

Parkman, Abbé Casgrain and Bougainville's Journal

BY EDWARD P. HAMILTON

FRANCIS PARKMAN in November of 1887 warned his friend, Abbé Casgrain, against appearing to be "a fervent advocate bent on winning a cause, instead of a cool historian mousing among the litter of centuries in search of the truth."¹ For the last four winters I have spent most of my daylight hours "mousing" through some of the contents of the stacks of the Massachusetts Historical Society, and to a very large extent among Parkman's own papers. Some interesting lights on the relations between the Boston and the Canadian historians have emerged as a by-product of researches directed toward other ends. Although minor in nature, they still seem worth recording.

While Parkman is well known to us all, Abbé Casgrain is a historian unfamiliar to most people today. Two generations or so ago he was eminent in Canadian letters, an historian with many works to his credit. Henri-Raymond Casgrain was born in 1831, seven years after Parkman, in a manor house on the banks of the lower St. Lawrence, descendent of ancestors famous in Canadian history. In 1856 he was ordained a priest, but his life was devoted to teaching and writing rather than to the duties of the parish. Like Parkman, he at times enjoyed poor health and likewise was plagued with troublesome eyesight. Casgrain was an extreme patriot, most conscious of Canada's past glories. In fact he carried his glorification of the past of his country to such an extreme that he was not unwilling at times to direct and

¹ Francis Parkman, *Letters of . . .*, ed. by W. R. Jacobs. (Norman, Okla., 1960), II, 215.

channel his researches to a predetermined end, rather than to the truth. I realize that this is an accusation that should not be lightly made, but I believe that my statement can be justified.

The two historians first exchanged letters in 1866, although they did not meet until five years later, and a lasting friendship resulted, one which, despite widely divergent beliefs and a violent quarrel, lasted for the rest of their lives. The two met on only a very few occasions during their lifetimes, but they interchanged letters at varying intervals for over a quarter century. In 1872 Casgrain published a little book which was both a biography of Parkman and a short critique of his works. At times each helped the other with suggestions, sometimes with notes or transcripts, and occasionally by doing little errands. It was a long lasting friendship between two scholars, a pleasant but never an intimate one. The bond between the two friends was greatly strained by the Canadian's violent reaction to Parkman's presentation of the Acadian question in *Montcalm and Wolfe*, which was published in 1884. Some quite stiff letters were interchanged, but the resulting coolness passed away after a few years, and friendly relations continued until the Boston historian's death in 1893.

Despite the friendship Parkman had some most definite reservations with respect to the Canadian priest, and he was not at all averse to telling his friends what he thought. His remarks at times were far from complimentary. "The Abbé is no more fit than a chicken to deal with questions of history . . ." "I have known the Abbé 20 years or more. He is so constituted that he can never take an unbiased view of any subject in which his feelings are interested . . ."²

Casgrain's letters, although sometimes pained, were always written in a most friendly spirit, even at that time

² *Ibid.*, II, 214, 220.

when their friendship was most strained by violent disagreement over the true story of the expulsion of the Acadians. The Abbé, however, was guilty of one dishonorable and most unfriendly act against Parkman, an act which can be explained only upon the assumption that the priest wished history to be written as he thought right, and not as the facts might require. This was the affair of the Bougainville papers.

Louis Antoine de Bougainville was born in 1729, the son of Pierre Yves de Bougainville, a well-to-do lawyer of Paris. He thus was a member of the upper level of the bourgeoisie and of good social standing, although not of the noblesse. He originally studied law but apparently never practiced it, and we know little of his early activities. He must, however, have devoted considerable study to higher mathematics, for at the age of 22 he produced a book on the integral calculus. At about this time he served as an officer in the Picardy militia, and he spent several months as secretary to the French ambassador in London, where he perfected his English and apparently made many friends. By 1755 we find him in the French Army as a lieutenant of dragoons, and he had a second volume on the calculus ready for the press. In January of 1756 he was elected a member of the British Royal Society, an extraordinary honor for so young a man, and a foreigner at that. Early in this same year he was appointed aide de camp to the Marquis de Montcalm with the rank of captain, and in April the two left for Canada.

