea transport interfaces.

The city was to act as a continental gateway for passengers from Europe traveling further inland. The existence of a substantial regional travel market centred around numerous resort areas on the Gulf of Saint Lawrence, serviced by steamships from Québec, positioned the Château at the fulcrum of the Eastern Canadian tourist system, which had lacked a major first class service facility.¹¹

Van Horne had ambitious ideas about exploiting the historical past of the city and its picturesque settings in the design of the hotel. Yet, just like Dufferin, his conceptualization of the city was predetermined by romantic associations and his local references were often more imagined than real. Van Horne hired the American architect Bruce Price, whom he had already called upon for the design of the Windsor Railway Station in Montréal a few years earlier. Price's architecture was greatly influenced by the Romanesque, Militaristic, and Medieval style made famous by the architect H.H. Richardson.¹² Price drew upon previous sketches made for the Château and presented his final design as emulating the seventeenth-century French Château of Jaligny in the Loire Valley (fig. 8). The picturesque architecture of the Château consolidated the Medieval character imagined for the city by Lord Dufferin a decade earlier. The Château and its Medieval imagery thus were born out of a certain imperialist nostalgia for an idealized French Canada.¹³

Van Horne rightly predicted that the Château would become the "most talked about hotel on the continent."¹⁴ "Immediately," as a commentator wrote, "the Château Frontenac seemed to sum up in the minds of both foreigner and native all that Quebec was, or all that it was expected to be."¹⁵ What came to be known as the "château style," with its characteristic Gothic dormers, machicolation, turrets, and steep copper roofs, was



Fig. 8. «Proposed Château Frontenac», Bruce Price architect, ca 1890
(McGill University: Edward and W.S. Maxwell Archive, Published by France Gagnon-Pratte, p. 4).

recuperated by Van Horne for the construction of other railway hotels throughout Canada, and became a trademark for the CPR. Over the years, other competing private railway companies adopted the château style for their hotels and railway stations. In tune with the British Neo-gothic state architecture found in Ottawa and easily distinguishable from the Neo-classical style prevailing south of the border, the château style gained the title of "national style." It was recuperated by governmental agencies for the construction of new federal buildings, with design specifications that made explicit reference to the architecture of the railway hotels.¹⁶ By the 1930s, the style had acquired such strong nationalist symbolism that it was indiscriminately imposed upon all new public buildings. No longer restricted to hotels or government buildings, the architectural style was adopted all over Canada for all kinds of structures, ranging from train stations to post offices, apartment buildings, and even prisons.¹⁷ Only in the 1960s did the government's developers abandon the Château-derived roof as a mandatory symbolic accessory.¹⁸ By such historical circumstances, the Château Frontenac, born at the heart of Québec City, came to symbolize Canadian nationalism.

The Château as a Site of Contestation

The new hotel was not received locally as well as it has been on the national and international scenes. A series of controversies and public protests surrounded the early construction stages. The siting of the Château was the first object of contention. Although several sites overlooking the river had been proposed by the municipality for the construction of the hotel, Van Horne used his influence to secure the Federal government property adjoining the Dufferin terrace on the Cape Diamond promontory (fig. 9, 10). This spectacular site had been of great historical importance for the colony. It is where Samuel de Champlain, who founded Quebec in 1608, built the Château Saint-Louis in

1620 to serve as the residence of the governors of New France. Following the British conquest in 1759, a second château named after the British governor Haldimand was built facing the first one.

This prestigious site had been jealously kept by the city after the Château Saint-Louis was destroyed by fire in 1834.

The news of its concession to a private commercial institution at the fixed rental of \$1,250 a year with a ten-year tax exemption brought a wave of protests among local residents. Moreover, the project would require the demolition of the Château Haldimand, which had been housing the École Normale Laval for twenty-five years. The local press fuelled the controversy: "Where will all the students go?"¹⁹ After long debates, the school administration accepted to be relocated in the nearby Séminaire, allegedly not to stand in the way of progress. Moving expenses were covered by the provincial government.

The discovery, upon demolition of the Château Haldimand, of the remains of a seventeenth-century Powder House led to a new series of debates in the local press. Archaeologists and historians tried to stop the project and preserve the Powder House, but development advocates succeeded in having the structure demolished.²⁰ Subsequent excavations uncovered two ancient rooms of the Fort Saint-Louis. The ensuing public outcry threatened to upset plans to erect the Château Frontenac, but an agreement was reached to retain and incorporate the walls of the old fort into the hotel building.²¹

The stylistic origins of the Château's architecture were also the object of controversy. While the Château Frontenac was officially described as a French Medieval Revival, some contended that the building actually followed a Scottish Baronial style, celebrating the origins of CPR's president (fig. 11). The fact that the bricks used for the external walls of the hotel were imported from Scotland, despite the local availability of high-quality bricks, was used to support such hypothesis. The style was also very popular in late-Victorian America. Architectural historians find attempts at distinguishing the two styles futile since the Scottish Baronial style actually finds its origins in the architecture of the Loire Valley Châteaux.²² Such ambiguity in stylistic reference nonetheless represented one of the hotel's greatest assets and afforded certain flexibility in interpretation, an extremely diplomatic move for a hotel located in Québec City but

