

Of Beaubassin, Acadie: A Cautionary History

(à la manière de H.W. Longfellow)

Came *paysans* to that pleasance, that saltwater marsh, the Isthmus—Chignecto,
Came *les Acadiens* there, in 1670: *History* says so.
And came they there to ranch—bull, cow, and calf—following Jean Bourgeois, who made bread,
Thanks to his flour-mill, and who fed lumber from his saw-mill. (Pines fell like lead.)
Next arrived the trader Michel Leneuf de la Vallière de Beaubassin,
Likely outfitted with tuque and snowshoe, knife and cross, musket and moccasin,
And who fished the Fundy-flooded creeks, and farmed, and soldiered at futile *War*,
And won a hundred leagues, on what's now Tonge's Island, where he was *seigneur*.
That was in 1676, and the village of Beaubassin now
Arose richly, fattening on the Tantramar Marsh, between hay and snow,
And battenning on the seagrass portage between the Bay of Fundy and
The Northumberland Strait, plus *Trade* twixt Acadie, Ile Royale, *et* New England.
Ex edgy, nervy Ireland, Roger Quessey seeded blossoming orchards;
By 1685, Beaubassin boasted pears and apples in boulevards,
Plus twenty-two *habitations* and crowds of cattle, teeming pigs and sheep:
The next year, a church went up, and *les citoyens* knelt in prayer before sleep.
Come 1715, fifty families call Beaubassin home, and tap
Apples for Acadian *Calvados*, and hold the centre of a map
Depicting trade between Boston and Louisbourg, and now tend a thousand
Cattle and eight-hundred hogs. But *Strife* between France and Britain (New England)
Compels Benjamin Church, “Damn Yankee,” to besiege Beaubassin, not once, but
Twice—in 1696 and 1704. How to save each hut?
The solution? The Treaty of Utrecht. This 1713 accord
Split Nova Scotia from Acadie. Now, ploughs were meant to replace each sword.
That didn't happen: Map lines wavered, shivered, fluxed. So, 1750
Witnessed the *coup de grâce*: Major Charles Lawrence, that Empire-servant, shifty
And sly, led eight hundred soldiers to seize the Isthmus of Chignecto
And plant Fort Lawrence at Beaubassin. As Anglos trooped in—*verso, recto*—
French soldiers laid waste the town—to deny the English its bounty, its goods,
And 2,800 souls fled—new refugees—to ships, salt marsh, or woods.

Five years later, Anglo and Yankee troops rounded up all ex-Beaubassin
Paysans—and all “Cajuns”—deported all from Nova Scotia. That was then—
The end of Acadie—or so Longfellow thinks in his *Evangeline*,
An epic in dactylic hexameter set within Grand Pré's demesne,
And so Bliss Carman ponders in his “Low Tide on Grand Pré,” that lay of *Grief*,
Where the salt marsh floods with tears echoing Matthew Arnold's downcast *Belief*,
Or Oliver Goldsmith's *Deserted Village* prevails now o'er Oliver
Goldsmith's *Rising Village*, so Canuck *Hope* caves in facing British *Despair*.
But such is *History*: Continents incontinent with bloodshed, grisly
With defunct bodies, houses of worship sacked penniless, homes gone frizzly
With flame, the gruesome precipitation of ash, *Value* injured in wrecks,
North America sundered between *Le Roi Soleil* and *Georgius Rex*....

If only Beaubassin could have remained aloof from *Strife*—safe and pristine—
Unwed Evangeline—unhoused Evangeline, unsure Evangeline—
Bellefontaine would have kept her Gabriel Lajeunesse—and the pretty turf
Of Acadie; the chordal Fundy sounding at the dykes, decanting surf,
An oasis amid seagrass; black crows winging over mudflats; seagulls
Hovering at opened shutters (ogle Alex Colville’s pastel locales);
Crucifixes of iron and pine shaking off the wind’s gusty wallops;
And fair fish slabbed fresh on plates, pears that mimic breasts and whose innards are milk
Tasting of apples and honey; and where children gambol and dour priests sulk;
And decent-sized cattle mulch pastures from dawn until the first bits of night;
And, over hooting owls, the moon glows white—til its light dives where doves alight.
Instead, there was a marine—a naval—undoing: Internecine wars—
Demoralized—decomposing—corpses under deteriorating stars.

A disadvantage to poets is fire, though its smoke flares up messages—
Trophies of colonies that crumble into once-gold-star, now-charred wreckages;
As was Beaubassin’s *Fate*, to blaze in the choppy light of the French torches—
Sparks spitting skyward (furious as bees set on stinging), crumpling porches
To the scattered applause of musket shots, or cannonades clapping the skies....
Is this *History*’s sorry lesson? To colonize is to weaponize?
Apart from old Acadie—the sundry, luscious valleys—Nova Scotia
Is elsewhere all boulders, slabs of granite, where waves smite down. Joy Kogawa
Scribes Japanese-Canadian dispossession in her bleak novel, *Obasan*:
But such *Sorrow* is foreshadowed by the liquidation of Beaubassin.

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