Bougainville now commenced a journal and continued it throughout his stay in North America. It is of very great interest, the frank and detailed story of the activities, thoughts and observations of an educated French gentleman, who knew the English and their language, and was a member of the French high command in Canada. Montcalm and Bougainville each thought very highly of the other and

the two were to remain close friends until the death of the Marquis.

Bougainville was a colonel by the end of the war, and he shortly transferred to the Navy. In 1766 he led a scientific expedition around the world and explored the South Pacific. He published a book of his travels in 1771, and the story of his discovery of Tahiti and his descriptions of that region excited very considerable public interest. He it was who introduced the Bougainvillea flower to Europe. Bougainville served under Admiral de Grasse during the American Revolution and became a commodore in 1779. By 1790 he commanded the Brest fleet, but resigned soon after. He was made a member of the Institute, and served in the Bureau of Longitude. Under Napoleon he became a senator and a count. Bougainville was short and plump, almost fat, and he suffered badly from asthma except when at sea, and this probably was one of the reasons for his transferring to the navy. He died in 1812.

Bougainville did not at all like much of what he found in Canada, and saw a great deal to criticize. He was most frank in his remarks, both in the journal and in letters to his family at home. To my mind his journal is by far the best single piece of source material we have concerning the last French and Indian War. Many of his statements are corroborated by other contemporary observers whose honesty and integrity are above suspicion, and I believe that the story his journal tells is a true one.

Casgrain was a native born Canadian, and one who carried his patriotism and his desire to see only good in his people to a ridiculous length. He naturally would violently have disapproved of much that Bougainville wrote. He developed a dislike of the French officer, and carried it to such an extreme as to distort, both knowingly and intentionally, his presentation of portions of the history of Can-

ada in order to abuse Bougainville's reputation. Moreover he carried his animus still farther and was guilty of disloyalty to his friend Parkman. And in addition he withheld from students of Canadian history for over a generation source material of the greatest value. In the early days of their friendship the priest had written his Boston friend that there always would be one unalterable point of common union between the two authors despite their divergent beliefs, adherence to loyalty and to honor³. Casgrain was to violate both.

Before Parkman wrote *Montcalm and Wolfe*, he had read part of Bougainville's journal. Among the Parkman Papers at the Massachusetts Historical Society there is a transcript of this portion, sent by Pierre Margry of Paris in 1877 or '78, with a notation that it might be consulted but not published. Parkman wrote Margry that it was a shame that Bougainville had not carried it further. Almost ten years later he was to learn that the journal had been continued for several more critical months of the war. Through what I can only consider the disloyalty of Abbé Casgrain Parkman was never to see the complete journal.

In 1881 a letter arrived at 50 Chestnut Street from an unknown Frenchman who somehow had learned of the forthcoming *Montcalm and Wolfe*, and offered to translate it into French. But what was of much greater interest was the writer's statement that he was the great-grandson of Bougainville and that he had all of his ancestor's papers in his possession, the complete journal, as well as many family letters. The letter was from René de Kerallain of Quimper in Brittany, a lawyer and a historian.⁴ Parkman at once replied, and asked to have the latter part of the journal, which would complete the Margry transcript, copied. De Kerallain an-

³ *Ibid.*, II, 57n.

⁴ April 27, 1881, Francis Parkman Papers (Massachusetts Historical Society).

swered that he would be most welcome to this, but Parkman was never to receive it, and the journal did not see the light of day until 1924 when it was at last printed in French by the Archivist of Quebec. For some reason I cannot determine the transcription hung fire, although a friendly correspondence continued between the two men. Meanwhile *Montcalm and Wolfe* had been published, and Parkman's immediate need for Bougainville's journal had passed.