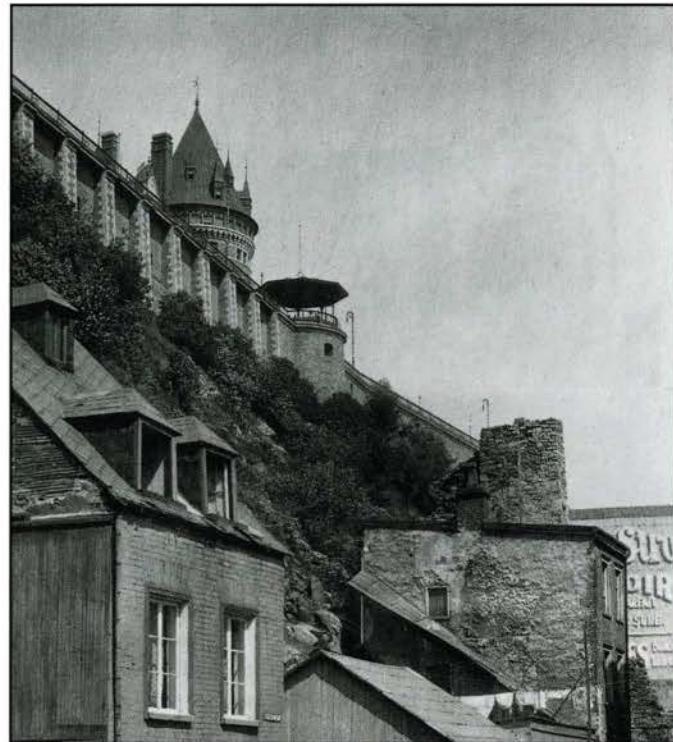
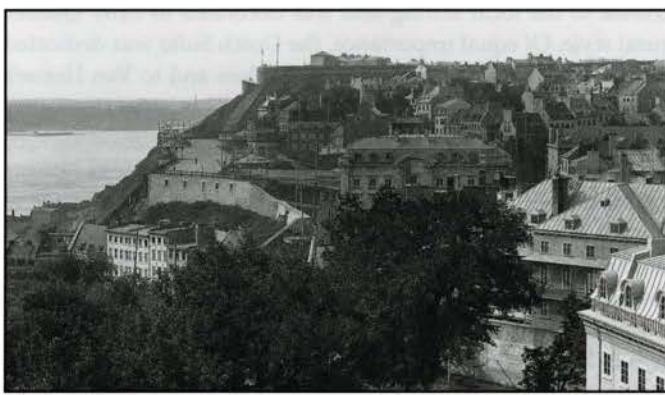


Fig. 9. «Lower Town, Quebec City, ca 1865.»
(Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum of Canadian History, 00195000)

Fig. 10. «Quebec City from Laval University, ca 1890.»
(Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum of Canadian History, View-2326)

Fig. 11. «Quebec City from Laval University, ca 1895.»
(Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum of Canadian History, View-2761-A)

Fig. 12. «Lower Town, Quebec City, QC, ca 1910.»
(Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum of Canadian History, View-4958)

geared mainly to Anglo-Saxon tourists. The Château could thus be seen either as a symbol of British imperialism or as a tribute to the French founders of the city.

Another source of resentment was related to the role the hotel held in local politics. As a major employment centre and source of regional revenue, closely related to the powerful railway company, the Château gained certain influence in public affairs and enjoyed privileges given to few other local businesses, serving its own interests to the expense of the urban population. The Château's administration once audaciously contested the addition of a wing to the nearby Court House, which would hinder future street widening necessary to accommodate the flow of traffic generated by the imminent hotel expansion. The Château also boldly pressured the mayor for permission to expand the hotel along the Dufferin Terrace, which would have deprived the historical Parc des Gouverneurs of its view over the Saint Lawrence River. But the attempt failed.

The Château was also presented as an Anglo-Saxon enclave in the French-Canadian capital (fig. 12). English was the main language of communication inside the hotel. The guest ledger for the first year of operations reveals a near total absence of French-Canadian names among guest registrants, which were mainly affluent east coast Americans escaping their stuffy summers.²³ A journalist recalls her perception of the Château in the 1920s as an “enchanted fairytale castle, where people spoke English and rich Americans resided” (my translation).²⁴ Publicity for the hotel was geared towards the affluent sophisticates of London, New York, and Toronto and not until the 1930s did French language tourist brochures become standard. The Château also became the privileged meeting place of the local bourgeoisie, mainly composed of the Anglo-Saxon minority.²⁵



Fig. 13. «Hotel Frontenac. Dufferin Terrace, Quebec City, QC, 1900.»
The new Citadel Pavillon, Bruce Price, architect, 1898.
(Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum of Canadian History,
MP-1979.22.188)

For the French-Canadian masses, the Château represented a world from which they had been excluded. With a single public entrance located within the central courtyard, reached through archways and guarded by doormen, the Château seemed like an inaccessible fortress. The use of hotel facilities was reserved to its select clientele. The exclusionary quality of the hotel was reinforced by the contrasting public nature of its surroundings, especially the Dufferin Terrace spreading along the top of the cliff in front of the Château and which had traditionally been a place where residents of all classes mingled. Symbolically, the hotel's imposing mass cast its shadow on one of the poorest French neighbourhoods in the city down at the foot of Cape Diamond.

