

THE OFFICE OF INTENDANT IN NEW FRANCE

A STUDY IN FRENCH COLONIAL POLICY

As one dips into the voluminous documentary data available for the study of French colonization and French colonial institutions in North America, one's initial impression is that of prodigious official activity. The hand of authority appears everywhere, restlessly thrusting itself into every department of colonial life—ordering, directing, or restraining. A hierarchy of officials, formidable in number, is seen issuing edicts, ordinances, declarations, decrees, and judgments with a profusion that is ominous and bewildering.¹ It is not strange, therefore, that students of the French régime in the New World have recoiled from the task of attempting to define precisely the position and powers of the various administrative officials; for the multitude of their jurisdictions appear at first sight to be inextricably dovetailed, and the limits of their several activities hopelessly overlapped. The sage De Tocqueville has somewhere remarked that in the days of the old dominion the administration took the place of Providence. One might add that at any rate it seemed almost as omnipresent if not always as omniscient, and that its ways were frequently as inscrutable.

This paternal system had its myriad of agents of all ranks, jurisdictions, and qualities, all vying in the activity of their administrative energies, and encroaching upon the apparent jurisdictions of one another in a way which seems almost to preclude any exact definition of their proper positions and functions. Against this somewhat kaleidoscopic background, however, one figure stands silhouetted with tolerable clearness—that of the intendant, at once the most active and the most characteristic royal officer of the prerevolutionary era. In New France as in Old, this special custodian of the royal absolutism filled a post which is capable of being described with some exactness, and exercised powers which are susceptible of definition.

For a proper understanding of the position and functions of the colonial intendant, a word or two must be said as to the origin

¹The Registres du Conseil Souverain et du Conseil Supérieur de Québec, from September 18, 1663, to April 8, 1760, fill no less than fifty-six ponderous manuscript volumes; the Ordonnances des Intendants du Canada make up the contents of forty-four more; and there are in addition thirty-six volumes of minor decrees and judgments.