Abbé Casgrain arrived in Paris early in 1887 on a search for material dealing with the history of Canada, and through some unfortunate chance came in contact with the Marquise de Bassignac, an aunt of de Kerallain, and the technical owner of the Bougainville papers then in the hands of the Breton lawyer. The aunt, a royalist and a fervent upholder of the clerical party, had read *Montcalm and Wolfe* and was quite scandalized by parts of it. She was an easy prey to the charm Casgrain possessed, and the priest apparently had no difficulty in persuading the lady to recall all of the Bougainville material from her nephew and to put it into his hands. He made a complete transcript of the journal and of a number of the family letters, and took them back to Canada, 1300 pages in all.⁵ It was at this same period that Casgrain discovered the journal and other papers of Brigadier de Lévis, next in command under Montcalm. These the Province of Quebec would publish within a few years under the priest's editorship, along with several other associated pieces of source material. His editing, however, seems to have been of the slightest, for the papers are almost entirely lacking in explanatory footnotes.

Early in the spring of the following year Parkman evidently asked de Kerallain to arrange that he should have access to the Bougainville material, for in May he received a letter from his Breton friend which clearly revealed the

⁵ de Kerallain to Parkman, February 23, April 25, and August 23, 1888, Parkman Papers.

falseness of Casgrain's friendship. De Kerallain had referred Parkman's request to his aunt, who said that it must be passed on to the abbé for his approval. This was done, and Casgrain, in connection with violent protests against *Montcalm and Wolfe* refused his permission.⁶ Thus through the disloyalty of his supposed friend Parkman was never to see these most valuable records.

Soon the volumes of the Lévis Papers started to appear, and Casgrain presented Parkman with the first two volumes in 1889. They were far greater in extent than would appear from their title, comprising in addition to the Lévis material a journal and letters of Montcalm, and many letters of Vaudreuil, the last governor of Canada. They did not however, include what was perhaps in some ways the best of all of Casgrain's discoveries, Bougainville's journal. This he suppressed.

In 1897 the Abbé published his *Montcalm et Lévis*, a study of the last French war, which did its best to build up Lévis at the expense of Montcalm, and attempted to place Bougainville in a most unfavorable light, in fact accusing him of being the man responsible for the loss of Canada.

Three years after Parkman's death in 1893, the Massachusetts Historical Society received from de Kerallain a little book called *La Jeunesse de Bougainville*, which he had written to refute, as he said, the malicious misrepresentations made against Bougainville by Casgrain. It is an interesting study, quoting many extracts from Bougainville's journal, as well as a number of interesting and revealing letters from the young officer to his family. De Kerallain was bitter in his accusations that Casgrain misrepresented and distorted facts in his *Montcalm et Lévis*, freely utilizing any material that would glorify his native land and its inhabitants, and suppressing anything to the contrary. Although the abbé had excluded Bougainville's journal from

⁶ de Kerallain to Parkman, May 3, 1889, Parkman Papers.

the Lévis Papers, he quoted from it very freely in this book whenever he found an extract that could be used to serve his purpose of praising the Canadians, maligning Bougainville, and building up the smooth and calculating Lévis at the expense of his commander, Montcalm. I have carefully studied Casgrain's selection of extracts from many of the various journals and papers available to him and checked them against the full text. He selected, rejected and excised in order to alter the meaning and to prove his case. I feel that I can say with complete assurance that the priest was guilty of bad faith and malicious and intentional distortion of history. This perhaps should be no surprise, since Wilbur R. Jacobs has recently shown that Casgrain, when he prepared for publication the letters he had received from Parkman, altered their meaning in some cases by excisions of whole paragraphs.⁷ These were no accidental slips, they were the result of an intellectual dishonesty which tried to present history in the light which the Canadian historian wished.