There also was a certain amount of rancour towards the Château for its discriminatory employment practices. The inner organization of the hotel reflected the established social order separated along language lines. English Canadians or Americans held the highest managerial positions while other skilled jobs were occupied by foreign professionals, especially from Europe.²⁶ Until the 1940s and 1950s, French Canadians only found employment in more menial and unskilled assignments. Only in 1986 did a French Canadian first become general manager of the hotel. All employees had to be fluent in English, although French was not compulsory. At the city level, the development of tourism triggered by the marketing efforts of the hotel also reinforced French-Canadian subordination through the creation of a local service class catering to a new wave of Anglo-Saxon elites.

The Château and the Cultural Construction of Old Quebec

Despite its location at the core of the old city, the hotel was removed from its cultural context and made few integration efforts. There was little interaction between the hotel residents and the local population, the former only occasionally leaving the hotel

for a romantic *calèche* ride in the picturesque streets of the city. Visitors were discouraged to visit the lower part of the city where poor French Canadians resided.²⁷ Quebec and its residents played an accessory role, serving as an exotic background for the hotel. The interior design of the Château reflected the subsidiary place given to the local culture in the hotel conception. Of the Château's three main thematic suites, one, the Habitant Suite, paid tribute to the local setting and was decorated in early Québec rural style. Of equal importance, the Dutch Suite was dedicated to the memory of Dutch CPR shareholders and to Van Horne's own ancestry, while the Chinese Suite was to celebrate the CPR's new service to the Orient (fig. 13).

In response to the criticism of rich American guests surprised not to find the local French-Canadian character at the Château in its first years of operation, the management undertook to market the hotel as "cosmopolitan with a French flavour" and set out to exploit that unique cultural capital in the North American context.²⁸ However, the French culture that was to be sold was not the long hybridized culture of the contemporary *Québécois* population, but a more purified version, carefully selecting aspects of the local culture, which suited the Château's Medieval image.²⁹ Much of the Château's publicity abroad subsequently focused on the so-called "Gallic" character of the city, presenting Québec as a timeless city, frozen in an idyllic, pre-industrial past.

In the 1920s, the Château initiated a series of annual Craft and Folk Song Festival to bring attention to disappearing old French songs and rarefied ancient crafts, while reviving a cultural heritage that could be marketed to the tourists. Little of the festival was based on actual local practices, but it was mainly composed of reconstitutions of old French traditions, some of which never had local equivalents. Newspaper accounts of the first edition of the festival talk of the "illusion of troubadours" created by a group of young girls from Toronto who came to Québec to sing sixteenth- and seventeenth-century French songs in what was perceived to be their "proper context."³⁰ The festivals, repeated through the late 1920s, marked a renaissance for local crafts and folklore. The Château was later praised for having "discovered" the riches of French Canada in folk and traditional arts and to have made them known to Canada and the rest of the world.³¹

The Château was also largely responsible for the consecration of the city as the "Snow Capital."³² From 1924 until the

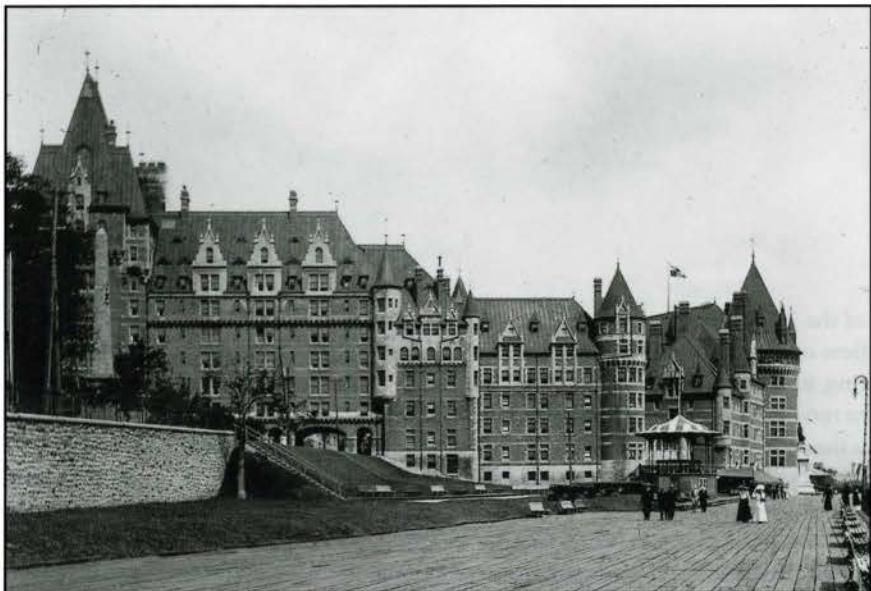


Fig. 14. «Château Frontenac and Dufferin Terrace, Québec City.»
The Mont-Carmel Pavillon, Walker S. Painter, architect, 1909.
(Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum of Canadian History,
View-8009)

