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Thomas Pownall—His Part in the
Conquest of Canada

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VII.—*Thomas Pownall.—His Part in the Conquest of Canada.*

By W. D. LIGHTHALL, M.A., F.R.S.L., F.R.S.C.

(Read June 23, 1904.)

In an article in the *Antiquarian Journal* of Montreal (Third Series, Volume III., No. 5), afterwards separately issued in pamphlet form under the title of "The Glorious Enterprise," I drew attention to a chain of family relationships and other facts, throwing new light on the various plans of campaign for the conquest of the French dominions in America from 1689 to 1760.¹ It was shown from the official documents that the principal of these plans—those of 1689-90, 1710-11 and 1759-60—were in reality forms of one and the same; that they all originated in the province of New York; that they were the work of one group of men united together by close bonds of blood or marriage—a part of the manorial gentry of the province—that this plan and the military and topographical knowledge connected with it were a kind of family inheritance; and that the outlines of the plan constituted the only practical scheme of invasion of New France; the only one by which success was possible; and the actual one by which success was at last attained. It was shown that its originator was Colonel Peter Schuyler, of Albany, in 1689; that Sir William Phips and General Winthrop were not the true leaders, but in reality secondary actors, in the invasion of that time; that the projected invasion of 1710-11, according to the scheme of Colonel Samuel Vetch, was a resuscitation of the idea, originating in the fact that Vetch married Schuyler's niece, the daughter of Robert Livingston, one of the chief agents in the matter, and lived among them at Albany; and that the final plan adopted by William Pitt, and assigned by him to Amherst and Wolfe for execution, was the same thing once more, proceeding from Lieutenant-Governor De Lancey, grandnephew of Peter Schuyler, and was drawn from the same store of tradition.

Those concerned were well aware of the breadth and consequences of the idea. In 1689, the Albany agents to the other colonies referred to it as "soe glorious an enterprise," "soe noble a designe," "such a noble design." In 1709, Vetch wrote of it as "this noble enterprise," "this noble designe," Quarry as "that noble design against Canada"; in 1711, Gov. Hunter as "this glorious enterprise"; The Sachems of the Five Nations called it "this great design"; others

¹ Some minor errors crept into this pamphlet owing to its being hastily rewritten after loss of the original manuscript.

"that justly great attempt," "so promising an enterprise," and so forth. I have therefore applied the phrase "The Glorious Enterprise" X to the traditional plan itself. The issue was plainly put in such phrases as that of Caleb Heathcote, "it is impossible that we and the French can both inhabit this continent in peace," and "until the tryall is over and 'tis known whether North America must belong to the French or us."

Its essential features were (1) combined action by all the British colonies; (2) a fleet attacking Quebec; (3) an army making a supporting attack on Montreal by way of Lake Champlain; (4) the assistance of the Iroquois. As first conceived, it was indeed a bold and original design, aiming at the almost undreamt-of. And even towards the end it contrasted strongly in its comprehensive simplicity with the confused projects concerning the war in America among which the English military groped about. We know that the scheme failed in 1690. The determining cause then was the outbreak of smallpox among the Indians at the foot of Lake Champlain, which relieved Count Frontenac from the fear of an invasion of Montreal, and left him free to withstand the naval attack of Phips upon Quebec. In 1711, it failed again, through the cowardice and incompetence of Sir Hovenden Walker and General Hill in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The cause of its revival in the end was the utter failure of other plans of campaign, such as Shirley's against the Lake forts; Braddock's against the posts on the Ohio; and Abercromby's against Miconderoga. A great disaster was impending over the British colonies—their forces were exhausted, the Indian allies were on the eve of going over to the enemy, and the outlook was turning seriously in favour of a French future for America. Another generation of growth for the population of the New France, together with a rush of immigration from Old France into the West, and a people would have grown up firmly rooted in Canada like a nation of Europe, who might perhaps have been temporarily overrun, but whose permanent conquest would have been very doubtful. The "tryall" was still in the balance "whether North America must belong to the French or us," and was in danger of being finally decided not in favour of the British.

Two men, at least, knew what was needed in that critical hour. One was James de Lancey, Lieutenant-Governor of New York, who set forth in clear terms to the Lords of Trade the only means "to distress the French in Canada"; but, although he had some influence in England, he well knew that no colonial adviser was of sufficient weight to move fleets and armies by any direct action of his own, in the then state of mind towards provincials of the titled incompetents ruling at London. The other was De Lancey's friend, Thomas Pownall, Governor of Massachusetts and Lieutenant-Governor of New Jersey, brother of the

X The best engraved view of Louisbourg, ^{in 1758} bears an inscription ending with the words: "this Glorious Enterprise?"

Secretary of the Lords of Trade and friend of the Earl of Halifax, their President. He was master of the necessary knowledge and influence, possessor, too, of what was far better, a most brilliant combination of penetrating mind and enterprising character. Coming to America in 1753 as secretary to Sir Danvers Osborn, Governor of New York, who died on entering upon his office, he was thrown closely in touch with De Lancey, and took part in the latter's great Colonial Convention of 1754 at Albany, where he caught from the men of "experience and judgment" there assembled "the actual state of the American business and interest."