I shall cite only two examples of Casgrain's distortions. When describing Abercromby's 1758 defeat at Ticonderoga, the priest in his *Montcalm and Lévis* tells how Lévis ordered a sortie by the Canadians and how "a multitude of coureurs de bois led by their valiant officers dashed against the British" in a decisive charge.⁸ Yet Bougainville's journal, which we know that Casgrain had at hand, says: "At the first sortie . . . Sieur de Raymond . . . called for men of good will to follow him. A small number stepped forward. . . . These volunteers advanced; the enemy fired on them once, all disappeared. . . . It was the same with the second sortie: Sieur Denys La Ronde, lieutenant, was the only one who followed Monsieur Raymond."⁹ There is a transcript of a letter by

⁷ Parkman, *Letters*, I, lxii.

⁸ Henri-Raymond Casgrain, *Montcalm et Lévis* (Tours, 1898), p. 162.

⁹ Louis Antoine de Bougainville, "Le Journal de M. de Bougainville," *Rapport de L'Archiviste de la Province de Québec pour 1923-1924* (Quebec, 1924), p. 340.

Montcalm in the Parkman Papers, a letter which Casgrain may never have uncovered in his researches, which confirms what Bougainville reported. Shortly after the battle Montcalm wrote to Doreil, the commissary who served as chief supply officer to the French regular troops, that "the colonial troops and the Canadians have behaved very indifferently. Monsieur de Trecesson, the commandant, has been obliged to fire on some of them who were abandoning their post, . . . Nevertheless . . . I have considered it for the good of the service to praise them . . ." ¹⁰

The Canadian historian in the same book accuses Bougainville of being the cause of Montcalm's defeat on the Plains of Abraham because he did not march eastward from his assigned mission of guarding the more western regions from possible British landings. He cites Governor Vaudreuil's 6:45 a.m. letter to Bougainville as an urgent summons for the latter to drop everything and to rush his troops to the Anse du Foulon area. He gives the letter as follows without any indications whatsoever of excisions.

It appears very certain that the enemy has made a landing at the Anse du Foulon; we have put many people in movement. We hear a few little fusillades. I long to hear your news and to know if the enemy has made any attempts in your direction.

Then a P.S.

The enemy forces appear considerable. I do not doubt that you will be attentive to his movements and will follow them; on this I depend on you. ¹¹

The actual letter was longer:

I have, Monsieur, received the letter you have done me the honor of writing me along with the statement of the prisoner or deserter attached. I have had the whole passed on to the Marquis de Montcalm. It appears very certain that the enemy has made a landing at the Anse du Foulon. We have put many people in movement. We hear a few little fusillades.

¹⁰ *Documents relative to the Colonial History of the State of New-York*, ed. by E. B. O'Callaghan (Albany, 1849-1883), X, 754.

¹¹ Casgrain, *Montcalm et Lévis*, p. 309.

Monsieur the Marquis de Montcalm has just left with 100 militiamen of Three Rivers as a reinforcement. As soon as I shall positively know what is happening, I will let you know. I long to hear your news and to know if the enemy has made any attempts in your region.

I have the honor to wish you the best of luck.

At 6:45

Your courier will see Monsieur de Montcalm on the way and he can give you his news.

Vaudreuil

The enemy forces appear considerable. I do not doubt that you will be attentive to his movements and will follow them. On this I depend on you.¹²

A rather leisurely and almost chatty letter I would call this, certainly not an urgent call for assistance. Bougainville, however, started eastward immediately he had received it, but the logistics involved in assembling his troops and moving them to the Plains of Abraham prevented his arriving until after the battle had been decided.

De Kerallain concluded his little book with a bitter statement about Casgrain. "He does not read the text before his eyes, but if he does read it, he does not understand it. But should he understand it, he falsifies it as soon as he sees the slightest opportunity."¹³ Harsh and perhaps unjust as this statement may be when applied to Casgrain's work as a whole, it unfortunately is only too true when applied to certain parts of it. A historian who will falsify only a single point in order to prove his thesis is certainly not one to be admired.

¹² Arthur G. Doughty and G. W. Parmelee, *The Siege of Quebec* (Quebec, 1901), IV, 126-127.

¹³ René de Kerallain, *La Jeunesse de Bougainville* (Paris, 1896), p. 182.

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