Fig. 15. «New addition to the Château Frontenac, Québec City, 1921.»
The Saint-Louis Pavilion, Edward and W.S. Maxwell,
architects 1921.
(Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum of Canadian History,
MP-0000.2077.27)



mid-1940s, the Château conducted important publicity campaigns outside Québec, marketing the “Nordic” exoticism of the city to boost off-season business. The hotel promoted winter sports and activities, some of which were locally practiced, such as tobogganing, skating, snowshoeing, and some of which were revived by the Château or borrowed from other Nordic traditions, such as skiing and dog-sleigh riding in the streets of Old Québec. The hotel opened its own alpine ski school managed by a Swiss professional and contributed to the development of ski resorts in the region, making Québec City one of the major ski centres of the eastern part of the continent.

The Château was also intimately linked to the development of the Winter Carnival initiated in February 1894. The Château contributed—together with the CPR—one third of the festival’s total costs and hosted most of the Carnival’s activities. The Carnival was also a mix of invented and borrowed traditions, such as Finnish snow baths, ice sculptures, downhill canoe races, and of folk revivals brought together around the theme of winter. Since its revival in 1954 with the help of the Château, the Carnival has become an established annual ritual for the residents of the city, and the central attraction of winter tourism in Québec.

Assimilating the Château

In the course of the century, that vision of Québec as a piece of old-France surviving on the North American continent came to resonate with the French-Canadian cultural elite conception’s of the *Québécois* culture. Long had local intellectuals asserted their French roots and worked on the construction of a collective identity fundamentally different from that of their American neighbours. Cultural specialists despised mass endorsement of British and North American cultural practices and condemned the hybridization of the local culture. Yet their European references were not those of contemporary Republican France, but of the more remote mythical years of the colony.³³ Despite intellectual condemnation of the Château’s inauthenticity as a British import, the medievalized image it created for the city fitted the unspoiled golden age they idealized (fig. 14).

The unitary vision of the city’s visible past promoted by the Château also coincided with the aspirations of the Nationalist Movement in their construction of a distinctive *Québécois* identity of French origins. The Nationalist vision and the new image of the city were mutually reinforcing in that the cultural practices initiated by the Château and the spatial image it projected legitimized the Nationalist’s claims to cultural ownership, while the Nationalist rhetoric over the existence of a pure *Québécois* identity authenticated the Château’s cultural production.

Following the Quiet Revolution and the rise of *Québécois* consciousness in the 1960s, the city underwent a new series of transformations aiming at its “Frenchization,” under the direction of the ministry of cultural affairs.³⁴ One of the most significant interventions was the renewal of Place Royale, a working class neighbourhood at the foot of the cliff known as the site of the earliest French settlement in Québec. The neighbourhood was restored to its alleged pre-conquest French Regime state, reducing a complex history into a single stranded one. The project offered a constricted view of the national past and denied the successive Amerindian, French, British, and contemporary architectural occupations of the site. The restoration project epitomized the Nationalists’ idealized vision of the Nation, as a bounded—and by definition exclusive—entity, homogeneous and continuous in time, space, and sociocultural composition.³⁵ The project added to the staged appearance of the old city and confirmed its touristic vocation.

The international attention given to the rise of the Nationalist Movement led to a dramatic increase in the flow of tourists attracted by political exoticism. Businesses catering to tourists borrowed from that European imagery, often in the most eclectic and anachronistic ways. In an attempt to recreate the ambiance of Paris' Montmartre, the *rue du Trésor*, across the Château from the Place d'Armes, was allotted to artists selling tourist art—most of which picture the Château or present idyllic views of the city free from all reference to modern infrastructure. The city also saw the proliferation of *crêpe* restaurants with staff members dressed in traditional Breton outfits.

That europeanizing movement was not confined to the tourist areas, but soon permeated other aspects of local life, through what John Dorst termed *mimetic participation*.³⁶ Accelerated by increased knowledge of Europe through the democratization of international travel, the city's cultural elite came to see that image as a natural part of its own identity. In the late 1970s, smoke-filled cafés serving bowls of *café au lait*, sidewalk restaurants, and French bakeries appeared in the gentrified areas surrounding the walled city, reflecting their residents' aspirations to a European way of life. At the occasion of the Château's centennial celebration in 1993, its ballroom was transformed into a Parisian cabaret to present an operetta by Jacques Offenbach. Promoting the event, the director of the centennial project declared: "We could not have thought of a more charming attraction than *La Vie Parisienne*, in the pure French spirit, to celebrate the centennial of the hotel."³⁷ (fig. 15)

Local Recognition

While the Château epitomized, for foreign and Canadian tourists, the enduring French character of the local culture, for much of the local popular classes—which hardly associated themselves with France—, it represented something quite different. The Château became the object of local pride as a symbol of modernity, which had allowed the city to step into the twentieth century.³⁸ The building itself became an emblem of progress. Its heavy masonry walls hid the most advanced building technology and a sophisticated light steel structure. The eighteen-story tower added to the hotel in 1919 was the first high-rise structure in Québec City. Towering above the silhouette of the city and symbolically dwarfing religious monuments, which had long dominated the skyline, it epitomized a new era in the life of the city, a belated enlightenment: the slow secularization of the Québécois society. The Château also made the name of Quebec known abroad and allowed the city to claim a place in the global

hierarchy. The dramatic image of the Château overlooking the river inspired such epithets as "the fortress of Gibraltar,"³⁹ the "Edinburgh of the North American continent,"⁴⁰ "surpassing Salzburg in the drama of its location,"⁴¹ and it symbolically elevated Quebec to the rank of great scenic cities of the world.