Towards the end of 1756, Pownall, dissatisfied with the poor progress made up to that time, returned to England and wrote a memorable letter to Lord Halifax which revolutionized the conduct of the war. He pointed out "that after the English had been repeatedly disappointed in their attempts to penetrate the country by way of Crown Point and Lake Champlain, and had lost Oswego and the command of Lake Ontario; considering the reason there was also to expect the defection of the Indians in consequence thereof, there remained *no other alternative but either to make peace or to change the object of the war, by making a direct attack up the River St. Lawrence, upon Quebec itself; urged to a radical destruction of Canada.*" "The writer of these papers," he says (1) "came over to England in the latter end of the year 1756 to propose and state these reasons, nearly in the same form as afterwards repeated by the paper that follows; particularly the necessity of two fleets and two armies; one army destined for the attack, the other under orders to invest Canada by taking post somewhere between Albany and Montreal, so as to cover the English colonies, one fleet to escort and convoy the army up the River St. Lawrence and the other to cover and protect the sea line of the colonies."¹ The object was adopted. Why nothing was done in the year 1757, and why no more was done in the year 1758 than the taking of Louisbourg, will be explained on a future occasion; the ideas contained in the following paper lead to the rest:—

"IDEA OF THE SERVICE IN AMERICA FOR THE YEAR 1759.

Boston, December 5th, 1758.

"If the point disputed between us and the French be determinedly and precisely understood, the manner of conducting it may soon be fixed. If we are still, as we were at the first breaking out of the war, disputing about a boundary line, and for the possession of such

¹ Administration of the British Colonies, Appendix IX.

“ posts, communications and passes as may be a foundation to our possession of a future Dominion in America, we are still engaged in a petty skirmishing war. . . . If we have changed the point and brought it to its true issue, its natural crisis, whether we, as Province of Great Britain, or Canada as the Province of France, shall be supreme in America, then the service to be done is a general invasion of Canada in conjunction with the European troops and fleet; then is our natural strength employed and we must be as naturally superior. This being fixed, the next point is where the real attack must be made. The same reasons that show the necessity of such an attack show that it *will never effectually be carried on over land.* . . . Experience has now shown that the possession the enemy has of the posts of strength would render the passage to Canada by land the work of a campaign, even with success, but finally also the success doubtful. (The going to take possession of the country in 1760 after Quebec had been taken in 1759 proved ‘the work of a campaign.’)

“The road to Quebec up the St. Lawrence is possessed by the superiority of our marine navigation. There is neither danger nor difficulty, nor do I see how there can be any opposition to hinder the fleet getting up to the Island of Orleans; and a superior army in possession of that may by proper measures command the rest of the way to Quebec.¹ If our army can once set down before Quebec it must take it; if Quebec be taken, the capitulation may at least strip Canada of all regulars; after which the inhabitants might possibly be induced to surrender. . . .

“But although this attempt on Quebec by way of the St. Lawrence River may be the only real and will be the only effectual attack on Canada, yet one other, if not two, false attacks will be necessary, one by way of Lake Champlain, the other by way of Lake Ontario. That by way of Lake Champlain may, as far as Crown Point, be offensive, and should then change into a defensive measure.” . . . “As to action on Lake Ontario, an appearance of an attack by that way must greatly alarm the enemy at Montreal” (and serve other purposes).²

Pownall, in claiming to be the first proposer of his measures, evidently refers to being the first in England and in official quarters there.

“The first paper,” he says, “was written at a time when the subject was entirely new; scarce ever brought forward to consideration here in England; and when authentic accounts of the true state of

¹ “Did not the event literally justify this?”

² P. 249.

"the country, as possessed by the English and French, were with great difficulty, if at all, to be obtained; and, I may venture to say, *utterly unknown to our military.*"

The consequence of these doings was the favourable turn to the British campaign. The results were no less than the conquest of North America, the establishment of both the British Empire and the United States, and the dominance of the world by Anglo-Saxon institutions. This statement is a new and a broad one, but is it incorrect? The proofs are in the Documentary History of New York. Schuyler, Vetch, De Lancey, Pownall, Pitt and Wolfe were the six bright stars of the "Glorious Enterprise." Perhaps Saunders, too, should be included. The work of Pownall was *sui generis*—masterly, great-hearted, the equal of the others in sweep of vision, a link as necessary as theirs in the success of the "noble designc."

As the present paper is merely a note, this is not the place for an extended account of Pownall. He was born in England in 1722 and died there in 1805. A very full biographical article upon him is contained in Volume XVI. of the Magazine of American History, and is embellished with a fine portrait. He was a man of rich qualities of both heart and intellect, and an intimate and loyal friend of Benjamin Franklin even throughout the Revolution. He is generally acknowledged as the author of the idea of United Empire, and had his enlightened views as a friend of America obtained proper hearing, there might have been no Revolutionary War. But I believe that in the above lines and in the pamphlet referred to I am calling attention for the first time to his greatest work.