The undeniable success of the Château as an international class hotel, attracting such prestigious visitors as Grace Kelly, Liz Taylor, Charles Lindbergh—to name only a few—, contributed to its consecration as symbol of the city. The hotel gained historical fame when it was requisitioned for the two Québec Conferences, which brought together Mackenzie King, Roosevelt, and Churchill to discuss the outcomes of WWII in August 1943 and September 1944. The Château also became the abode of foreign state officials visiting the capital. Chang Kai-Chek, Charles De Gaulle, Queen Elizabeth II, Haile Selassie all stayed at the Château. Several provincial Prime Ministers have also used the hotel as a semi-permanent residence. Alfred Hitchcock selected the hotel as one of the sites for his 1952 film *I Confess*.

The local population also regarded the Château as an important object of distinction from other North American cities, especially Montréal, Québec's historical rival. An article in the Montréal press, which dared to compare the Château to the Windsor Hotel in Montréal, raised public outcry in the capital and fuelled chauvinistic sentiments. The local press replied in outrage:

The Windsor was a hotel good enough for Montreal, but there is no possible comparison between the Château Frontenac and the huge pile of rocks and mortar in Montreal. The Château is unique, the site is the most beautiful in the world, Montreal cannot equal Quebec because Montreal has no location suited for such a building. Montrealers, if you want class and style, come spend a few days at the Château Frontenac. (my translation)⁴²

Besides its unquestionable imageability, the Château was thus highly regarded as a symbol of social distinction.

For several decades, the life of upper class *Québécois* revolved around the Château.⁴³ The city's gradual decline as a commercial and industrial centre in the second half of the nineteenth century and the decline of the port after the First World War led most of the Anglophone commercial elite to flee to more important metropolitan centres. That, coupled with massive rural exodus to the capital, allowed the French-speaking population to gradually reconquer the city. The Château lost its exclusionary feel and made efforts to attract a more diversified clientele, by renting out hotel facilities for local events. In need of a new source of local revenue, the hotel paid more attention to



Fig. 16. «Dufferin Terrace and the Château Frontenac, new tower under construction, Quebec City.» Edward and W.S. Maxwell, architects 1920-1924.
(Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum of Canadian History, MP-0000.2078.4)

anniversary of the hotel in 1993, the management made extra effort to correct the Château's image as being for the exclusive use of celebrities and rich Anglo-Saxons, and launched a publicity campaign to welcome the French-Canadian population, under the slogan: "C'est votre Château, Québécois" (This is your Château, Québécois).⁴⁶

The Château as Heritage

In recent years, the importance of the Château has been sanctioned through official recognition. On December 10, 1993, the Canadian Commission of Historical Sites and Monuments identified the Château as an architectural monument of national importance by inaugurating a plaque at the Château, which honoured the hotel as one of Canada's most famous architectural elements.⁴⁷ Six months later, the Château Frontenac received the prize of tourism excellence, the most prestigious of all prizes attributed by the jury of the *Grand Prix québécois du tourisme*, for portraying an image of quality and representing a first-choice ambassador for the region of Québec as well the whole province.⁴⁸ The ambiguous image of the Château and its complex history still allow it to be claimed as a symbol of collective identity by two antagonistic entities.

the local middle-class population, which became one of its most faithful clientele.

The Château came to play a central role in the social life of the city, as an important civic space. For decades, it remained the only facility capable of hosting conventions, symposia, or banquets in Québec, until the construction of the convention centre and other large hotels in the 1970s. All important life landmarks were celebrated at the Château. Marriage and baptismal receptions, graduation dances, Christmas and Easter parties, wedding anniversaries, business meetings, and all sorts of social events are still held at the Château. On weekends, from the 1930s until the 1960s, the ballroom was converted into the largest dance hall of the city, freely accessible to the whole population.

For the working class, the Château became a sacred shrine where they would dream to go on Saturday nights, putting on their best clothes and pretending to live the high life for a few hours. The famous novelist Roger Lemelin captured such magic moment in his 1948 novel *La Famille Plouffe*:

A hotel like the Château Frontenac is designed to house kings and their courts, princes, prime ministers, and cardinals... That night, it is in this same hotel that Ovide Plouffe walked in, stiff like a bone in his well-ironed suit, accompanied by Rita Toulouse, filled with admiration. (my translation)⁴⁴

Visiting the Château also allowed the popular classes contact with a wider world. People's habit to sit in the warm lobby of the hotel and to observe the passage of celebrities and strutting strangers is said to have inspired the name "Peacock Alley" to the ground floor gallery of the Château.⁴⁵

The hotel's democratization efforts continued throughout the century. In 1973, the hotel opened up a shopping arcade with tourist boutiques and a popular café in the basement, directly accessible from the Dufferin Terrace. For the centennial

Over time, the Château has almost become part of the city's architectural heritage and of the *Québécois* cultural patrimony. Today, the Château serves as an architectural model and historic referent for the touristified part of the city. Local institutions have attempted to appropriate some of the Château's fame, by either mimicking its architecture or borrowing its name to serve their own purpose. There are over thirteen hotels in the Quebec city region using the designation of Château and exhibiting some sort of stylistic reference to the Château Frontenac. The new Museum of Civilization built in 1988 also pays a visual tribute to the famous hotel, further consecrating the steep copper roofs as a trademark for the city. Making stylistic reference to the Château rather than to its immediate surroundings, the museum was nonetheless awarded the 1988 *Prize of Excellence* by the Québec Order of Architects for its sensitive integration to the old city. In 1996, the Québec municipality installed a series of new bus stop kiosks in the old Québec, crowned by steep copper roofs and pinnacles. A recent editorial in the local popular press, entitled "The copper topped city," denounced the extravagant cost of the kiosks to be partly covered by the

Ministry of Culture, and ridiculed their design, comparing them to large toasters dressed up as Château Frontenacs, or miniature Château Frontenacs disguised in aquariums.⁴⁹ Bell Canada has also installed telephone booths in old Québec crowned with copper roofs (fig. 16).

Today, most of Québec City's residents only occasionally visit the Château, leaving it, like the rest of Old Quebec, to the herds of tourists who visit the city each year. Yet, most consider its familiar image to be central to Québec's identity and take their foreign visitors around the hotel as if they were its proud owners. The publication in the early 1990s of the French *Guide du Routard* travel guide to Canada, which ridiculed the Château as "Walt Disney's Castle," raised public outrage among city residents. Today, the Château remains a symbol of success, esteemed for having contributed to the economic development of the region, especially in promoting the development of tourism, now the city's second main industry. The hotel is now the fourth largest employer in the Québec region and contributes 1.6 million Canadian dollars in municipal taxes.⁵⁰

The Château Frontenac has now become a tourist attraction in itself, with its own museum and guided visits. No longer a background for the famous hotel, the city and its residents have also profited from the popularity of the hotel. The city is now using images of the Château to advertise itself abroad. Yet not all have forgotten that this architectural icon is also a private commercial institution. In 1993, hotel owners of the Québec region pressured the tourism bureau of the Québec region to remove the image of the Château from its official posters and tourist pamphlets distributed overseas, seen as unfair free publicity in favour of their main competitor. The image of the Château was not replaced by that of a French Regime historical landmark, but by a view of the St. Louis gate, which was part of Lord Dufferin's early recollected medievalism, thus consecrating that romantic image as the visual signature of the city.⁵¹

Conclusion

The Château has thus played a central role in the shaping of Quebec's identity, contributing, through its promotional efforts, to the construction of the "idea" of Quebec as old, romantic, French, and Nordic. But the power of such image rests in the flexibility of interpretation it affords. As an architectural monument, its meaning was never unequivocal but was constituted through affective and symbolic sedimentation accumulated over time, subjected to ideological manipulation and diverging interpretations.⁵² Woody Allen well understood this when he

filmed his 1969 *Don't Drink the Water* at the Château, turning Quebec into the capital city of Vulgaria, a fictitious Eastern European state born out of his imagination. The current general manager of the hotel, who is incidentally the ex-manager of the hotel complexes of Euro-Disney and Disney World, compares the incredible spell exerted by the Château Frontenac to the magic of Sleeping Beauty's Castle.⁵³ For him, the historical role of the Château for the city is very clear: "We are builders of memories, merchants of dreams..."⁵⁴

This does not mean that the cultural identity of the city is counterfeit, but it rather epitomizes the real nature of collective identity. Identities are never fixed, natural, nor homogenous. Not only are they socially constructed, they are also constantly contested, reworked, and reinvented. Instead of rejecting the Château as a foreign imposition or a spurious construction, local population groups rather adopted the myth, which came to surround it to serve their own purposes. In 1993, a group of local citizens initiated a biannual Medieval Festival, where, for a few days in August, the old city fills up with medieval street life: teenage punk pan-handlers become plagued beggars, store owners turn into brave knights, university students act as troubadours, lute players, and courtesans, most of which are not hired actors but local residents.⁵⁵ This masquerade is not staged for the sole benefit of tourists, but rather for the pleasure of spectacle, of playing another's identity, and to finally realize the image of the city as it was long imagined. For a few days, the Château and the old city thus become the stage on which that fantasy is actualized.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Association of Canadian Studies Conference on Canadian Identity in Saint John's, Newfoundland, in June 1997.
2. Duval, Monique, 1982, « Que se rrait Québec sans le Château ? », *Le Soleil*, Québec, Saturday, June 14, p. B6.
3. Rivard, Jean-Claude, 1993, « Le Château Frontenac a cent ans », *Le Soleil*, Québec, Saturday, May 1st, p. C1.
4. Duval, André, 1978, *Québec romantique*, Montréal, Boréal Express, p. 229.
5. Hobsbawm and Ranger wrote of the invention of tradition through the use of ancient material for novel purposes. Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger (dir.), 1983, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
6. Luc Noppen and other architectural historians have noted that, in Québec, the production of architecture with direct references to French traditions disappeared around 1860-1880, to be replaced by architectural imports, which characterized Quebec's opening to the world.

- Noppen demonstrates how foreigners, especially British, driven by a romantic vision, were the first to show interest for traditional architecture in the early twentieth century, and their efforts led to local revivals. Noppen, Luc, 1983, « La maison québécoise : Un sujet à redécouvrir », *Question de Culture 4 : Architectures : La Question dans l'espace*, Institut Québécois de recherche sur la culture, Québec, Lemeac. See also Gauthier, Raymonde, 1981, *La tradition en architecture québécoise : Le XX^e siècle*, Québec, Éditions du méridiens.
7. Lord Durham in Dumont, Fernand, 1996, *Genèse de la société québécoise*, Montréal, Boréal, p. 124.
8. Morgan, Joan E., 1949, *The Castle of Quebec*, Toronto, T.H. Best.
9. *Canadian Gazette*, February 4, 1892.
10. Donzel Catherine, 1989, « Canada : Les citadelles du transcanadien », in Catherine Donzel, Alexis Gregory and Marc Walter, *Palaces et Grands Hôtels d'Amérique du Nord*, Paris, Flammarion.
11. Lundgren, Jan O., 1984, *The Luxury Hotel of the 1890s: Operational and Spatial Attributes of the Château Frontenac in Quebec City*, Aix-en-Provence, Centre des Hautes Études Touristiques, série B, n° 36.
12. It was even suggested that Prince's inspiration for the Château was Richardson's Lunatic Asylum in Buffalo, New York, 1871. Rogatnick, Abraham, 1967, « Canadian Castles: Phenomenon of the Railway Hotel », *Architectural Review*, May, p. 366.
13. Renato Rosaldo has labeled *imperialist nostalgia* the longing by colonialists for a way of life they have themselves destroyed. Rosaldo, Renato, 1989, « Imperialist Nostalgia », *Representations*, Spring, no. 26, p. 107-122. According to Rosaldo, imperialist powers often romanticize native cultures they have themselves altered and foster the revival of their collective past, real or imagined, to alleviate their own guilt and pacify the local population. Jean Dethier similarly wrote of traditional revival as a means of social control by foreign rulers in the context of colonial planning. He defines *psychic pacification* as the fostering of excessive fascination for the past, which petrifies native identities and reduces populations to a non-intellectualized expression of their own culture. Dethier, Jean, 1973, « Evolution of the Concepts of Housing, Urbanism, and Country Planning in a Developing Country: Morocco 1900-1972 », in L.C. Brown (dir.), *From Medina to Metropolis*, Darwin Press, p. 297-243.
14. Hart, E.J., 1983, *The Selling of Canada: The CPR and the Beginnings of Canadian Tourism*, Banff, Alberta, Altitude, p. 77.
15. Rogatnick : 366.
16. Specifications for an architectural competition concerning the construction of a series of new government buildings in Ottawa in 1913 insisted that the chosen style display: "an architectural character of vigorous silhouettes, steep roofs, pavilions and towers [...]. Inspiration may be derived from the close and sympathetic study of the beautiful buildings of Northern France of the 17th century. Generally speaking, the external architecture of the [hotel] Château Laurier [...] may be regarded in general outline and character as a worthy suggestion for an architecture of vertical composition, such as is suggested for the new group [of buildings]", in Harold D. Kalman, 1968, *The Railway Hotels and the Development of the Château Style in Canada*, Victoria, University of Victoria Maltwood Museum, Studies in Architectural History Number One, p. 24. See also Hart, *op.cit.*; and Gowans, Allan, 1968, « The Canadian National Style », in W.L. Morton (dir.), 1968, *The Shield Of Achilles: Aspects of Canada in the Victorian Age*, Montreal, McClelland and Stewart.
17. Donzel, *op.cit.*
18. Kalman, *op.cit.*
19. Gaumont, Michel, 1993, « Le Château Frontenac : une origine méconnue », *Cap-aux-diamants*, n° 33, Spring, p. 15-19.
20. Rimbault, E., 1952, *Courrier du Canada* 1892, in *L'Action Catholique*, Québec, Sunday, October 5.
21. Pitcher, Rosemary, 1971, *Château Frontenac*, Toronto, McGraw-Hill; Morgan, Joan E., 1949, *The Castle of Quebec*, Toronto, T.H. Best.
22. Sommerson, John, 1963, *Architecture in Britain 1530-1830*, Harmondsworths.
23. Lundgren, *op.cit.*
24. Duval, Monique, 1993, « Mon Château à moi ! », *Cap-aux-diamants*, n° 33, Spring, p. 20-24.
25. Since the early stages of the project, the Anglophone elite symbolically claimed the Château as its territory by referring to it in the English-language press as the "Dufferin Terrace Hotel," using the name of the former British Governor despite previous announcements that the hotel would be named Château Frontenac, after the notorious French governor, *Morning Chronicle*, May 13, 1892, in Gaumont : 15-19.
26. Pitcher, Rosemary, 1971, *Château Frontenac*, Toronto, McGraw-Hill.
27. Duval, André, *op.cit.*
28. Lemieux, Louis-Guy, 1992, « Le Château : une histoire (2) », *Le Soleil*, Québec, Saturday, September 2, p. B7.
29. Gaumont : 15-19.
30. « Ce que sera le festival du Château », *Le Soleil*, Québec, Friday, May 20, 1927, p. 1.
31. Hart : 109.
32. Laplante, Serge, 1993, « Cent ans de vie de Château », *Le Devoir*, Montréal, July 14, p. B8.
33. Bouchard, Gérard, and Serge Courville, 1993 *La construction d'une culture : Le Québec et l'Amérique française*, Québec, Presses de l'Université Laval.
34. Until the 1960s, Québec had remained isolated under the economic domination of the affluent English population and under the spiritual subordination of the Catholic Church. In the early 1960s, a large liberalization movement, later called the "*révolution tranquille*" (Quiet Revolution), triggered important transformation of the French-Canadian society in the displacement of the clerical-conservative paradigm by a forward-looking nationalism. One of the first legislation initiatives of the Quiet Revolution was the creation of the *ministère des Affaires culturelles* in 1961, which was to oversee cultural affairs in Québec. Handler, Richard, 1985, « On Having a Culture: Nationalism and the Preservation of Québec's Patrimoine », in George W. Stocking (dir.), *Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material Culture*, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press; and Handler, Richard, 1988, *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture*, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press.
35. Handler, 1985.

36. Dorst, John D., 1989 *The Written Suburb: An American Site, An Ethnographic Dilemma*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press.
37. Tremblay, Régis, 1993, « La Vie parisienne au Château Frontenac », *Le Soleil*, Québec, February 5, p. A7.
38. Gagnon-Pratte, France, and Éric Ette, 1993, *Le Château Frontenac : Cent ans de vie de Château*, Québec, Continuité.
39. Nicholson, Byron, 1908, *In Old Quebec and Other Sketches*, Quebec, Commercial Printing Company; Rivard, « Le Château Frontenac a cent ans » : C1.
40. Richardson, A.J.H. et al., 1983, *Quebec City: Architects, Artisans and Builders*, Ottawa, National Museum of Man.
41. *Canadian Architect*, May 1963.
42. In Gaumont : 15-19. The original reads as follows: "Le Windsor était une hôtellerie assez bonne pour Montréal, mais il n'y a pas de comparaison possible entre le Château Frontenac et la grosse pile de roches et de mortier de Montréal. Le Château est unique, son site est le plus beau au monde, Montréal ne peut égaler Frontenac parce que Montréal n'a pas d'endroit pour mettre un tel bâtiment. Si Montréalais vous voulez de la classe et du style, venez quelques jours au Château Frontenac."
43. Henissart, Paul, 1981, « Le Château sur le toit de Québec », *Selection of the Reader's Digest*, October.
44. Lemelin, Roger, 1948, *La famille Plouffe*, Québec, Bélisle, 470 p.
45. Rogatnick : 366.
46. Fournier, Lise, 1993, « La visite guidée du centenaire du Château attire 3000 personnes », *Le Soleil*, Québec, May 2, p. A3.
47. Laplante, Serge, 1993, « Le Château reconnu... », *Le Devoir*, Montréal, December 14, p. B7.
48. Vaillancourt, Claude, 1994, « Gala du tourisme québécois : Le Château Frontenac rafle le plus prestigieux des prix », *Le Soleil*, Québec, May 7, p. A9.
49. Gagné, Jean-Simon, 1996, « La Ville au dessus cuivré », *Voir Québec*, July 4-10, p. 6.
50. Rivard, Jean-Claude, 1993, « Le Château de rêve », *Le Soleil*, Québec, Saturday, May 1st, p. C6.
51. Vaillancourt : A9.
52. Gottdiener, Mark, and Alexandros Lagopoulos (dir.), 1986, *The City and the Sign: An Introduction to Urban Semiotics*, New York, Columbia University Press. According to Dan Sperber, "symbolicity is a property not of objects, actions, nor statements but of conceptual representations which describe and interpret them" (Sperber, Dan, 1974, *Rethinking Symbolism*, Cambridge, England, Cambridge University Press). Stanford Anderson also claims that the architectural object is neither a purely "autonomous text" nor a "cultural index" of the times; its meaning is neither pre-given and inherent in the object, nor is it exclusively determined by an external zeitgeist (Anderson, Stanford (dir.), 1986, *On Streets*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press).
53. Rivard, « Le Château Frontenac a cent ans » : C1.
54. Rivard, « Le Château de rêve » : C6.
55. After many critiques by historians who claimed that Quebec never was a Medieval city, the festival was, after a few years, transformed into the *Fêtes de la Nouvelle-France*.